

The groups were briefed at the start of the walks that the purpose of the project was "to explore how you feel about being in the woods, by taking you through different kinds of settings". The walks took in open glades and dense patches of woodland; wide and narrow paths; the woodland edge and interior; extensive views of open countryside; and enclosed areas within the wood. Figures 3 and 5 show the routes the groups walked through the woods.

At the start of the discussion the groups were given an outline of the Community Forest programme and why it needed to discover what people liked and disliked about being in woods.

The primary aim of the group discussions was to enable people to share their views and feelings about being in woods. The researcher's role was to ensure that people kept to task and that everyone had an opportunity to talk. The group had some control over the order in which topics were discussed, although the researcher also maintained a mental checklist and ensured that all topics were covered in the one and a half hours. The Asian and Afro-Caribbean groups were led by a Black woman, with the researcher acting as participant observer.

#### Primary themes of the discussions:

1. The pleasures of being in woodlands.
2. Perceptions of risk – whether people feel frightened and why, and how their actions are limited by their ability to cope with risk.
3. Specific features of the wood and how much landscape design and management strategies might help ease fears.
4. Crime and safety issues in urban fringe woods, compared with built-up areas.
5. The tensions between 'wild' and 'tame' woodlands and how the needs of different users can be met.

All groups discussed these topics, although depth and sequence varied. Discussions were tape-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

#### Introduction to the groups

Thirteen site visits and discussions took place, seven in Bencroft involving 55 people and six in Bestwood involving 42 people. The majority of groups comprised women, differentiated by age, family responsibilities, and ethnicity. Younger age groups are statistically more vulnerable to the threat of rape. Additionally, teenage girls are trying to renegotiate the rules that bind them to home, while young mothers are coming to terms with anxieties about the safety of their own children.

Figure 6. Bencroft and Wormley Woods discussion groups.

Month of walk/discussion	
February	<b>MATURE WOMEN (7)</b> , living in the urban fringe near the wood. Referred to in the report as 'London grandmothers'.
February	<b>YOUNG MOTHERS (5)</b> , living in the urban fringe near the wood. Referred to in the report as 'London mothers'.
February	<b>TEENAGE GIRLS (8)</b> , living in the London suburbs. Referred to in the report as 'London girls'.
February	<b>TEENAGE BOYS (10)</b> , living in the London suburbs. Referred to in the report as 'London boys'.
February	<b>FATHERS AND GRANDFATHERS (6)</b> , living in the urban fringe near the wood. Referred to in the report as 'London men'.
April	<b>ASIAN WOMEN (11)</b> , living in urban/suburban London. Referred to in the report as 'London Asian women'.
April	<b>AFRO-CARIBBEAN WOMEN (8)</b> , living in urban/suburban London. Referred to in the report as 'London Afro-Caribbean women'.

Elderly people, and especially women, are thought to be the most fearful of crime and it is their behaviour that is most tightly constrained.

Three groups of women from Afro-Caribbean and Asian communities participated in the study. (Members of ethnic communities are particularly vulnerable to racial harassment in public spaces.) The Afro-Caribbean group included three senior citizens as well as women in their twenties and thirties. The London Asian women were mainly aged 20 to 50, some accompanied by children. The Nottingham group of Asian women was split between four mature people who had lived in the city for some 20 years, and two young women in their early twenties who were British born.

In each location, there were two groups of men. One consisted of teenage boys because recorded crime statistics suggest they are most at risk of being assaulted in public places. At the same time, when gathered on street corners, they are most threatening and intimidating to other people. The final group in each location was men of mixed ages, all but one of whom were

Figure 7. Bestwood Country Park discussion groups.

Month of walk/discussion	
February	<b>TEENAGE GIRLS (10)</b> , living in the urban fringe, very close to the wood. Referred to in the report as 'Nottingham girls'.
February	<b>TEENAGE BOYS (8)</b> , living in the urban fringe, very close to the wood. Referred to in the report as 'Nottingham boys'.
February	<b>MATURE WOMEN (6)</b> , living near the wood. Referred to in the report as 'Nottingham grandmothers'.
February	<b>FATHERS AND GRANDFATHERS (7)</b> , living near the wood. Referred to in the report as 'Nottingham men'.
April	<b>ASIAN WOMEN (6)</b> , living near the wood. Referred to in the report as 'Nottingham Asian women'.
April	<b>YOUNG MOTHERS (5)</b> , living in houses close to the woodland edge. Referred to in the report as 'Nottingham mothers'.

white. The common factor was their experience as parents (only one young man was not yet a father) — taking responsibility for children's safety as well as being concerned for the safety of their female partners. Figures 6 and 7 give details of group membership and the month of the site visits.

