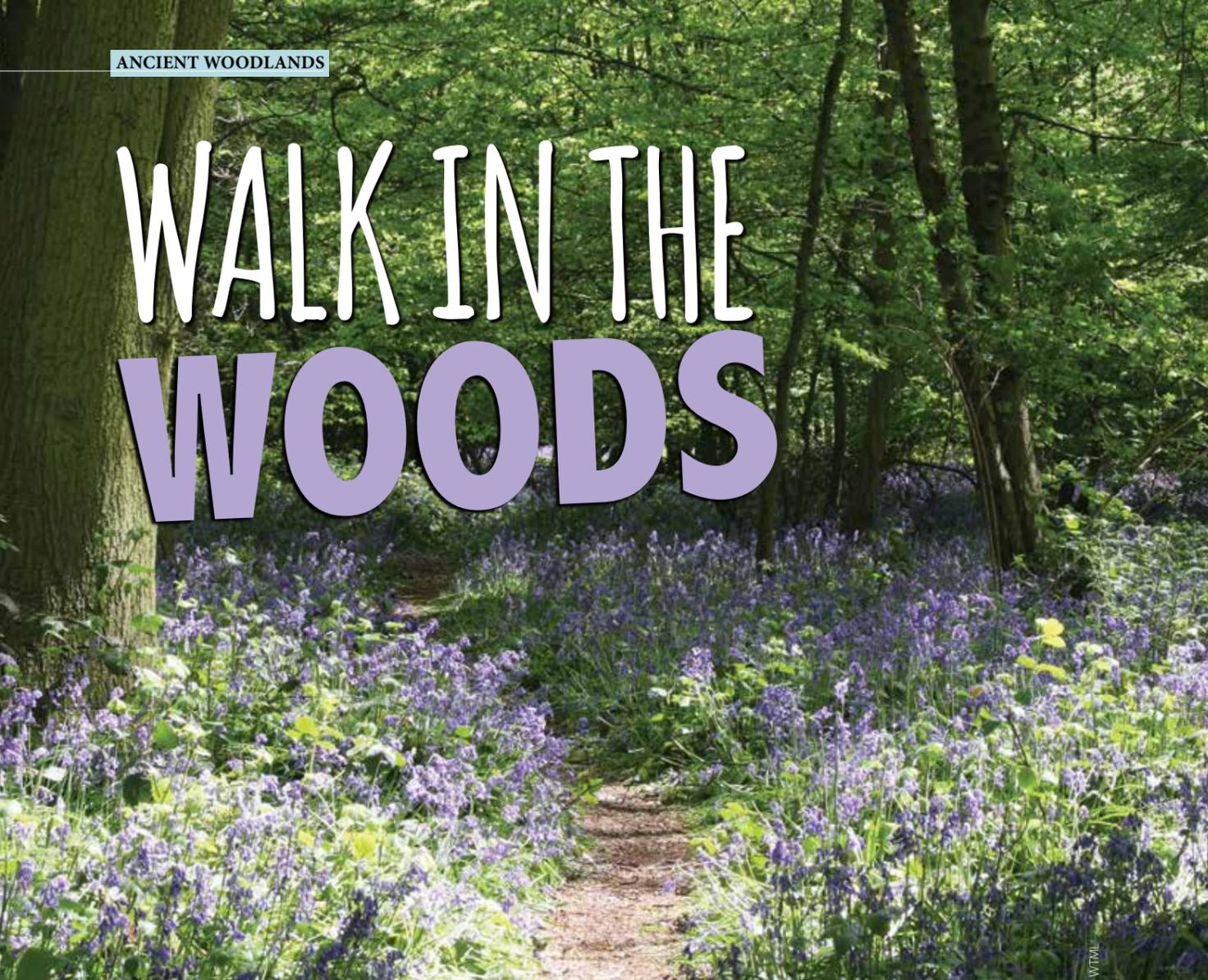
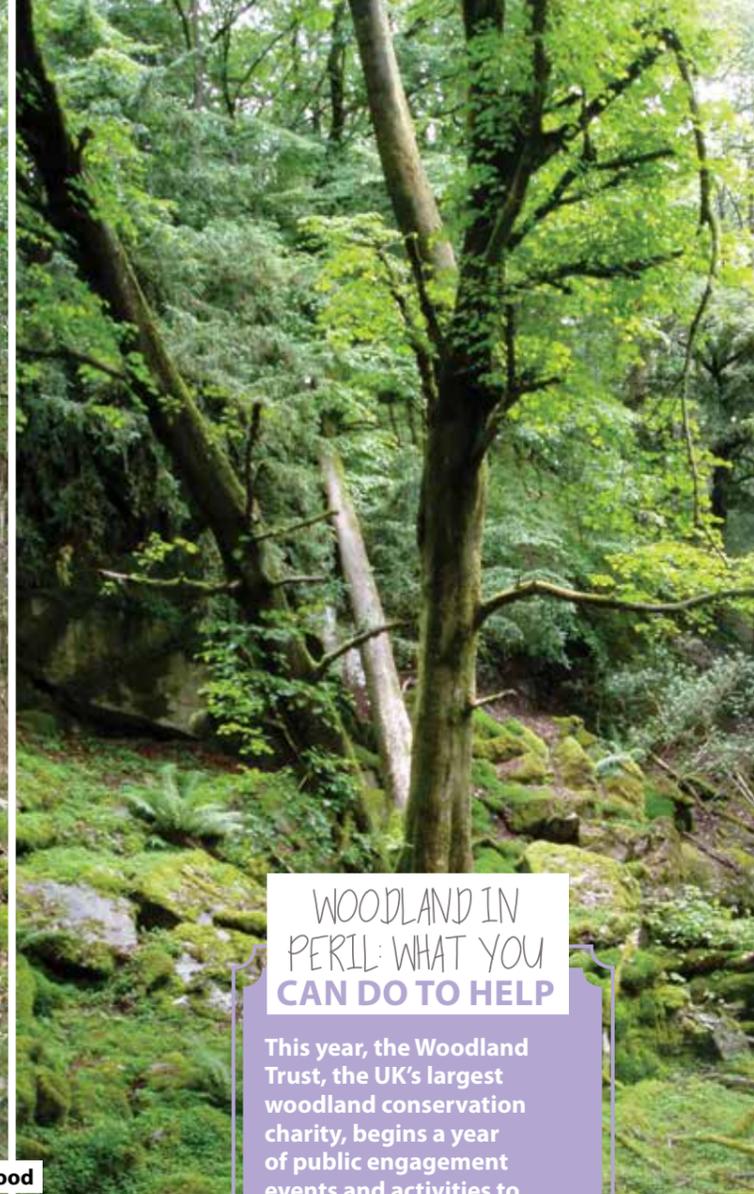


