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Growing New Forests in the UK

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Since World War II, many of the United Kingdom's native woods have been felled and replaced with non-native conifers for fast timber production. The dense growth of conifers prevents light from reaching the woodland floor and therefore reduces biodiversity. Less than 12 percent of the UK's landmass consists of woodland cover, compared to a European average of 44 percent. Only 8 percent of the woods the UK does have are native British trees. In light of mounting evidence of the important mental health benefits of living near trees as well as the growing threat of climate change, the UK has made the first steps toward addressing its shortage of native trees.

In 2008 the Woodland Trust, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) dedicated to protecting and planting trees in the UK, was presented with the opportunity to create the largest contiguous forest in Britain on 850 acres of formerly private land near St. Albans, Hertfordshire. The Woodland Trust began in 1972 when Kenneth Watkins, a retired farmer, and three of his friends decided to take action to protect their local woods, which were rapidly disappearing due to development and being replaced with conifer plantations. Just six years later, they took their operation UK-wide.

The Woodland Trust is now the UK's leading woodland conservation charity and exists with the primary aim of protecting and creating woods. In the last 39 years, we have acquired over 1,200 woods and forests all around Britain and Northern Ireland, totalling 50,000 acres—about the size of 20,000 standard sized soccer pitches. We're not only buying and conserving existing woods, we're also planting new ones (over 12 million trees to date), helping people and communities plant trees on their own land, and campaigning and lobbying government to ensure greater protection for woods outside of our ownership. We have successfully encouraged the British government to place a greater emphasis on planting and protecting trees in its manifesto. And we were a major campaigning voice when the government announced plans to sell off the UK's public-owned forests—plans that were cancelled due to overwhelming public opposition.

The Hertfordshire project is an important step toward the Woodland Trust's goal of doubling native woodland cover over the next 50 years. Less than 45 minutes from London, the new forest will provide a unique chance to engage people in habitat restoration.

To raise the £10.4 million needed to buy the site and cover project costs for the next 20 years, we began our "Heartwood Forest Appeal" three years ago. Thanks to generous donations from our members, local fundraising efforts, and forestry grants, we've raised over 80 percent of the necessary funds to date. But there's still a long way to go to ensure the long-term viability of the project.

In the meantime, having bought the site itself, we've begun an ambitious planting program for this varied site of grassland, agricultural fields, and ancient woodland. Overall 600,000 trees will be planted on the site, covering 71 percent of the land area. Every tree will be planted by a volunteer.

Due to the size of the site, we needed to take a different approach to planting than we usually do. Rather than plant the entire planned amount of trees within a couple of years, we're planting in phases, a new block of woodland every year, to mitigate any potential losses that could occur as a result of extreme weather patterns. Newly planted trees become flourishing woodland in just over a decade, so the finished site will contain trees of a range of ages, new and old, creating varied habitat that promotes biodiversity.

The Hertfordshire site contains 40 acres of ancient woodland, land that has been continuously wooded since at least

1600. The Woodland Trust is committed to protecting ancient woodland due to its biodiversity. The ancient woodland areas are a key feature of the site and their late spring and early summer displays of English Bluebell flowers are an added attraction for visitors. Planting the open areas of the site will link these pockets of ancient woodland, creating a protective buffer around them, helping secure their associated species and features, and improving wildlife habitat.

So far, over 210,000 trees have been planted by volunteers. Many well known names have been involved in planting trees on site from companies such as Disney Stores UK (whose staff planted a whole “Magical Wood”) to the Royal family (Princess Beatrice of York visited the site in 2010 and planted trees with schoolchildren).

Another important step was to name the forest. England has many evocative forest names, such as Sherwood and the New Forest in Hampshire, supposedly created in the eleventh century when William the Conqueror kicked out the local inhabitants to create a hunting range. The Trust ran a naming competition for this site and selected *Heartwood Forest* as the winner. The name is a nod to the forest’s home county of Hertfordshire and its stag emblem. It also suggests the special meaning the forest will have to so many people—in this generation and those to come—and represents native trees and woods as the backbone of Britain. Heartwood has become a flagship for our tree planting goals and campaigns. The site is providing opportunities for fresh air and exercise for the local population. Local schools and universities can study the site. The forest will even lock in an estimated 9,880 tons of carbon. We hope that the newly planted trees will stand long after our time.

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