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THE NORTH WEST WOODLAND CRISIS

By Andrew Harris

This is a plea for the importance of the tree – and what we can do to protect, restore and plant them. Trees are vital whether the need is to absorb harmful carbon, be the habitat for thousands of species of wildlife and woodland flora, prevent soil erosion, act as a wind break, provide shade, beautify our countryside and towns or be a wonderful form of education and recreation for adults and children. Despite this, just 10 per cent of England is wooded compared to the European average of 37 per cent and 31 per cent worldwide - and most of our region is nowhere near the average for England.

Leafy prosperous counties like Surrey, Sussex and Hampshire head the woodland league table of 48 English counties with cover of 24.83-19.39 per cent. Rural Cumbria manages the England average of 10% but Greater Manchester, Merseyside, Lancashire and – surprisingly - Cheshire are all in the bottom 15 with just 7.74, 6.93, 6.51 and 6.43 per cent cover respectively.

The resulting loss of wildlife is staggering. The number of butterflies has halved in the last 25 years and we now have only 10 per cent of the number of hedgehogs we had in the 1950s. In some recent years more trees have been lost than new trees planted. It is estimated that 110,000 mature trees have been cut down by Network Rail and city councils like Sheffield. Also, ash dieback has the potential to wipe out 126 million ash trees which is nearly twice the ambitious new planting target of the Woodland Trust which is described later.

It wasn't always like this. After the Norman Conquest the creation of Royal Parks meant that the English were not allowed to fell many trees. By the 18th century it had become a patriotic duty to grow oaks for their timber to

make the country's warships. The Action Oak Partnership was established this year to help to safeguard our remaining 121 million oak trees. These could, however, be threatened by the oak processionary moth which is thought to have already arrived in London and Berkshire. England still has more ancient native oaks than the rest of Europe put together but only constant vigilance will prevent the loss of mature woodland.

There is a need to tighten border controls to prevent additional bacterial pests from being introduced in to the UK. The Bartlett Tree Experts' laboratory at Reading University says the need is now urgent. They explain "This year's winter snow followed by summer drought has meant we have already lost thousands of vulnerable trees and enfeebled others. They are now highly susceptible to disease. A quarantine period for all plant imports is vital."

We know of many threats to our trees. We lost 30 million elms to dutch elm disease in the 1970s. Many horse chestnuts in London now have drooping brown leaves and struggle to produce their white candle flowers because they been invaded by the leaf miner moth. Millions of ash trees are at risk of dieback which was first found in a consignment of trees sent from the Netherlands to Buckinghamshire in 2012. Dieback is rife in Denmark where it has infected 90 per cent of their ash trees. The *xylella fastidiosa* bacterial pest from South America is devastating olive groves in Italy. If it found its way to the UK it would cause a massacre here.

It is too easy for diseases to reach the UK through live plant imports. We export just £52 million of pot plants but import more than a £1 billion worth of trees and shrubs but these are rarely inspected; hence the need to quarantine imported trees

and shrubs to protect our native species. If we could improve our biosecurity we could sell disease free plants to the world and boost our exports hugely.

Leading the campaign to preserve, restore and plant trees and woodland throughout the UK is the Woodland Trust - a national charity founded in 1972 and based in Grantham, Lincolnshire. It has enabled 32 million trees to be planted since 1972 and plans to enable a further 64 million to be planted by 2025. They offer a range of initiatives and ask for your support of which more later.

More locally there is an encouraging project to create a 'Northern Forest' which is an ambitious long-term plan to

LEFT: Woodland at Smithills near Bolton. Picture courtesy of Heather Becket. BELOW: Woodland at Great Knott in Cumbria. Picture courtesy of Amanda Cogan Barber. BOTTOM: Trees and water at Grappenhall Heys in Cheshire.





plant 50 million trees in a fragmented woodland stretching from Liverpool to Hull. This region is home to 13 million people but only has woodland cover of 7.6 per cent which is well below even the modest figure for England. It aims to reduce flood risk for up to 190,000 people, improve bio-diversity, create thousands of jobs, store thousands of tonnes of carbon and leave all people in the region healthier and happier. In January the Northern Forest plans took a big step forward when the government announced support for the vision and included the Northern Forest in the 25-year plan of the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. This was accompanied by a commitment to £5.7 million towards the cost of the 50 million trees. It's good news but still only 11.4 pence per tree whilst the estimated total cost of the Northern forest is £500 million. If achieved it should provide £2.5 billion of social, economic and environmental benefits. Implementation is via 5 'community forests' across northern England; 2 in our region and 3 in Yorkshire.

