

Into the Woods

Shade, shelter, stories, smells; colours, creatures, crunch: where would we be without woodland walks? Fifty years ago one man realised we needed only to wait, and do nothing, to find out. There was no way on earth he was doing that.

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Ivybridge

TICK THE LIST

Titcombe Wood was one of the Woodland Trust's first sites; now they care for over 1000. For the ultimate arboreal challenge, why not walk them all?



TWIN LINES

Trees grow up into the high arches of the Ivybridge viaduct; the piers of an earlier Brunel viaduct stand close by.



'In midsummer, it's humid, lush and like walking inside a terrarium. In autumn, the colours kindle into one last flaming hurrah.'

IT'S GREEN, *SO green*. Leaves mosaic the sky, moss furs tree-trunks and rocks, ferns sprout from every nook, and it all tints the ripples of the River Erme. I'm walking north through the woods from Ivybridge to the hamlet of Harford. Tucked in a fold of Dartmoor, its scattered cottages include an old rectory now known as Butterbrook House. At a table in its kitchen, half a century ago, the Woodland Trust was launched.

The man at the table was Kenneth Watkins. Born in suburban Kent in 1909 and schooled in London, he went west to farm, then diversified into selling agricultural machinery. That was the day job. Ken's passion was wildlife. He built a holt to house otters. He made friends with a badger, called it Meles and let it roam *inside* Butterbrook. He set up a raptor rescue service and splinted broken wings, although one poor buzzard crash-landed in a tree on release. He won an award for a short film about harvest mice, and another called *A Naturalist's Year*.

The woods reflect the changing year more readily than any other habitat. Here today, in midsummer, it's humid, lush and like walking inside a terrarium. In spring, the budding treetops rock with frisky birdsong. In winter, the forest strips to its bones, each skeletal branch a sculpture. In autumn, the colours kindle into one last flaming hurrah before they fall. You've probably heard of the Japanese practice of *shinrin-yoku* or forest bathing, and the healing power of trees on humans is now well-known. But in 1972, as he retired from work, Ken was worried about the health of the woods.

They were in desperate straits. Forests had been felled for the war effort and the government had

▲WAY FINDING

Above, from left to right: The River Erme burbles through the hamlet of Harford; walking up the track to Hall Farm which Ken once owned; and lots of options for walks from Ivybridge.

►BY THE RIVER

A gorgeous old oak twists towards the light from the lush banks of the Erme.

▼FOUNDER, VISIONARY

Kenneth Watkins, the man behind the Woodland Trust, was awarded an OBE for his services to conservation.

incentivised planting of fast-growing conifers over native broadleaf species. Elm bark beetles had burrowed a fatal fungus into millions of Britain's *Ulmus* trees. Hedges had been ripped out to make room for larger machinery.

For 10 years Ken had worked with the Devon Naturalists' Trust (now the Devon Wildlife Trust), but had grown frustrated it didn't share his sylvan obsession. As the purchase of another oakwood was voted down in 1971, a colleague joked: 'Well, Ken, you'll have to start a trust for the woods.'

And he did. As the footpath climbs away from the Erme through the steep spinney of King's Wood, I enter Woodland Trust land. A leafy track leads me to Hall Farm, once owned by Watkins, now farmed by Clive Venables on behalf of the Trust. 'Ken used to be a regular sight and occasional counsellor to me,' Clive wrote in his book *Under the Rope*, 'as he walked with his dog for his statutory minimum two miles per day, either along the road when it was wet or across the fields when dry.' I follow the lane Ken once trod into Harford – a lane he also used to drive slowly in a tractor, and in a much faster, lemon-yellow Lamborghini he called his 'Italian friend'. Ken was no stereotypical tree-hugger: he loved to race cars, competing in Formula 500 at Silverstone.