The walks took place during the winter and spring of 1993. The ethnic groups' visits were delayed until spring when the leaves were on the trees and the weather was warmer. This was because these groups were least likely to have many experiences of English woodlands to draw upon in discussion. Uninviting winter weather would also have made recruitment more difficult.

Although it was not ideal to take most of the other groups out in winter when it was cold and the trees were bare, it might be argued that the woods would seem less threatening because there was less vegetation. However, the routes were carefully designed to go through some areas of dense shrubbery. The weather was kind: it did not rain, although the two February days with the London teenagers were dank and foggy.

## The site visits

The Bencroft and Wormley Woods walk took between 45 minutes and two hours, depending on how much time people wanted to spend. Some groups sat and enjoyed the sunshine at various points along the walk, others marched with great determination. Some kept strictly to the path in single file, or in ones and twos; others spread out through the open patches of woodland.

The Bestwood walk took less time and none of the groups expressed a desire to stop and sit at any point.

The adventure playground was an attraction for the teenagers. Most people knew the park well. In Bestwood it is common to see individual women, accompanied by a dog, walking by themselves and enjoying the natural woodland setting.

## The mature women

Seven mature women walked in Bencroft and Wormley Woods on a beautiful bright winter's day. All were over 50 and took part in outdoor recreation. Some were keen naturalists and others enjoyed country walks. The walk was punctuated by stops to enjoy the view, take photographs or ferret in the undergrowth for interesting specimens. Of all the groups, this was one of the most actively engaged with the woodland habitat.



There were six women in the Nottingham group, all over 45. Four actively enjoyed walking and being in the countryside and were members of environmental groups. The remaining two lived to the north of Bestwood and very rarely walked in woodlands. The day was cold and rather cloudy. The women chatted to one another as they walked and showed some interest in the range of facilities available for visitors. There was little discussion of natural history.

## The young mothers

The five London mothers met on a cold, grey morning immediately after they had dropped their young children at school. All had children under five years old. Crèche facilities were available but each preferred to arrange child care "so they could concentrate on the walk". They were women in their late twenties and early thirties who had given up mainly professional jobs to raise children. They had little or no sense of direction while they were walking and quickly lost a sense of time in the woods. The group stuck closely together and did not deviate from the path. They had very little knowledge of natural history and talked constantly of other things.

The five Nottingham mothers were in their thirties and, now that their children were at school, were beginning to seek wider interests. All the women lived very near the country park and for two of them it was on the doorstep. They met on a bright April morning when the wood looked beautiful and was full of bird-song. The women walked closely together and chatted about local concerns. There was some surprise at the range of facilities in the country park. As with the London group, they expressed very little interest in nature or the ecology of the wood but everyone enjoyed being in the fresh air.

## The teenage girls

Eight sixth-form girls piled into the mini-bus on a cold, grey February morning and were driven to Bencroft and Wormley Woods. They stayed very close together throughout the walk and stuck doggedly to the path. Only later in the discussion did they say that they would have loved to explore, get dirty and engage with the wood "like children". As they walked round, several of them said they would like to use woods more often but could not. Although they were accompanied by three mature women, they did not appear confident about being in the woodland.



Ten sixth-formers from Nottingham walked in Bestwood with the researchers on a cold but reasonably bright late February day. As with their London counterparts, these girls kept close together and made no attempt to stray from the path. They chatted confidently with one another but showed little interest in the different aspects of the woodland, apart from the adventure playground — although none was prepared to use any of the equipment. Some knew the wood quite well, others had visited it only rarely.

## The Asian and Afro-Caribbean women's groups

The level of interest in the project was very high among the London group which comprised 10 Asian and one Black woman who could not attend on the date set aside for the Afro-Caribbean group. They ranged from early twenties to late forties. Four brought their children, aged between three and 15. The group was accompanied by a male ranger. This proved popular, especially with the youngsters.



