

Readers' land army plants a forest

Hundreds of volunteers brave the cold to create the Sunday Times wood. Richard Girling reports

IT WAS like a scene from Tess of the d'Urbervilles. Men, women and children spilt across a wind-scoured field, bending their backs and stabbing at the rain-soaked clay soil with muddied picks and spades.

Yet it was not the past that was firing the imaginations of this ad hoc land army of Sunday Times readers. It was the future.

From mid-morning until the light began to fade, more than 300 adults and their families came together to plant 5,000 native trees on open ground next to a fragment of ancient wood in Hertfordshire.

With a little luck the fruit of their labours will still be enjoyed in 500 years' time by people whose 21st-century forebears will seem as remote as the Tudors do to us today.

The vision is heroic. By the time it is fully planted, Heartwood Forest will contain about 600,000 trees spread across 850 acres above the village of Sandridge, near St Albans.

Right at the heart of it is the Sunday Times Wood, funded and planted by the newspaper and its readers. Their efforts last Sunday brought to 45,000 the number of trees put in place since the first saplings were delivered in November. By the end of 2010 it will have grown to 90,000.

Heartwood is a *grand projet* of the Woodland Trust, designed to help reverse the massive loss of trees in the UK since the industrial revolution. Every generation since the mid-19th

century has erased woodland from the landscape. Now only Malta stands between Britain and the unwanted title of least wooded country in Europe.

Only 12% of Britain is given over to trees, against a European average of 44%. If you measure England alone it is a meagre 7% and half of that is conifer plantations and not native species.

Loss of trees means the loss of everything that goes with them — woodland flowers, butterflies, birds and mammals — robbing a once rich landscape of its ecological integrity.

With climate change threatening to make matters worse and the arable landscape likely to be farmed ever more intensively, the need for wild places could not be more acute.

Standing on a muddy bridleway on a freezing February morning, it is difficult to imagine the scene as future generations will see it. The bridleway will be a grassy ride between an avenue of limes. On either side, where empty fields now lie barren, there will be thick, self-regenerating forest pulsing

with so much life that you could spend a week in the woodland depths and not see everything. This is the vision that brings out the volunteers.

"The attraction is to do something for future generations," said Sue Stocks, a retired nurse who led a walking party from Harpenden Women's Institute.

The boys came, too. Early arrivals included a party of children, aged 10-13, from the 3rd Upminster Scouts who spread themselves out in a chain gang. It was hard work. The soil here is glacial moraine — heavy clay and pebbles, geological detritus dumped by ancient ice.

The scouts persisted. "Hopefully," said their leader, Kevin Twohig, "in years to come they will be able to tell their children that they helped to plant this forest. How many people can say that? It helps them to take ownership and that's the whole point of the thing."

Many families involved their children. Simon Thomas, a City solicitor, and his wife Naomi, a business coach, were fascinated when they first spotted the fledgling forest

from their commuter train, and now they had brought their four-year-old daughter, Isabel, to plant her oak.

"We've come down here pretty much every month since it opened," said Thomas. They are now the Woodland Trust's de facto official photographers, recording the site month by month as the forest grows.

Oaks, inevitably, are the favourites, but they are one species in a broad mix that includes birch, ash, hornbeam, holly, alder, dog rose, willow,

hawthorn and hazel. All are "native", having been resident in Britain for at least 600 years.

Insects, birds and animals are naturally opportunistic and will move in quickly. Although it will be long beyond even the youngest planters' lifetimes before the forest reaches its peak, it will take only 10 or 12 years for it to become a thriving natural woodland.

By then the leaf canopy will have closed and the place will have its own sounds and silences. The day will belong to

birds and butterflies; bats will flicker and deer will cross the ride at dusk; the night will be a hunters' carnival of ruthless tooth and claw. For human visitors there will be the recurring sensations of childhood, wide-eyed wonder with a lick of fear. In a wood, you never know who or what is watching.

"There is an overriding memory which still remains from when I first moved from London to Hertfordshire as a nine-year-old," said Kim Wilde, the 49-year-old gardening presen-



JULIAN WYTH/STUART CLARKE

Simon and Naomi Thomas took daughter Isabel to the wood to plant an oak. They photograph the site once a month

ter and former pop star. "I was completely captivated by the local woodland; I found it magical, enchanting and romantic. I loved the impact of the seasons and the wildlife it attracted."

Heartwood is on Wilde's doorstep. "It is an unequivocally positive scheme — environmentally, aesthetically and emotionally," she said.

Old maps show that this land was still forested in the 18th century, part of a ring of woodland that provided London with its fuel and building materials.

A red squirrel in those days might have hopped from tree to tree all the way from Sandridge to Epping, then right around London and back again.

History cannot be reassembled, but Heartwood gives extra meaning to the green belt. It is less than 30 miles from central London and 15m people live within 20 miles of it. It reminds us that we, too, are products of nature and there is pleasure in knowing our place.

For further information about Heartwood, go to woodlandtrust.org.uk

Mother held over death of girl, 2

Kevin Dowling and Steven Swinford

A MOTHER was being questioned by police last night on suspicion of murdering her two-year-old daughter.

Sonia Bellfield, 29, was arrested after her daughter, Jasmine, was found dead at their home in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire. Officers broke down her door at 2pm on Friday. Bellfield lived alone with her daughter.

Councillor Ken Smith, deputy leader of Kirklees council and head of social services, said Bellfield had a history of mental health problems and that the alarm was raised after a routine visit by health workers.

One neighbour said: "I heard them [the police] telling Sonia that if you don't open this door I'm going to kick it in."

Last night the results of a post-mortem examination on the toddler were inconclusive, police said.

A spokesman for the West Yorkshire force said police were called to an address in Naylor Court, Dewsbury by healthcare workers. "Inside they found the body of a two-year-old girl. The woman we have arrested is the child's mother. We are not looking for anyone else in connection with the incident."



Jasmine: found dead