On a bend just past St Petroc's church – where Ken wed Mary Clayton in 1959 – I spot the sign for Butterbrook, although the house is just out of sight. In October 1972, Ken signed a deed here, with his naturalist friend HG Hurrell and solicitor Oliver Rossetti: 'The objects of the Trust are to conserve, restore and re-establish trees and in particular broadleaved trees, plants and all forms of wildlife in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and thereby to secure and enhance the enjoyment by the public of the natural environment.'

Those nation-spanning ambitions began small, and local. The first site was tiny Wedd's Copse in Tavistock, bought on 23rd October 1972. Next day, it was Bedlime Wood, south-east of Ivybridge. Ken purchased these two sites with his own cash, gifting them the following year to his fledgling Trust. 1973 also saw the Trust acquire Dartshill Copse, soon incorporated into Bedlime, and neighbouring Titcombe and Woodleigh Woods, stitching together a sylvan patchwork in Devon's Avon Valley – where I'll be exploring tomorrow.

Today, I carry on up the lane onto Harford Moor. The flora shrinks from trees to scrub to ►

◀WILD LIFE

Meles the badger roamed Butterbrook inside and out (while Ken's friend HG Hurrell kept a seal called Atlanta in his swimming pool).



►A NEED FOR SPEED

Ken adored trees, raptors, otters, badgers, harvest mice... and racing cars.



BUTTERBROOK HOUSE

▲ FROM LITTLE ACORNS...

The UK's largest woodland charity was born here in 1972, moving six years later to its current HQ in Grantham.

tussocks as I climb to the plump ridge. Studded by granite outcrops, with long views over peaty hills, it feels like a classic Dartmoor scene – although these slopes would once have been thick with wildwood. Pollen records show man started clearing the oaks and elms about 6000 years ago, later building an astonishing collection of hut circles, stone rows and cairns – so many the area is now designated a Premier Archaeological Landscape.

From the trig point on Butterdon Hill the view dips into valleys brimming with trees. I can see the roofs of Ivybridge peeping through the leaves at the foot of the slope, and away to the south, the hills that cradle the Avon Valley.

Next day, I head there to walk with Dave Rickwood, Devon Site Manager, and Steve Marsh, Lead PR Manager, and learn about the Woodland Trust today. We meet at the edge of Watkins Wood, one of five in this arboreal complex. "This is all new planting," says Dave. "It was created as a memorial to Ken. We did it in phases to make a succession of habitats for wildlife."

Dave never met Ken, who died in 1996 aged 86, but he has a collection of his photos and letters: "In an obituary he was described as a 'benevolent despot' and I think he had a definite stubbornness."

We set off through neighbouring Woodleigh Wood. On the map there's only one path, down on the riverbank, but the site is criss-crossed by trails. "Nearly all of our woods are open access," says Dave. "There are only restrictions if we're working, or there's a danger like a quarry, or there's an oddity like a covenant from a previous landowner. Even then, if you want to walk somewhere, just ask!"

"We like to buy privately-owned sites and open them up," says Steve. "And they're all free. Parking is free. Our membership is causal rather than transactional. People join the Woodland Trust to help us, rather than gain free parking or entry."

A lot of us want to help. The Trust now has 500,000 members – and over 1000 woods. In 1980, Coed Lletywalter became its first site in Wales, in 1984 Balmacaan near Loch Ness its first in Scotland, and by 1992 it had 500 woods. In 1996 it opened a Northern Ireland office, and in 2019 it bought Ben Shiellaig, its first mountain.

"Our three aims are restoration, protection, creation," says Steve.

"Since 1972 we've planted 50 million trees."