It was a beautiful, warm spring day. The walk took nearly two hours as everyone made the most of a very rare opportunity to be out in the countryside in a relaxed and secure social environment. The group met no-one else during the walk although two women with a dog had arrived in the wood just beforehand. The most striking feature of the walk was the extent to which everyone enjoyed the physical features of the site: steeply incised valley sides, the wooden footbridges, and especially the stream at the bottom of Wormley Wood.

The experiences of the Asian women's group in Nottingham could not have been more different.

There were six women, four in their forties and two in their twenties who had been born and brought up in Nottingham. The women had been contacted through one of the Asian women's centres. They were reluctant to take part but too polite to refuse.

No ranger accompanied the group which had an extremely unpleasant experience when five or six teenage boys on mountain bikes sped past very close. They said nothing but the group felt extremely intimidated. The women did not enjoy the walk, asking "what is there to do here?" and commenting that their husbands would not want to come to the park, nor would their children.

The group discussion was extremely difficult because it was impossible to get the women to talk about the park or their experiences on the walk. The discussion was abandoned after an hour. Consequently, this group has not been included in the analysis.

The third group consisted of Afro-Caribbean women, aged between 20 and 70, recruited through the personal contacts of the Lee Valley Community Outreach Officer. Two were Somalian who had lived in London for four years and the walk was their first experience of going outside their neighbourhood.

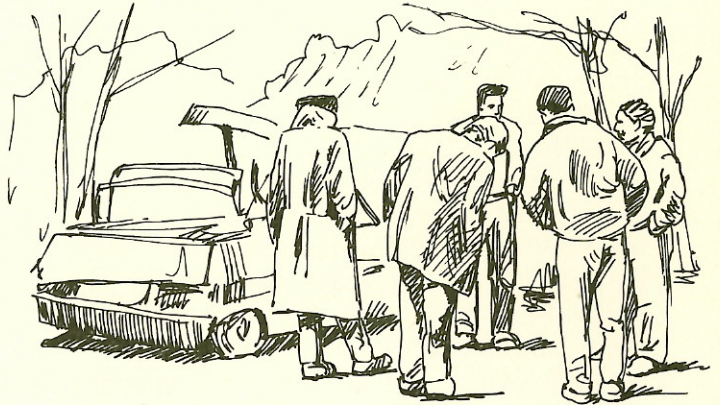
The day was warm and sunny; the wood was full of birdsong and caterpillars spinning down from the trees; there were lambs in the fields and a wonderful smell of spring in the air. The walk took over two hours and, like the mature women, this group found much of interest in the vegetation and wildlife as well as sitting in the sun. The ranger who accompanied them was in constant demand for information about the names and habits of the plants and animals. The group met no-one throughout the visit.

### The teenage boys

The London group of nine teenage boys visited the wood in early February on a foggy, dank day. Only one of them took any physical exercise: leisure for the majority involved watching videos or going to the pub. The group was accompanied by a male ranger but the lads were deeply suspicious of the purpose of the research and very rapidly left the researchers and fanned out into the woods. As they lost their self-consciousness they began to run around and play. They finished the set route in about 20 minutes so the walk was extended to encompass most of Wormley Wood.

The Nottingham group was a considerable contrast to the London one. Most of the eight teenagers knew Bestwood very well, having played there as youngsters, and two of the boys still used it when they went jogging. Consequently, the site visit was more like an enforced walk with parents than the kind of adventure

the London lads experienced. These young men were also very self-conscious at first and walked as rapidly as they could to get away from the researchers before ending up by showing them bits of the park the researchers had not seen before. The teenagers insisted that they were not interested in 'nature' — but when one of them spotted a squirrel they all crowded round to have a look.



### The men

Six London men took part in the Saturday afternoon walk. All had children, either living at home or married and with children of their own. Two were keen naturalists and members of a conservation group; the others lived locally and enjoyed walking in the countryside. Both they and the teenage boys began the walk by inspecting the hulk of a burnt-out car abandoned in the car park. (None of the women's groups paid any attention to the vehicle at all.)

