

The Mersey Forest at 30
9 October 2024, Chester

Prof Eunice Simmons, Vice Chancellor, University of Chester, host:



Lord Lieutenant Lady Redmond, Sir Phil – and honoured guests – which is all of you!

It is a great pleasure to welcome you all to this growing together event to celebrate 30 years of Mersey Forest here at the University of Chester's Queen's Park Campus. I am Eunice Simmons, Vice Chancellor of the University, Professor of Sustainable Environments, a long-time fan of the Community Forest Movement and most importantly the proud Chair of the Mersey Forest Partnership.

This building was home to the Army Western Command in the Second World War, hence the references to Churchill, De Gaulle and Eisenhower – who supposedly met in the basement during the war! It was then taken over by a bank who smartened it up somewhat – for the university to purchase a decade ago- It is now home to the University's Business School, recently voted the best in the north by the Educate North awards and shortlisted for the Times Higher Education Business School of the Year.

What is distinctive about this Business School and indeed our wider university is the focus on partnerships for impact, so it is a very fitting place to celebrate 30 years of the Mersey Forest.

I was a young lecturer when community forests were first established and have visited many of them with my students over the years, including with Professor Handley many years ago. If you study woodland history in England you will know that it is many centuries since we have been a forest people – or at least a people where forests were part of our everyday landscape unlike perhaps Wales and Scotland. And so the community forests were truly novel in focusing on people first and reconnecting them to trees and woodlands...

Professor John Handley

It is a great pleasure to welcome Professor John Handley to expand on how it all began!

Professor Emeritus John Handley OBE, Ph D. John Handley started out as a restoration ecologist. He has worked in practice as a senior Planner and as founding director of an NGO, The Groundwork Trust which developed into the international Groundwork network for community engagement in environmental regeneration. At the University of Manchester he jointly founded the Centre for Urban and Regional Ecology. His current work focuses on the role of green infrastructure in moderating the impacts of climate change on urban areas and in improving quality of life for an ageing population. He is also actively engaged in local planning at the neighbourhood scale. John Handley is a member of the UNEP Global 500 for services to the environment.

John is part of our advisory panel supporting the refresh of the Forest Plan for 2025.

Over to you John.

The Mersey Forest at 30

'How it all began and then what happened' – Prof John Handley



It's a great honour to be invited to speak at the 30-year anniversary of the Mersey Forest Plan which was approved on October 4th 1994.

I remember very well the publication of 'Forests for the Community' – the prospectus for community forests by the Countryside Commission¹ in January 1989. The vision statement in that document was arresting and truly inspiring:

'Imagine a magnificent forest with an exciting range of leisure facilities at the edge of the city – a well-wooded landscape right on the doorstep of tens of thousands of people. Woven into the forest is a rich variety of other landscapes, including farmland, heathlands, flower-filled meadows and lakes. Set among the trees, offering a unique

¹ Forests for the Community, CCP No: 270, Countryside Commission, Cheltenham, January 1989

experience, there are opportunities to enjoy a multitude of sports and activities. The forest also provides space for the arts, with open air concerts, exhibitions and festivals. And amid all the activity there are still secluded corners where people can relax and enjoy the peace of the forest.

This is a living forest, supporting a rich variety of wildlife. It is also a working forest, providing employment for hundreds of people – in forestry, farming, conservation and leisure. But above all, this is a Community Forest, shaped by local people for themselves and their children to cherish for generations to come.

This is not just a dream. The creation of Community Forests around our cities is the aim of a major initiative led by the Countryside Commission and the Forestry Commission – an initiative which promises to be one of the most exciting yet conceived for Britain’s urban fringes.’

What is truly remarkable is that over the past 30 years the Mersey Forest Partnership has gone such a long way towards making that dream a reality and those words will have triggered powerful memories amongst us all, whether that’s a community tree planting event, harvesting timber in a forest cooperative, battling along the Delamere Parkrun or simply enjoying the tranquillity of nature in the pine woods of the Sefton Coast.