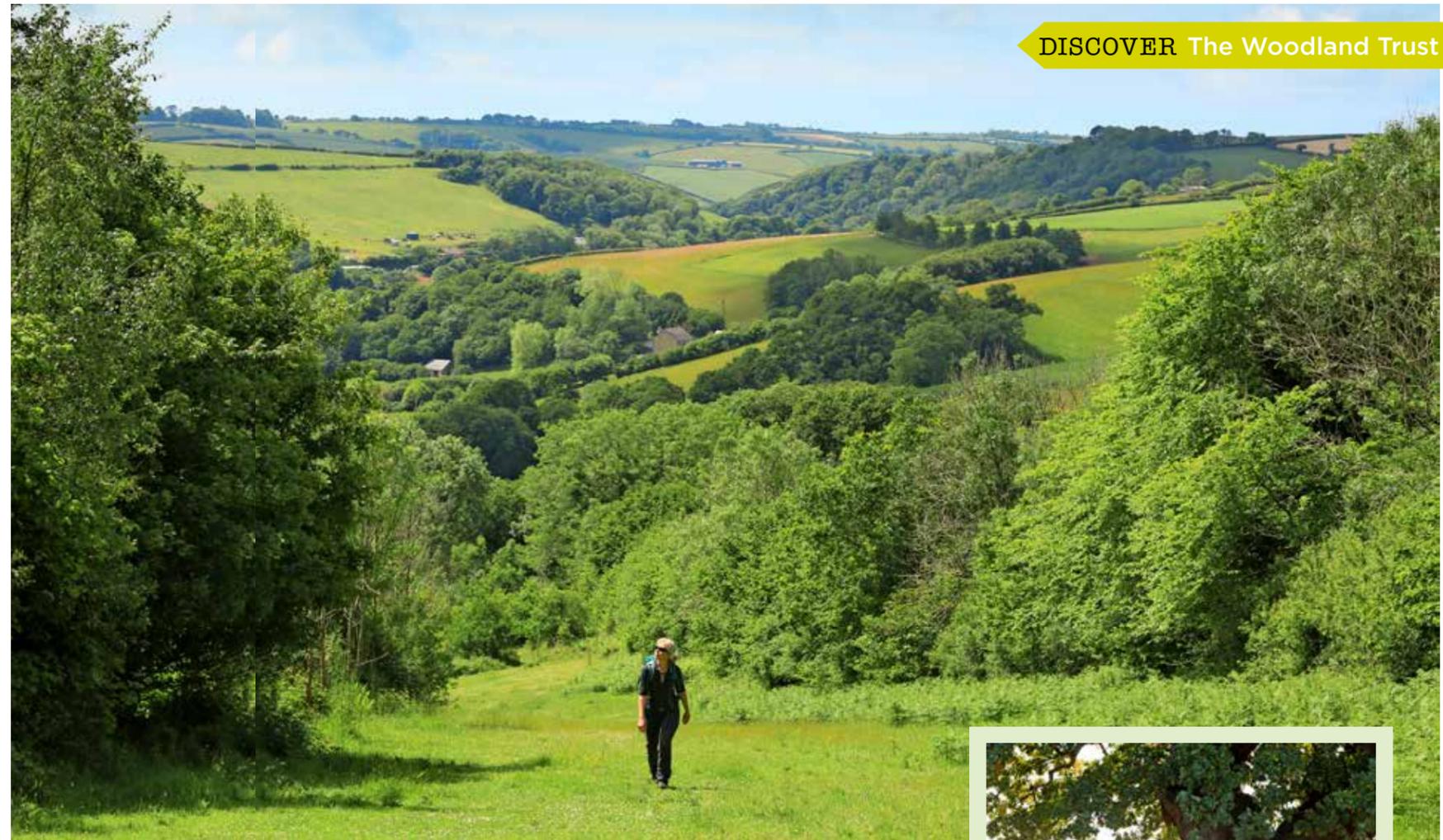
"The last 10 years have seen a major expansion," he adds.

"The environment started to be of interest. It wasn't just beardy weirdies hugging trees. People started to listen, to notice, to care.

During the pandemic people started to value local places they used to just drive by."