The day was bright but cold and there was a pleasing crunchiness underfoot. The group chatted constantly on the walk. Two of the men visited the wood very regularly and were able to tell the others about it. The group met no-one throughout the route.

The seven Nottingham men were accompanied by a ranger who participated in the group discussion. There was a range of experience; one of the younger men had no children; some were much older, in their fifties and sixties, and included retired miners, a parish councillor and voluntary rangers.

As they walked, the talk focused on how much Bestwood had been improved since the country park was established. People also said how important it was for them to be able to come and walk in the park. They expressed intense feeling, giving close attention to individual trees and very small patches of vegetation, and demonstrated a very strong sense of 'ownership', pride and valuing of the woodland as they walked the route.

### 3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

#### The nature of woods and forests

The qualitative material and the survey results in Lee's (1991) study show that 'forests' and 'woods' mean different things to different people. Commonly, forests are understood to be dark, deep and dense. Woods on the other hand, are smaller, narrower, lighter and less densely planted. This is also evident in this study.

The forests described by group members were very large areas of conifers and other sites owned by Forest Enterprise. They were all lowland forests such as Thetford in Norfolk and Clipstone in Nottinghamshire – upland areas were not mentioned. Although there is a sense in which forests are somehow closer to 'wilderness' than woods, at the same time they can be more commercialised or "fake" as one London boy put it, because the trees are in straight rows.

People associated deciduous trees, flowers and glades with woods. One elderly Afro-Caribbean woman said she had quite enjoyed Bencroft "because at home we have got lots of woodland. Only maybe our trees are much larger and... going through our woods we find different fruit trees that grow there wild". Generally, people thought of woods as having more edges and better views. The London grandmothers drew the distinctions quite well, and also recognised, as did some group members in Nottingham, that not all forests are densely planted.

Bencroft and Bestwood were experienced as woods rather than forests, although there was some ambiguity in both settings. For some London teenagers, Bencroft felt like a 'forest' because it had considerable depth and felt 'wild'; for others, it was certainly not "a real forest" because it was so light and open – "just like walking round a tree field", as one London boy described it. "It wasn't very thick, but I'd prefer if it was. To me, it'd be more like countryside, be more like a forest, if there were lots of trees" (London girl).

Different densities of vegetation – both types of trees and under-storey – are fundamental to the attractiveness of woodland and/or forest and the possibilities they offer for enjoyment and pleasure. The London mothers expressed why they liked the openness of the wood.

*Gina: "It isn't as threatening, is it, as being in dense forest?"*

*Sophie: "You can actually see a lot of area around you."*

*Perdita: "There's also nice wide glades, which I like."*

*Sophie: "Yes, I suppose because they're slim trees. On the whole they were a lot of silver birch trees, which aren't terribly big trees, and again the foliage is at the top, so there is always, even in the summer when they've got all their leaves on, it's still quite a light appearance. Whereas a pine forest is definitely more threatening anyway."*

*(London mothers)*

*"I got hold of the wrong end of the stick about forests. I always used to think forest was a great thick, impenetrable mass. In fact it doesn't mean that at all..."*

*(London grandmother)*

The groups saw Bestwood as either a wood or a park – never a forest. For the Nottingham boys it was small and tame, whereas for the girls it was very woody and large enough for them to worry about losing their way. At the same time, the young women disliked the housing at the edge of the wood because it "spoiled the wood feeling". Some described it as a "wooded park" with urban connotations, or simply a park: "It's a park rather than a wood – it's got a park-like atmosphere" (Nottingham grandmothers). This is primarily because so many people use it, there are good signs and facilities, and it is very accessible.

The Nottingham mothers knew the wood best because they lived on its edge. They discussed how it had been before it became a country park. While commending what had been done to improve facilities, one woman commented "it was more like a wood then" – because there were few paths, it was more overgrown and less intensively managed.

#### Fear of the dark

In questionnaires men rarely admit feeling afraid in woods and forests. The group discussions revealed, however, that there were two bases for male anxiety: concern about being the victims of physical violence, most probably in the twilight, from a gang of men or youths, and a generalised fear of the dark, which was still quite strong among the teenage lads.