But let’s take a step back and examine how and why this initiative came about. During the darkest days of World War II, a group of visionaries led by John Dower were planning the creation of a network of National Parks for England and Wales and in the early 1950’s the National Parks Commission set about bringing that about². In due course the remit of the National Parks Commission was expanded to cover the countryside as a whole and in 1968 the Countryside Commission for England and Wales was established. The Commission soon recognised the special importance of the countryside around the town. In the 1970s an innovative urban fringe project led by an independent project officer was set up in the Bollin Valley along the southern fringe of Manchester³ and thanks to the determination of the partnering local authorities, especially Cheshire East, the Bollin Valley Partnership is still operating today.

However, when this approach was tested in the London Boroughs of Havering and Barnet it became clear that the project officer model could not address all the complex problems of the urban fringe, where there were often difficult land use issues, powerful economic forces and stressful social conditions⁴. The Commission conceived a ‘Major Urban Fringe Experiment’ known as UFEX80 to tackle these issues in the countryside around a major conurbation. In due course St Helens and Knowsley were selected as the test bed area but the nature of the experiment changed with the creation of a free-standing charitable company, the Groundwork Trust, with very limited staff resources charged with delivering strategic land-use change through partnership working. The Groundwork Trust model has considerable strengths, in particular a collaborative approach that puts ‘place making’

² David Wilkinson, 2019, ‘Fight for it Now: John Dower and the struggle for National Parks in Britain, Signal Books, Oxford

³ Hall, A., 1976, The Bollin valley: A study in Land Management in the Urban Fringe, Countryside Commission, Cheltenham

⁴ Adrian Phillips, 2012, Groundwork – Pre-history and the Countryside Commission’s perspective, in Menzies and Barton Eds. Partnership for Action, Groundwork: the early years, Groundwork UK.

into the hands of local people⁵. The Groundwork Trust model was replicated around the country to the extent that the Groundwork movement developed its own momentum and parted company with its parent body the Countryside Commission.

But for the Countryside Commission the challenges and opportunities of the urban fringe remained to be tackled and 'Forests for the Community' emerged as the vehicle of choice to provide the long-term strategic approach which they felt was needed. In St Helens and Knowsley, Groundwork working with its local authority partners had already grasped the transformational power of woodland creation at the landscape scale. In St Helens the broad southern crescent of land despoiled by centuries of coal mining and heavy industry, which had been identified as a priority area for landscape renewal in the Merseyside Structure Plan, was being tackled through a partnership project named 'Wasteland to Woodland'. In Knowsley productive land had been taken out of agriculture in advance of industrial development which did not then materialise. Here the solution was an innovative programme of woodland creation called NUVIL (New Uses for Vacant Industrial Land), where the rotation time of the urban forest was geared to the developability of the land e.g. short rotation coppice on land with the highest development potential and structure planting, designed to last, on the fringes and access roads. All this experience seemed tailor made for the new Forests for the Community. As the prospectus said:

'Yet there are still too many bleak landscapes – residential and industrial areas with hardly any trees. Desolate areas of derelict land still scar our towns and cities. The creation of Community Forests will complement the move to develop urban forestry, and will make a major contribution to the greening of the city and the urban fringe beyond...And using the fringe in this positive way can make maximum use of the Green Belts around our towns and cities and keep them green and accessible'.

Groundwork had a very close working relationship with local government officers, especially in St Helens, and an ambitious proposal for a Mersey Community Forest soon emerged. The idea was to establish the community forest within a broad triangle. There would be three anchor points – the pine woodlands of the Sefton Coast in the north west, Delamere Forest to the south and the woodlands of Warrington New Town to the east. That would require a partnership that straddled the Mersey Estuary and new local authority partners including Warrington, Ellesmere Port and Neston, Vale Royal and Cheshire County Council. Vale Royal was a local authority centred on Northwich with its own legacy of industrial dereliction and decay. By contrast, Vale Royal also included Delamere Forest within its boundary. Of all the productive forests in the Forestry Commission's national estate we considered Delamere to be a model for what the community forests would seek to achieve with its progressive approach to public access and visitor engagement. From the outset the new local authority partners south of the Mersey played a very active and supportive role which is now taken forward by Cheshire West and Chester.