As we walk along the hilltop the view is a mix of meadow and woods. "This was planted under the English Woodland Grant Scheme and 20% had to be open ground," says Dave, waving at a field full of wildflowers. He explains best practice is constantly evolving: "We now leave 40% open ground. At one time it was all about high forest species like oak and beech, but those woods lacked understory. You need hazel, hawthorn and guelder rose. We planted 2250 stems per hectare here, which leads to a very uniform structure after 30 years. Things like a tree dying can actually help, as it creates gaps that let flowers grow and attracts butterflies."

A healthy woodland ecosystem takes active work and in the early days Ken never shied from mucking in – clearing scrub, building fences, planting trees. A sign saying *On the Moove* reveals one of today's management methods: "We use Dexter cattle for conservation grazing," says Dave, "as they create spaces in the wood – and you don't have to cut the



▲ EXPLORING THE VALLEY

Above: Woodleigh Wood is one of five Trust sites in Devon's Avon Valley, along with Bedlime, Titcombe, Aveton and Watkins. Inset left: Autumnal tints on the leaves of a sessile oak.

▼ LONG LOOK

Hangershell Rock on Harford Moor offers a fun scramble to vast views over southern Dartmoor.

grass. They don't graze down as much as sheep and their extra weight creates a bit of disturbance in the ground which lets species like dog violets grow – a major food plant for pearl-bordered fritillaries.

"There can be anxiety from walkers about cattle though, so a website shows their location and you can avoid them if you want. Some people like to see them. Dexters are very docile."

The trees grow taller as the path plunges to the River Avon: "Ancient woodlands tend to be in steep valleys that can't be got at," says Dave. "We're always looking for ancient woods with potential for restoration. England has maps dating back to 1600. If they show woodland, and it's still woodland, then it counts as ancient – even if it's now a very different kind of woodland like conifer." Incredibly, even block plantation can be restored, by thinning conifers and invasive species to give the native seedbank a chance to regenerate. ▶



▲ MAN ON THE GROUND

Dave Rickwood, Devon Site Manager for the Woodland Trust, joins us for a walk in the woods.

◀ ARBOREAL EVOLUTION

"Historically, we've managed for general habitat rather than particular species," says Dave. "But there are important species we need to learn about."



PHOTO: TOM BALLEE

Saving the old souls

"The Fortingall yew in Scotland is 3500 years old," says Steve Marsh, as we walk through the Devon woods. "Imagine what it's seen. It's the closest thing to immortality a living thing gets."

"Yet many of our ancient trees have no legal protection. We'd never think of knocking down an old building like the Tower of London, but trees can just be chopped down. We're campaigning for heritage status for trees."