One input to the Northern Forest from our region is via the Mersey Forest organisation which was established in 1991. It has already created about 7,125



acres of woodland, planted 8,354 street trees, managed nearly 17,000 acres of woodland and helped 529 landowners. The team is based in Warrington, operates in Merseyside and north Cheshire and has achieved £41 million of funding. Your columnist wanted to know more about their future plans and targets but their media contact didn't share this wish. After 27 years of such activity it is strange that Merseyside and Cheshire are only ranked 36 and 41 out of 48 in the 'league table' of counties for woodland cover.

The City of Trees community forest was only founded in 2015 to re-invigorate Greater Manchester's landscape within a generation by

restoring underused, unloved woodland and planting tree for every man, woman and child that lives in the City Region. It has three goals

- Plant 3 million trees – one each for the 2,798,800 men, women and children who live in Greater Manchester - plus a few spares;
- Bring 4,800 acres of unmanaged woodland back into use for the community and
- Connect people to the trees and woods around them.

It is not obvious why Lancashire, Cumbria and the rest of Cheshire have no community forest organisations or funding. Whilst Cumbria has woodland



TOP LEFT: A sunlit view of Grappenhall Heys courtesy of Steven Highfield. FAR LEFT: Woodlands are for people. Image courtesy of Michael Heffernan. TOP: Trees, flora and imagination go together. Image courtesy of Judith Parry. LEFT: Nature at its most natural. Image courtesy of Judith Parry. ABOVE: A waterscape sunlit through trees.

cover at 10.03% - the average for England – it is far below continental European levels. Poor neglected Lancashire and much of Cheshire have woodland cover of only 6.51 and 6.43 per cent respectively. Your columnist will enquire about this obscure allocation of resources which appears to exclude the most needy.

The overall situation is dire. With the exception of rural Cumbria the 4 counties in our region have some of the lowest levels of woodland cover. Our regional average of 7.5 per cent is only a fifth of the EU average and a quarter of the world average. So what can you do?

- A good start is to, in their words, 'Join the Woodland Trust today and make a difference.' The cost can be as little as £3 a month or more at your discretion. The Trust offer to keep in touch with news, appeals, campaigns, events, products and how you can become involved. To enquire visit www.woodlandtrust.org.uk or call 0330 333 3300

- Apply for a free Woodland Trust Party Pack so you can 'invite a tree to tea'. Packed with games and picnic recipes for all the family the aim is to raise cash for the cause and celebrate a local tree you love. Apply to www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/treeparty

- Schools and communities are invited to apply for free tree packs. The Woodland Trust give away packs of 30, 105 or 420 saplings to schools and communities each March and November to coincide with the planting season. Visit the Trust's website for details.

- The Trust offers trees, grants and funding schemes for planting trees on farms or private land. Details are available on the Trust's website.

The English have had a long love affair with trees. Sara Coleridge (1802-52) - daughter of S. T. Coleridge - wrote Trees:



TOP: 'What is this life if full of care, we have no time to stand and stare'. From the 1911 poem *Leisure* by W.H.Davies. Image courtesy of Michael Heffernan. **LEFT:** . . . and now for a rest among the trees. Image courtesy of Michael Heffernan. **BOTTOM:** The offices of the Woodland Trust in Grantham, Lincolnshire. Picture by Andrew Harris.



*The Oak is called the king of trees,
The Aspen quivers in the breeze,
The Poplar grows up straight and tall,
The Peach tree spreads along the wall,
The Sycamore gives pleasant shade,
The Willow droops in watery glade,
The Fir tree useful timber gives,
The Beech amid the forest lives.*



The state of our woodlands seems to reflect so many current comparisons because we let it. We are worse than Europe and the prosperous south fares better than the north west. But with trees we can do something about it and make Lancashire and the north west the leafy region we would like and improve our air, environment and the habitat for thousands of wild life species in the process. The Woodland Trust is the charity that can help if we ask them.

Andrew Harris –
www.andrewharris.co.uk - gratefully acknowledges the help provided by Andy Bond of the Woodland Trust in the preparation of this article but the views expressed are from your columnist. Unless attributed otherwise the pictures are by kind permission of the Woodland Trust Media Library.