The background 'fear of the dark' resonates with childhood fears and reflects deep cultural responses to woods and forests in fairy stories, fiction and horror films. The threat of physical violence from gangs is a contemporary one, amplified by media coverage.

The denser the planting, the greater the likelihood of feeling frightened. Some men admitted that they would feel anxious and a bit frightened at the prospect of being alone in a wood in the dark. The teenage boys, too, admitted being a bit scared of the dark, and that they might feel anxious in dense woodland.

**Mick:** *"You're too closed in. If there was a big footpath, then you could see something at the end."*

**Peter:** *"If there were a few lights on the main footpath..."*

**Mick:** *"...but I think if you're walking through very dense woods, I think everybody would be scared."* (London boys)

Only at specific times of night would the men and boys consider woods to be unsafe or threatening. One Nottingham boy said he carried a weapon made of two pieces of wood and a rope to defend himself: "When I'm running and it's really dark, especially in winter, 'cos it's really dark then and you can't see. Like the other night, a dog came running after me and that scared me."

The Nottingham men, too, highlighted the possibility of being scared by someone at night but did not impute any malicious intent to that person. "A sparse area you can see, but if you get a dense area, well that's when it starts getting a little unnerving, especially after dark. You've perhaps been wandering and then suddenly realise it's getting dark, it's time I was heading back. Somebody's been behind a tree, for something else, and popped back and 'Aagh!'. It's the situation you get into, isn't it?"

For the women, the woodland was more threatening and considered 'unsafe' or frightening for many more of the 24 hours. They, too, recognised background unease stemming from a fear of the dark and supernatural things. Their more specific fears were that a woman would be even more vulnerable at night to someone hiding in the darkness and that there would be no-one around to help her.

The women's fears were therefore connected with the relative darkness and shade of a wood that might provide cover for a potential attacker. Their anxieties ranged from feeling that at no time of day or night would a lone woman be safe in a wood to feeling that a woman might be safe in the morning or early afternoon but after that would be at risk. None of the women in the study would contemplate entering a wood alone at dusk or later.

## Enclosure

All the groups discussed the distinctive qualities of being in woods and forests and how they felt about them. The fundamental quality was the feeling of being enclosed by vegetation taller than oneself, of unknown depth and different kinds of greenness offering, at best, limited sight lines.

The strong impression from the discussions is that feelings of vulnerability and positive enjoyment, as Lee (1991) describes them, are not related directly to the distance walked into a forest or wood but more to the density of the woodland itself. One hundred metres from the car park can be enough to disorientate individuals and submerge them in the forest, if vegetation is dense enough. Being enclosed is linked with feelings of not being able to exercise sufficient surveillance.

Women of all ages, and many teenage boys, too, monitor their micro-environment extremely closely. Vegetation density and the variety of noises in woods make them more acutely aware of their surroundings. Talking about the Bestwood walk, which took place in late April when there were many birds scabbling in the undergrowth, the Nottingham mothers picked up this issue.

**Maureen:** *"In the autumn – the colour of the trees – it's lovely. But with the crisp leaves and a lot of noise..."*

**Elizabeth:** *"Straightaway your imagination..."*

**Alison:** *"It does..."*

**Linda:** *"There is so much going on around anyway. You hear about all these rapes and whatever. And no matter where you are, your mind is on it all the time. If you hear something you think, what was that?"* (Nottingham mothers)

All the women's groups discussed the physical properties of woods. Only rarely did they see the wood as a place to hide from a possible aggressor, although the boys and men did. Individuals were able to tolerate different levels of enclosure and relative darkness.

The Nottingham grandmothers talked about part of the walk where broom grew over the path and which some of the girls thought was quite scary.

**Kathie:** *"I always think that's really pretty. If I come across a wood and there's an arch with everything growing over, I always walk down it. It's beautiful. I've got to use that path."*

**Brenda:** *"But for me, it would feel restrictive. I would appreciate the beauty of it, but the sense of security..."*

**Irene:** "If you can see your way out of it, if it's not a long pathway, it might be possible."

**Jessie:** "I think the key to it all is sight, being able to see all around you, not just in front."  
(Nottingham grandmothers)

Enclosure is also closely linked to a fear of being trapped:

**Jessie:** "A lot of these trails again are straight and they've got banks at the side, perhaps overgrown — there's no way out, is there? It's a lot more enclosed, isn't it?"