WALK IN THE WOODS



Great Knott Wood



WOODLAND IN PERIL: WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

This year, the Woodland Trust, the UK's largest woodland conservation charity, begins a year of public engagement events and activities to raise awareness of the role trees play in our lives. The aim is to join together with other conservation and environmental organisations, and members of the public, to formulate a Charter for Woods and Trees to be launched in November 2017. It will mark the 800th anniversary of the Charter of the Forests, which re-established access rights to the royal forests which had been eroded since the time of William the Conqueror. It's hoped the new charter will re-emphasise the importance of our woodland heritage and encourage more investment to help preserve it. Find out more at woodlandtrust.org

Our ancient woodlands are as much a part of our heritage as a country house or castle. But many are under threat, as **Caroline Roberts** reports

There are few things more relaxing than a stroll in the woods. Surrounded by soothing greenery, tall trees and birdsong, you can feel completely cut off from the modern world. As well as contributing to our sense of wellbeing, woods improve air quality, stabilise the soil and provide a habitat for wildlife. And they certainly hold a special place in the national psyche – in 2011, the government was forced to back down on a plan to sell off public forests after a public outcry.

But few of us fully appreciate what we stand to lose if we don't properly care for our woodlands. It's not just about stopping them being chopped down to make way for buildings and new roads; it's about preserving what's left of our ancient woodland, defined as areas that have been

covered in trees since 1600.

Since the 1930s, more than half of our ancient woodland has been lost and it now covers just two per cent of the country. Composed of native broadleaf species, such as oak, beech and sycamore, it's the idyllic woods characterised by veteran trees with fissured trunks providing homes for wildlife, gnarled, moss-covered branches, and carpets of bluebells and wild garlic in spring.

It's likely that much of this woodland dates back to the forest that covered Britain after it emerged from the last ice age more than 10,000 years ago. Because it has existed for millennia, it has developed a very complex and diverse ecology, making it a unique and irreplaceable natural habitat supporting many rare and vulnerable species.

Flowers and birds may attract most of our attention, but there are other species such as insects and fungi that play very important roles in the ecosystem, explains Dr Nick Brown, a Lecturer in Forestry at the University of Oxford. "A lot of the trees and flowers we treasure are dependent on fungi to create a system that supports them. Fungi form close associations with the roots of many of our native tree species and scavenge nutrients for them from the soil that they find it really difficult to collect through their roots. Fungi then swap these for carbohydrates that the tree can produce through photosynthesis."

And there's much still to be learned about the constituents of the soil. "It would be very unusual to find an undiscovered plant or bird, but when you go below ground and look at the microbes, there's a lot of stuff that we have no idea about. We're only just beginning to understand how interdependent the system is. It's always nice to have more woods but

they are never going to be equivalent ecologically to our ancient semi-natural woodlands simply because we can't just move all the really diverse populations of fungi, insects and microbes that have been there for many thousands of years."