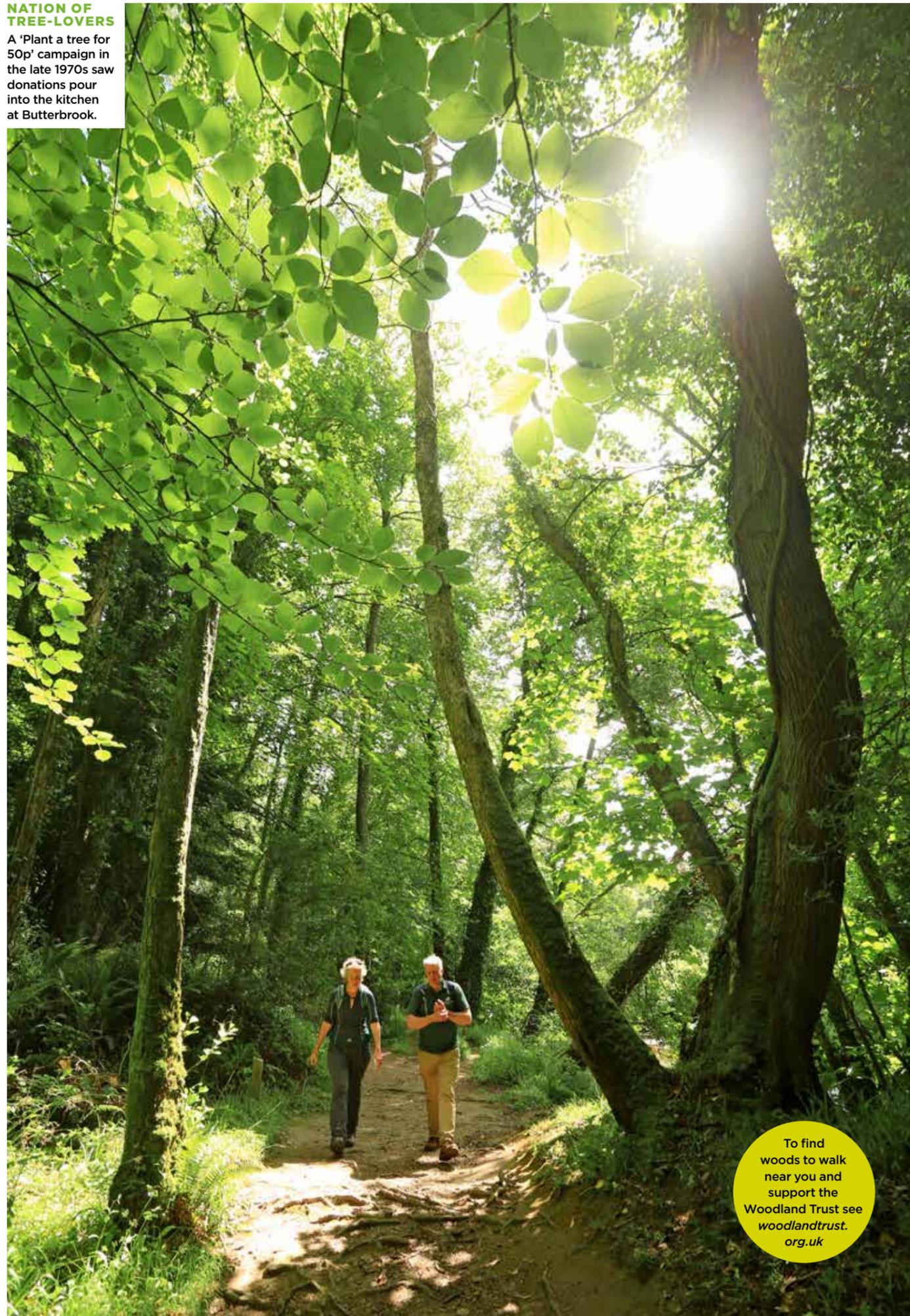
Part of protecting these living legends is identifying them and the Woodland Trust is building an Ancient Tree Inventory, which has already logged details of 180,000 venerable trees across the UK. An interactive map means you can find ones near you and make a pilgrimage to spend time with these old souls. You can help build the list too by adding ancient trees you see on your walks – see ati.woodlandtrust.org.uk

These leafy veterans have an irreplaceable role in the ecosystem, often hosting thousands of different species of wildlife, including many which are rare and endangered. Find out more and sign the petition to help them at woodlandtrust.org.uk/protecting-trees-and-woods/campaign-with-us/tree-protection-campaign



NATION OF TREE-LOVERS

A 'Plant a tree for 50p' campaign in the late 1970s saw donations pour into the kitchen at Butterbrook.



To find woods to walk near you and support the Woodland Trust see woodlandtrust.org.uk



Protecting trees from the grinding molars of deer is key. "That's an enclosure to keep them out," Dave says, pointing to a small, fenced-off area. "We measure inside and outside the boundary; within three years you will see a difference."

We turn along the Avon, where a tree has fallen to bridge the river. "We should be aiming to leave 20m³ of dead wood per hectare," says Dave. "But most sites are much less than that. For centuries we've gleaned everything – for timber, for firewood – and a whole ecological niche is missing. We need to leave things messier."

A boardwalk leads on into the dappled paths of Tiveton Woods: "I love walking in the woods," says Dave, "particularly in early spring in the first flush of growth. Autumn too, of course. And some woods are best in winter when the leaves are off and the branches heavy with lichen in the low sun. You should look for the string-of-sausages lichen – it looks just like it says."