⁵ Barton, P., Handley, J., Wilmers, P. and Sharland, R., 2021 Place leadership revisited: partnerships in environmental regeneration in North West England, 1980-2010: a practitioner perspective, Voluntary Sector Review 12 (1) p.99-121

To the west, Liverpool was also a key partner with the historic woodlands of Croxteth Country Park situated half way along the Sefton/Delamere axis. But the Forests for the Community prospectus also stressed the importance of urban greening with *'the mass of trees acting as a giant air conditioning system... planting on such a scale as this will not only help cleanse and moderate the city and the region's air system but also form part of the nation's contribution to reducing the effects of global warming'*. From the outset, the Mersey Forest has taken a science-led approach. The development of analytical methods for quantifying the impacts of climate change and identifying spatial priorities for conserving and investing in urban greenspace to combat those impacts is internationally leading. The Mersey Forest is also providing national leadership in the Northern Forest, a government initiative with large scale tree planting for carbon capture at its heart. Launched in 2018, the Northern Forest is an ambitious programme of transformational change. The aim is to establish at least 50 million new trees over 25 years, across 10.000 square miles of land stretching from Liverpool to Hull. Since the project started almost 8 million new trees have already been established. The Northern Forest project brings together 4 community forests alongside other partners and the Mersey Forest Partnership has grown in area to meet that challenge, taking in Wirral and Cheshire East in 2021.

In Europe, the idea of integrated policy for place has emerged as a key theme in regional development, and with that, the recognition of the importance of 'place leadership'. As Collinge says⁶ *'the call is for a new generation of leaders operating in complex and sometimes chaotic policy environments, working across institutional, thematic, territorial and professional boundaries and with long-term, vision-led agendas'*. This is a tall order, and the Mersey Forest has been hugely fortunate in the competence and longevity of its two Directors, first John Burns and latterly Paul Nolan. Success has required great skill in partnership working both vertically, from the local community to national government and horizontally between local authorities and other key partners in the local area. The strength of those partnerships was tested as never before during the years of austerity. At a time when community forest initiatives were failing elsewhere the Mersey Forest Partnership survived and prospered, thanks in no small part to the sustained commitment of the local authority partners. One cannot deliver long-term transformational change without ensuring that the organisation is itself sustainable. In St Helens the Groundwork Trust did not survive and it was the Mersey Forest that rescued its legacy, particularly at Bold Forest Park. It is vital that new investments in the landscape can be properly sustained and the Mersey Forest has its own charitable Trusts to provide long-term assurance and income.

One of the greatest challenges facing a community forest project is the problem of scale. Paul Selman in his book *'Planning at the Landscape Scale'*⁷ recognises three dimensions of scale:

1. a spatial dimension – based on both a rational and intuitive recognition of distinct physical units;
2. a temporal dimension – implying a continuum from the earliest human use of a landscape to the sustainable use by future generations. Besides looking forward,

⁶ Collinge, C., Gibney, J. and Mabey, c., 2010, Leadership and place, Policy Studies 31 (4):367-8

⁷ Paul Selman (2006) Planning at the landscape Scale, Routledge

- the temporal dimension is essential for understanding historical and archaeological attributes, traditions and memories and ecological dynamics;
3. a modification dimension- from intensely urbanised areas, through farmland to more natural environments with some areas possessing such intense degrees of alteration that the landscape requires human assistance to accelerate the recovery of its 'regenerative' properties. Ironically, we now recognise that nature recovery has often been at work most effectively in the post-industrial landscape and it is 'regenerative agriculture' that is now the order of the day.

One way to bring these dimensions of scale together and to provide a framework for action is landscape character assessment – that is a systematic approach to identifying and describing what is distinctive about a landscape, rather than better or worse⁸. From the outset the Mersey Forest Plan was grounded in a comprehensive landscape character assessment which identified priorities for conservation, reinforcement, restoration and even (re)creation. Targets for woodland planting could be carefully matched to the character, condition and needs of each landscape character area.

The Countryside Commission's prospectus envisaged that '*with commitment and cooperation our own community forests could be established and flourishing within a generation*'. So, here we are – 30 years on- and the evidence is plain to see in terms of an evolving landscape, quantifiable outputs and above all the vibrant partnership that is represented here today. My congratulations to you all.