Over the last decade or so, arboriculture experts have begun to realise that the common view of an ancient woodland as a piece of nature that will look after itself if left alone is misguided. 'Semi-natural ancient woodland' is a more precise term, says Nick Brown. Up until around 100 years ago, woodland would have been used very intensively as a source of building material and fuel, and traditional management techniques such as coppicing, cutting back the tree to promote growth, and pollarding, pruning the upper branches, were common.

"It's a human artifact, and getting in there and managing it is important for protecting some of the species that live there," says Nick. "Just as you need to

make sure the roofs on our stately homes are watertight and the windows are painted, we need to keep on making sure we disturb our woodlands, and coppice management is a good example of how this is done."

Another issue is that after World War I around 60 per cent of these woodlands were planted with fast-growing conifers to provide timber to help rebuild the country and its economy. The conifers soon began to dominate, their tightly packed needles blocking out the light that native species need to flourish. But simply chopping down the conifers isn't the answer as the sudden influx of light causes nettles and brambles to shoot up, preventing other slower growing plants regenerating.

Conservation organisations such as the Woodland Trust and the National Trust now have many projects to identify and restore such woodlands around the country. They will involve many years of gradual and expert thinning out, allowing in just the

TREES WITH TALES TO TELL

The UK has some iconic ancient trees that have witnessed important events in our nation's history. A number of these are protected by the National Trust

THE ANKERWYKE YEW, ANKERWYKE, SURREY

This tree, thought to be 2,500 years old, overlooks the site where the Magna Carta was sealed in 1215. It may also have witnessed the courtship of Henry VIII Anne Boleyn as Henry reportedly wooed her in the vicinity.

NEWTON'S APPLE TREE, WOOLSTHORPE MANOR, LINCOLNSHIRE

This is the tree under which Sir Isaac Newton is thought to have been sitting when he was hit on the head by a falling apple, leading him to come up with the theory of gravity. The tree is probably more than 350 years old.

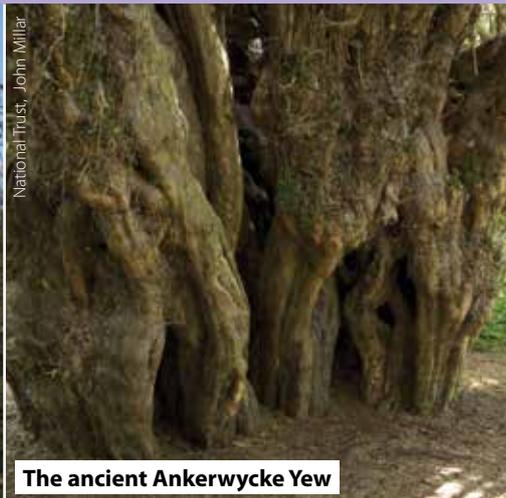
THE TOLPUDDLE MARTYRS' TREE

In 1834, six agricultural labourers gathered under this sycamore tree and formed the first ever trade union in Britain. They were subsequently arrested under the Mutiny Act and transported to Botany Bay, but were allowed to return home in triumph after a massive public protest.

You can read more about ancient trees, and the best woodland walks, at nationaltrust.org.uk



Newton's apple tree



The ancient Ankerwycke Yew



Tolpuddle Martyrs

right amount of dappled light to replicate the broadleaf environment.

Heather Swift, the Woodland Trust's regional manager for Cumbria and Northumberland, is one of those working on the ground. "It's a gradual process," she says. "The first thing we do is to look very closely at the ecology." There are certain species that are suggestive of ancient woodland, she explains. "You're looking for a number of indicator species, particularly things that are uncommon such as wild daffodil. You get those where I am in the Lake District – they're the ones that Wordsworth wrote about. Another of my favourites is townhall clock. It's a tiny little thing with four flower heads facing in different directions, just like a clock, and one facing upwards. If you can find that,

you can guarantee it's ancient woodland.

"The next phase, which usually takes about five years, involves thinning out some of the conifers and just allowing a little more light where you might have the ancient woodland flora and native trees and see how they respond. Every site is different, but you're probably looking at a 20 year programme, doing some felling every five or ten years."

Restoration has been going on at one of the sites Heather manages, Great Knott Wood near Lake Windermere, for just over ten years. "I've just done the third assessment and you can see how the ancient woodland plants have spread, such as wood sorrell and lots of ferns, including oak fern, which is really unusual.

Local people can see the changes, year on year. There are a lot of lovely old yew trees and they're now thriving, where once they were completely overshadowed by conifers and their branches were dying.

"Ancient woodland is a precious resource. It's finite and you can't recreate it. Woods complement our history; these are the woods that people back then would have walked through and worked in, and these are the plants that they would have seen. We need to plant more trees, but planting a woodland is no substitute for saving one. It's like knocking down a castle and getting a pile of stones and saying, 'we're going to build it over here now'. We need to hang on to what we've got and restore these woods to their former glory." ■