

Escape to the city

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The Guardian, Wednesday November 9, 2005

It is a typically slate grey, autumnal day on a north Manchester hillside, with the rain coming in at a 45-degree angle and the wind whipping through the sodden valley below. When the visibility is better, this is a spot that commands impressive views across much of the city. But today there are few takers - except for one hardy character in a waterproof jacket. Despite the unforgiving elements, Red Rose Forest manager Nigel Blandford cannot contain his enthusiasm for this urban open space.

"This area is known as Clifton Green, over there is Prestwich Forest Park, and over there is Clifton Country Park," he says. "It's possible to walk from one to the other and all the time feel like you are out in the countryside. And yet we're only a few miles from Manchester city centre. People need to know that there are wonderful environmental assets like this right on their doorstep."

The area is one of several large woodland projects within the patch covered by the Red Rose Community Forest - one of 12 community forests across England that together have seen the planting of 10,000 hectares of woodland since they were set up 15 years ago.

"The forests are an environmental regeneration project, rather than a discreet area of woodland," Blandford explains. "They're not really one single place you can go to but lots of different projects. I suppose they're like a faith or religion rather than a specific place of worship."

A few miles to the north-east of Clifton Green is another of Red

Rose's flagship projects, Colliers Wood. Located on the site of the former Moorgreen colliery, which closed in the 1960s, it has seen 60,000 native broadleaf trees, such as ash and oak, planted in the last few years and the creation of 5km of new footpaths.

Local resident Peter Guy, who moved to the area 18 years ago and now acts as a volunteer warden looking after the site, says the area has been transformed. "There were some trees planted in the 1970s after the mine was reclaimed, but it wasn't managed properly," he says. "Then the community forest took the area on a few years ago and things have moved on a lot since then.

"It's all a far cry from its days as a coal mine. There were spoil heaps 60ft-80ft high and it was criss-crossed by railway lines carrying the coal to the nearby Bridgewater canal. Now the spoil heaps have been replaced by 60ft poplar trees. The trees are maturing really well, though a legacy of the mines is that there is good and bad soil. In the good soil, the newly-planted trees are up to about 6ft high now.

"It's just lovely to have something like this on your doorstep. Walking out among these trees just makes you feel better: it lifts your spirits. It's nice to look at, it's pleasant, and it's peaceful. Of course, we've got the Lakes and the Peak District reasonably nearby, but each of them are over an hour's drive away."

The tree planting has attracted wildlife to the area, and there have even been sightings of a kingfisher and wild deer.

"The area was also prone to off-road motorcycling, and joyriders used to take stolen cars on there," Guy says. "Now access points have been created that prevent them getting on. We do still suffer some vandalism, but we are beginning to get on top of it."

Urban fringe

Covering 292 sq miles of Greater Manchester - an area populated by 1.5 million people - the forest is a partnership between the Countryside Agency, the Forestry Commission and six local

councils. Red Rose, and the other 11 community forests, were set up after the Countryside Commission (now the Countryside Agency) shifted its attention from protected areas such as national parks to green spaces on Britain's urban fringe. Funded by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), via the Countryside Agency, with staff and expertise from the Forestry Commission, each community forest has formed partnerships with the local councils, which provide additional funding.

The forests' key role is to expand the amount of woodland in their patch, boost recreational opportunities, and improve access to the countryside on the edge of large conurbations. They also work to promote employment opportunities in forestry and educational projects.

Each has been reasonably free to find its own way of meeting these objectives. For example, Red Rose's diverse projects include Green Streets, a collaboration with three local councils to plant trees in inner-city residential areas, a project to tackle off-road motorbiking, and an ambitious scheme to create a regional park that will run as a "green artery" through the central belt of Greater Manchester. Overall, Greater Manchester's area of forest has doubled, with 2,000 acres of new woodland planted.

Lisa Booth, who organised a petition to get 40 trees planted by Green Streets on four streets in the Levenshulme suburb of Manchester, says: "It's made a huge difference to the streets - it feels like we live in a leafy suburb now. They were a bit bare at first, but when they started to blossom they looked fantastic."

In Bury, to the north of the city centre, the forest recently purchased a farm, using money from central government and cash from the North West Development Agency. Forty-five acres of native broadleaf woodland (some 35,000 trees) have been planted and 1.2km of new paths laid, along with gateways, fencing and signage.

"Before, when it was a farm, there was just one public footpath going through the site," says local resident Steve Kane, who now regularly uses the community woodland to walk his dog. "And, of

course, being a farm it belonged to someone else, rather than this, which is an asset that belongs to the community. It has changed the area enormously: it's open access, safe and offers fantastic views of Manchester. Living in the city, you need somewhere you can stretch your legs and breathe in a bit of fresh air."

The forests are, however, facing a period of change and uncertainty over the next two years. Last March, Defra announced that it was giving them a two-year deadline to make the switch from central government funding to local and regional sources of revenue. Voluntary and private funding for individual projects, however, has dipped in recent years. Each of the 12 forests has put together a succession planning framework, setting out how they plan to make the adjustment when central government cash runs out next year.

John Vaughan, director of the National Community Forest Partnership, an umbrella group for all 12 community forests, says the forests are adjusting well. But, as with any adjustment, there are gains and losses. "One gain is that the forests are becoming more aligned with local needs and opportunities," Vaughan says. "But it is proving hard to find that core funding to support the investment of time and effort into development work, which unearths new opportunities for the forests and motivates local communities to get involved."

The changes are taking place against the backdrop of Lord Haskins' review of rural services, which recommends the merger of the Countryside Agency, English Nature and Defra's rural development service into a new body, Natural England.

Continue to flourish

"We have real potential to help these organisations to integrate their work because we do work that crosses over all three agendas," says Vaughan, who is confident that, in one form or another, community forests will continue to flourish.

But he is less clear about the actual form they will continue in. "It's like children growing up," he says. "You give birth to these

ideas and you nurture them through their early years as they experiment and learn about the world and find their place in it. But there comes a point where they need to grow up and leave home, and it's only by doing that that they can actually get out into wider society and spread their contribution. We're at that stage now."