John Handley, Professor Emeritus in Planning and Environmental Management, The University of Manchester, October 9th, 2024

Louise Gittins, Leader of Cheshire West & Chester Council

Introduction:

Cllr Louis Gittins, is leader of Cheshire West and Chester Council which has been fundamentally important in its support for Mersey Forest over many years.

Councillor Louise Gittins is a prominent figure in local government, particularly within Cheshire West and Chester Council. She was first elected to the council in 2011, and represents the Little Neston Ward. In 2019, Cllr Gittins was elected as the Leader of Cheshire West and Chester Council, a position she continues to hold. Her leadership has been marked by a focus on community engagement, sustainability, and improvement of local services. In addition to her role in the council, Cllr Gittins serves as the Chair of the Local Government Association (LGA), where she plays a crucial role in representing and advocating for local governments across the UK.

⁸ The Countryside Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage (2002) Landscape Character Assessment: Guidance for England and Scotland, The Countryside Commission and Scottish Natural Heritage, April 2002



Speech:

Cheshire West and Chester are the host authority for the Mersey Forest Team, working together with Cheshire East, Wirral, Liverpool, Sefton, Knowsley, St Helens and Halton too we hope in the future.

This core group has worked together for 30 years to deliver our Forest Plan. Throughout that period we have had a private sector chair. We have worked closely with many organisations including the Forestry Commission, Environment Agency and Natural England, Woodland Trust and National Trust and more recently with the Community Forest Trust group of organisations.

The Forest Plan tackles some of our trickiest issues – how we improve places, how we improve lives and the wellbeing of our communities, bringing nature back to our towns and cities, and helping to adapt to climate change.

The Partnership has achieved lots more than we could have done individually. But we still have lots to do. Perhaps the Plan and our Partnership is even more essential now than it was 30 years ago.

Now to tell us about The best time to plant a tree” – I would like to hand over to Paul Nolan, Director of The Mersey Forest

You will all know Paul is Director of The Mersey Forest.

He keeps quiet about having a commercial forestry background in this job - and is a member of the Institute of Chartered Foresters, Chair of the National Community Forest Partnership and an Honorary Fellow of Liverpool John Moores University and Myerscough College. In 2014 Paul was awarded with an OBE for services to forestry and in the decade since then I can tell you he has not let up one jot!

Paul Nolan, Director of the Mersey Forest



As the saying goes, "The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago, the next best time is now." And for three decades, 30 years of “nows” that's precisely what the Mersey Forest Partnership has been doing – planting trees - but also cultivating connections, fostering community, and nurturing a shared vision for a greener future. - you are all an integral part of this remarkable journey.

Ahead of this evening, I had a quick look back at the original documents and some of the original papers from the Countryside Commission and the LAs as they thought about whether they should set up a “Mid Mersey Forest”, it's clear that those involved were visionaries. Whilst our new Forest Plan, will look and read differently from the one launched 30 years ago, their intent and the vision remain ours too.

The Forest Plan has been our north star for the Partnership's journey and I think it will continue to be.

It's been some start to the journey. Together, we've planted ten million trees, invested £150 million, engaged hundreds of thousands of people, and created 600 kilometres of accessible pathways through 10,000 hectares of thriving habitat. These numbers, impressive as they are, only tell part of the story. They don't capture the countless acts of kindness, the innovative ideas, the unwavering commitment that have brought us to where we are today.

We've faced our share of challenges along the way.

From the early years of establishing ourselves, to the shifts in government policy, the devolution of power, the pressures of austerity... But through it all, the Mersey Forest Partnership has remained steadfast, adapting, evolving, and emerging stronger each time. We've embraced new opportunities, from the rise of Green Infrastructure to the urgent call for climate action. And now, as we enter a new era with a renewed focus on nature, climate, and people, the Mersey Forest Partnership is perfectly positioned to help with some of the most challenging issues we face.

It's said that an oak takes 300yrs to grow, 300 yrs to thrive and 300 yrs to decline - and whilst Susannah is not writing a 1000yr Forest Plan, we are all involved in something that is intergenerational, and tangible.

Children already climb trees or play in woods that were planted by their parents in an early Mersey Forest project when they were children, and maybe they too will plant a tree that their children will climb – and so it goes on.