Across the old Primrose Line, and the Avon, we walk up through Aveton Woods, chatting about the Trust's many sites. "I think I've visited about 200," says Steve. "Heartwood Forest near St Albans is a favourite. Fourteen years ago it was fields and I remember looking over the fence and thinking *hmm*. Now we've planted 600,000 trees – I did 1000 myself – to make the largest new continuous native woodland in England. It's the first place I saw turn into a wood. Then there are woods that make me go *this is amazing* like Shaptor on Dartmoor. It's like Sleepy Hollow – dripping with mosses like an old wild wood in a fairytale."

Sunken lanes loop us back towards the start, as Steve outlines the Trust's ambitions for the future: "We have hotspots we're looking into – places that need more woodland like the Northern Forest where cover is particularly low at just 7% vs a national average of 13%. That's where we can make the most difference. We also want to plant another 50 million trees in the next five years, strengthen protection for ancient trees and woods, and have all the public forest estate in active restoration by 2030."

Our last stop is a memorial stone in Watkins Wood. "I put this here," says Dave, then adds with a smile: "Well, I guided the machinery." It's dedicated to Kenneth Watkins OBE: *His vision saved woodland for everyone*. I think back to Harford, where Ken's ashes were scattered at his 'favourite sitting place' in King's Wood, and where his ghost perhaps still walks among the trees. 'Three months after his funeral I was so sure that I had seen him,' Clive Venables wrote, 'head on one side walking his little collie dog on a short lead, that I walked several paces to meet him before looking again! Alas no Ken and no dog.' But Ken's Woodland Trust lives on: 50 years old and still growing. **CW**

DISCOVER The Woodland Trust



▲AWAY FROM IT ALL

Clockwise from top left: Ken's memorial in the wood named after him; boardwalk helps ease erosion; Steve Marsh, Lead PR Manager, finds peace in the woods – "It's a moment of time, away from it all."; Ken's wife Mary designed the original ash-tree logo, now twin oak leaves.

Plan your trip

WALK HERE

Turn to Walks 1 and 2 in this issue for turn-by-turn guides.

GETTING THERE

Ivybridge is just off the A38, 10 miles east of Plymouth, and has a mainline rail station and good bus connections. Loddiswell and the Avon Valley Woods are a 10-mile drive south-east of Ivybridge; no direct public transport.

WHERE TO STAY

Country Walking stayed at **Boringdon Hall**, a five-star manor near Plympton whose name comes from the Saxon *Burth-Y-Don* meaning 'enchanted place on the hill'. Built in the 16th century, the house has a turbulent history including civil war and fire, but is now all comfort and relaxation: bedrooms mix antique furniture with modern luxury – like four-

poster beds and ensuite wet rooms – and there's a spa to boot. Stable Rooms from £157 B&B in October (boringdonhall.co.uk; 01752 344455). Alternatively, Ivybridge has options or you can stay at the coach house at **Butterbrook House** where Ken used to live in Harford. Sleeps 5, from £478pw in Oct, devonholidaycottages.com/cottage/butterbrook-coach-house

WHERE TO EAT

The **Mayflower Brasserie** at Boringdon Hall serves lunch, afternoon tea, and dinner with dishes like ham hock terrine with black pudding (£10) and butternut and gorgonzola risotto (£19), or there's a tasting menu at its *À la carte* restaurant (£100pp). Range of pubs and cafes in Ivybridge, including the popular **Refuel** (facebook.com/people/Refuel/100039718969829) snack van on the Lee Mill Industrial Estate with takeaway lunches like Bombay potatoes topped with tandoori chicken or paneer (£7).

MORE INFORMATION

See visitdartmoor.co.uk for ideas, accommodation and places to eat, or call **Ivybridge tourist information centre** on 01752 897035.

