




# EARTH-WISE

by Geoff Cooper

## Not seeing the wood for the trees





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**T**rees are in the news. In January plans for the creation of a Northern Forest in England between Liverpool and Hull were announced by the Government. The project to plant 50 million trees over the next 25 years will cost £500 million. It will be kick-started by a Government grant of just £5.7million and the rest of the funding will be raised by charities. Meanwhile the planned line of HS2 north of Birmingham threatens the destruction of 35 ancient woodlands.

With only 13% of woodland cover, the UK has one of the lowest proportions of forest in Europe. Despite this many of us have a strong affinity to trees. This was borne out by the public's reaction to the Government's proposal to sell off over 250,000 hectares of English public woodland in 2010. The Government failed to appreciate the importance millions of people place on access to woods for a whole range of activities connected to recreation, adventure, contemplation and social engagement. There were mass protests and the Government was forced to back down. Sheffield Council also bore the brunt of public opinion when it started to cut down well established street trees valued by the local residents.

I live in a village which has a community website where people share photographs and stories of village life. Last year I asked people to take photos of trees in and around the village that they liked or with which they had a special connection. There was a good response with many stories relating to childhood activities including climbing trees, collecting conkers, making dens and building swings.

It is evident that many outdoor enthusiasts have emotional ties to particular individual trees. The "Long View" was a two year arts and environmental project led by writer, Harriet Fraser and photographer, Rob Fraser. They identified

seven spectacularly located trees in the Lake District all different native species, and made many slow journeys in all seasons and weathers to the trees. They also led a series of guided walks using stories, local history and poetry to set the scene for their journeys.

But are we not seeing the wood for the trees? Peter Fiennes in his recent book, "Oak, Ash and Thorn" argues that in Britain we are very good at looking after individual specimen trees. He claims we have some 2,000 ancient yew trees and 112 "great oaks" which are more than 800 year's old. But he laments the fact that we have destroyed most of our woodland through shipbuilding in the past and continued road building, urban expansion and large scale agriculture. 50 "Great British Trees" were selected by the Tree Council in 2002 to celebrate the Queen's Golden Jubilee. The thousand year old "Major Oak" in Nottinghamshire, the Sycamore in the gap on Hadrian's Wall and the Fortingall Yew in Perth and Kinross are a few of these much admired and visited trees. It's great to celebrate these fine specimens but are we doing enough to protect our ancient woodlands with their complex and irreplaceable ecosystems? They are still being threatened by bypasses, high speed rail and industrial development.

What can we do? A good starting point is to support The Woodland Trust, a campaign charity that is also actively involved in managing over 1,000 sites throughout the UK. It plants millions of trees and restores ancient woodlands. It is also keen to encourage people to get out and enjoy the woods. The Trust's recent newsletter, "Wood Wise- Nature inspires Education" is packed with ideas on helping young people to explore nature through visits to their local woods and it lends support to the well-established Forest Schools programmes. ■