**Brenda:** "I think that's why the footpaths give you a sense of confidence here, because they are wide."  
(Nottingham grandmothers)

No men discussed feeling enclosed in this way because they thought they would not be vulnerable to this kind of attack. They would be able either to 'fight their way out' or to run and hide. They would be able to make use of the same cover as an assailant. Women did not regard this as a possibility — either because they would be overpowered too quickly or because they would feel too frightened to seize the initiative.

## Fear of getting lost

Reasons for anxiety about getting lost varied by gender and partly by age. The women felt that if they got lost their body language would reflect that they were uncertain about which way to go and that would make them more vulnerable. At the same time, being lost would make it more difficult to flee an attacker or find help.

For the young men, 'getting lost' was an adventure, a feeling shared by one of the Nottingham women — but only when accompanied by her partner.

**Anne:** "There was another place we went to as well, and that was in Sherwood, and we ended up near Worksop."

**Maureen:** "We always stick to the paths when we go up there."

**Anne:** "We do like getting lost and finding our way back."

**Maureen:** "I like to know where I am going!"

**Anne:** "But if you don't get lost, how do you know all the things that are there? You get lost and you find different things. You find another path, it goes here or it goes there, and you find, I have never been here before, I didn't know that was there. That's how we go. We find all different things."  
(Nottingham mothers)

The men associated getting lost with inconvenience and anxiety about trespassing by mistake. They were the only groups to express any concern about trespass. Losing one's way seemed to represent a 'failure' in orientation skills.

Fears of being lost also reflect a more general point that knowledge of woodlands and experience of orientating oneself within woods is declining. There seems to be less ability to read the woodland or to recognise features. The younger groups were also least able to say in which direction they were walking and were quickest to become 'lost.'

**John:** "I certainly feel the potential to get lost, but again it's knowing that eventually you'll come to a signpost, you know, wherever you go. I suppose the only intimidating part might be how long that might be. At ten o'clock in the morning, you're not too worried, but at seven o'clock at night, the sun's going down. Then you're a bit more worried about when you're going to reach the main path. I've certainly felt this potential for getting lost here."

**Paul:** "Yeah, when you get in a hollow say, and there's only trees round you, that's when you could lose your sense of direction and get lost because all the trees look alike."  
(Nottingham men)

Even the London grandmothers, who all walked extensively and actively enjoyed being in woods, expressed some difficulty with following the way marks.

**Ada:** "I know that wood really well but I still go in and wonder where I am."

**Mary:** "One wood is very like another, and one path looks very like another."

**Judy:** "You need visual points out of the wood so that you can orientate yourself."  
(London grandmothers)

These women also possessed the skills to orientate themselves. As Judy (an ex-Guide Captain) said: "reading a map is one of the most important things a woman has got to learn".

The inability to read woods and forests, and associated loss of confidence, reflects how children have been increasingly denied opportunities to play and explore woodlands. Even small woodland patches can have a vital role in this environmental experience.

Inner city children have long been denied contact with natural settings, although the experience has been replaced by other kinds of encounters with nature — on derelict sites, for example. For suburban and coun-

try children, however, woodland used to provide some of the most exciting opportunities for play. Memories of childhood play spaces from different generations (Burgess 1988; Harrison *et al.*, 1987; Ward, 1988) reveal the vital importance of contact with woodland in the immediate pre-teenage years. Contemporary evidence suggests these opportunities are fast disappearing.

## Play and adventure

Woods and forests create a sense of surprise and excitement, encouraging the desire to explore and have adventures that everyone in the study recognised as valuable and enjoyable – especially for children. Childhood woodland experiences emerged as an important theme as the groups walked in the woods and in their discussions afterwards.

Many of the parents expressed great sadness at having to deny their children access to woodlands because they were anxious for their safety. “They’re the only kids I’ve got and I’m not going to run the risk of losing them” (London man); “I think my kids are getting the message that they are only safe when Daddy is around – which is dreadful, I know, thinking about it now” (London mother); “I think I would be frightened to play hide and seek with them in the wood” (Nottingham mother).