Planting a tree or creating a forest is an act of hope, and creating a Community Forest is a form of infinite game, a game where we do not have to win every time or succeed in every approach; infinite games require that we stay in the game, winning for us is each life touched, each new habitat created or restored, each tree planted, each slight positive change for our communities, economies and nature. They mean we are still in the game.

The Partnership has shown remarkable resilience and a will to stay in the game at times when it might have been easier to give up.

I wanted to mention a few people, who have been instrumental in shaping the MF but who are sadly no longer with us; Paul Oldfield, who coordinated the original Partnership and wrote the original bid, Tom Butlin, who transformed our approach to data and Pat McCloskey, chaired the Partnership through some of the stickiest phases with wisdom and always a smile.

And I want to mention the team, many of the current team are here today. I have been fortunate to have been part of the team for a while, and been lucky to work with some remarkable people, colleagues, who have done or do amazing things to support the partnership and our communities; many going above and beyond what we should reasonably expect, because they believe in the cause. With the Plan and Partnership, the forest team forms the third vital part of what you have all helped to build.

The Mersey Forest is as vital today as it was 30 years ago, perhaps even more so. And I think we are ready to push on and do more, better.

We will have a bold new plan to guide us, a strong partnership to support us, and an unwavering commitment to creating a better future for all our communities.

Who knows, maybe some of the oak trees we plant today will still be standing tall in 3024!

And that, is hope.

Professor Eunice Simmons:

Now this is rather like a wedding as I have a telegram from the in-laws – sorry FUNDERS!

Tim Hughes and Stephen Penlington at Defra ...

- We are so sorry we can't be with you tonight.
- We've worked with the Mersey Forest Partnership for many years and Since 2020, the Partnership has been absolutely integral to delivery of England's Community

Forests 'Trees for Climate' programme, supported by Defra's Nature for Climate Fund.

- This programme is massively contributing to national statutory planting targets and measures to curb climate change, help nature recover, and increase biodiversity and people's access to green space.
- Mersey, with invaluable support from Cheshire West & Chester Council, continues to provide outstanding and inspirational leadership for this national programme, while also delivering hundreds of hectares of trees across the Mersey region. Improving people's lives now and leaving a legacy for future generations.
- Defra's thanks go to Paul and his amazing Forest Team and all their volunteers, congratulations on your 30th Anniversary.

Thanks and toast - Professor Eunice Simmons DL



And finally, I mentioned partnerships at the outset – and I am particularly grateful to our Forest Plan Advisory Group and our Steering Group members – many are here today representing our all-important Local Authority partners, we also have Jake Thompson, Partnership and Expertise Manager Forestry Commission Northwest– and Penny Oliver who has managed to fit us in on her hectic schedule as head of FC's Environmental Land Management Schemes. We are also grateful to Natural England and Environment Agency for their support and are pleased that Dave Brown joins us tonight from the EA.

Our universities have added research value, Liverpool, LJMU and Sheffield came up in discussion at the Steering Group today – and University of Chester is delighted to provide some of your new staff members! Hopefully the new Ideas Lab will bring this research to the fore to help tackle some of society's significant challenges.

I would also just like to mention John Burns – the original Director of the Forest and we also so pleased to be joined by Tom Butlin's parents tonight – Tom was so key to the early use of the Geographic Information Systems which as Paul said – was transformative in data use.

– and we are so grateful to everyone here who has been part of this history for however long – whether you are a pioneer, sapling, or indeed a veteran.....

Thank you to Jenni Davies in my Chester team and of course Programme Manager at the Community Forest Trust - Claire Olver – who has coordinated this event and who I knew as a University of London student at Wye College more than 30 years ago...

And now, returning to the personal impact forests have on us – I would like to end with

The Creed of the Forest by Katharine Lee Bates – an American academic and social reformer – so perfect company for those in this room. Her Creed of the Forest captures for me the essence of community forests' work:

A whiff of forest scent,

Balsam and fern

Won from dreary mood

My heart's return

From its discontent,

Joy's run-away,

To the sweet, wise wood

And the laughing day.

To everyone at Mersey Forest who have helped so many thousands of people move from sadness and discontent to joy and the laughing day!

I give you the Mersey Forest at 30!