These discussions therefore have a bearing on risk and the use of urban fringe woodlands by children. Three elements are important.

- The extent to which being in woods brings back pleasurable childhood memories.
- Parents’ desire to let children experience woods.
- The importance of woodland experiences for children.

Many parents said they thought playing in woods was important for children because it was “healthy fun” that taught them to appreciate the natural world. One Asian woman reflected on how she had been cut off from her parents’ extensive knowledge, as village people, of wildlife at home in India, and how little she herself knew about that or wildlife in the UK.

Many people were sad that they lacked the knowledge and experience to enjoy the woods as much as they would have liked.

An element of nostalgia affects people’s memories of where and how they played as children. At the same time, people are aware of responding to social pressures

in refusing to allow their children out alone today. The inexorable growth in traffic provides another fundamental check (Hillman, 1993), as this comment from one father in the London men’s group indicates. “But then, if you have children you have actually got to take them there anyway. You can’t expect them to – I mean, it’s a little bit off the beaten track isn’t it? It’s two miles away from any residential area. So you can’t expect young children to make their own way there.”

One major consequence is that children are growing up with less sense of independence and less security in their own judgements and capabilities. At the same time, parents and children are less able to create the necessary space between them to ensure quality of family life. All the parents mourned the loss of freedom and expressed anxieties about the impact on their children and/or grandchildren of being denied opportunities to roam. Many older women also remembered being free to roam in the countryside with their friends.

*Judy: “You have to protect children far more now than ever we were protected. I ran wild over Royston Heath on my own. And I don’t think anybody has been accosted on Royston Heath yet. But you still wouldn’t let them. Mind you, it used to worry my mother silly, but then.”* (London grandmother)

The elderly Nottingham men talked about their childhood memories.

*Arthur: “You had a childhood. You don’t get a childhood now. You were out all day, you were camping, you could go up in the woods up here, three or four days at a time. Your parents would come up ‘Are you short of anything?’ They had no worries. We were as happy as sand flies.”*

*Ted: “I think kids nowadays would still do that if you let them, without a second thought. It’s the parents who are the problem now. Because when I was a kid, I would go for miles up the fields, at 11, 12, whatever. And presumably my mum and dad weren’t that worried. But now as grandparents, they won’t let their grandchildren go anywhere. And these are the same people who let me go miles and miles! They won’t let their grandchildren go three yards away from them.”* (Nottingham men)

*“It’s one thing to be in there, but there’s something totally different, valuing it... That’s what I call education – valuing. So that’s what you have to learn.”*  
(London Asian woman)



Most adults, the teenage boys and some of the teenage girls remembered the freedom of being able to play out all day and having adventures in woods. These adventures included exploring; getting muddy and dirty; climbing trees; damming streams; fishing; and having the freedom to roam; "doing those little floaty things you used to do on the river," said one of the London girls, half remembering playing Pooh-sticks (A A Milne).

One of the Nottingham mothers also alluded to children's literature – again, Milne – and its ability to add to the pleasure of being in a wood. "My little one, he goes up to the trees and if he sees a little notch in the tree, he will go up and knock on it and ask if Piglet is in. He has always done that and I don't know if he will ever stop doing it. No matter where we walk – here, Thieves Wood, Rufford Park, anywhere – he will go up and he will knock on the tree to see if Piglet is there!"

Many parents mentioned the pleasures of being able to explore with their young children; there was a sense that this increased the appreciation of nature by both child and parent. The desire for contact with nature and the measured pace of being in the countryside was often seen as a way of resisting contemporary pressures.

*Sarah: "You don't just have to walk. You can stop and look at an old log and find all these things... they can dig for worms or what-not. Children like doing that sort of thing... and the kids like running from one sign to the other just to read it, and then they try and look for the little boxes. And then when we go out they say 'can we go to such and such because we like looking for the boxes'. They sort of encourage you to take more interest."*

*Charlotte: "...for young people to understand the ecology of woodlands and how woodlands are created. When they go out to them they understand them a bit more and it is much more interesting."* (London mothers)

One key is how much the setting offers possibilities for adventures and for opportunities to experience what is elsewhere described as 'safe danger' (Burgess et

al, 1988) – that is, people are able to stretch physically, emotionally and socially without coming to harm. That quality should be fundamental to the woodland experience – and it is what is most distorted by fear, as these two comments reveal.

*"What I like about woods is that you can't see what's round the corner. There's an element of excitement. Although that does add a little to the sense of danger, the possibility of people lurking that you can't see, as well."*

(London grandmothers)

*"You fear that behind every tree is a maniac... you're not going to get people wanting surprises if you haven't dealt with their greatest fear."* (London mother)

The teenagers responded much more enthusiastically to Bencroft than to Bestwood: Bencroft seemed more likely to offer the challenge of 'safe danger'. This reflected people's understanding of Bencroft as 'proper countryside' rather than a 'wooded park'. The presence of adults gave the girls enough security for them to wish they had been on their own. An adult presence needs to be negotiated sensitively when dealing with teenagers and trying to bring them out. This was also a point for both the Nottingham groups.

The following extract from the London girls makes the point and highlights another contemporary problem. With the reductions in local authority budgets, some countryside-based activities for younger people

(such as SUNTRAP in Epping Forest) and other programmes are disappearing. In particular, girls who are no longer able to roam have their opportunities to enjoy woodland experiences further reduced if such group activities are stopped.

The girls were reflecting on the walk and whether it had been enjoyable or not.

*Rachel: "I think I would have liked to spend longer there, a longer walk. It just seemed really quick. It's like Kate said to you, 'I've got this urge to climb a tree'. I haven't done that since I was about 12 or something and I really wanted to climb a tree. I would have done that."*

*"Because society is so sort of whiz, whiz, whiz for children, so much passes children by. I have to say to myself so many times 'slow down, slow down, slow down!' Because you are zooming them about. It would be so nice to have something at child level, child centred, which took it at their pace and introduced these sorts of things."*  
(London mother)

*Kate: "I think if you're there and you know you can spend as much time as you want, then you go off a bit, well I would, go off and look at trees, climb one, whatever."*

*Vicky: "When I was younger, all the boys used to go in the woods and have a good old laugh and all the girls used to have to stay at home and play. I hated all the girls things."*

*(London girls)*

Some pre-teen children do use Bestwood country park – a point made by the Nottingham grandmothers: "I think the children are the nicest thing about this park".

However, both groups of teenagers in Bestwood said they would find it boring. The Nottingham boys saw it as a place for parents, adults and the old: "I couldn't imagine going out on Sunday morning and going for a walk round Bestwood – I'd rather stay in bed!" It was evident also that the young men and women in both Nottingham and London had already developed a strong sense of their 'appropriate' gender roles which affected how they could enjoy woodland.

One girl in Nottingham said wistfully: "I often feel that I would love to actually climb trees or have a go on the rope swing," and her friend commented: "It would be nice to make a wood into something where you could come back and be a kid again". And the Nottingham boys' view? "Girls don't come in woods because it's not really a girlie thing, climbing trees!"

## **The pleasures of walking in woods**

All the groups – apart from the Nottingham boys – expressed pleasure at being able to walk in the woods on the site visit. Pleasure came, in large part, from being outdoors with others on a social occasion. It was clear that all the group members found each other more interesting than the woods, but the setting was also important and pleasurable.

People enjoyed the large trees and hearing the wind in the tree tops; the sudden surprise of views across open countryside; the smells and freshness of the wood;

the sense of naturalness; the possibility of adventure. Some took pleasure from the quality of light in the woodland when the trees were bare; and the contrasts between walking through quite enclosed paths opening into glades and green spaces. Variety was welcomed and valued.

The topography of Bencroft was particularly appealing: for many women, particularly from the Afro-Caribbean and Asian communities, the day was a real adventure – a rare opportunity to come out with their children into the countryside.

Although children were welcomed on the site visit, one woman had arranged for hers to be looked after by a friend. She said sadly during the discussion: "It would have been so nice because we've never been out on a walk together, and this was an ideal opportunity" (London Asian woman).

Responses to the questionnaire in Lee's (1991) study suggested that the major attractions of woods and forests were the close encounters with nature – walking, admiring the view, and looking at plants and animals. For these reasons, woodlands might be expected to appeal to a narrower band of countryside recreationists than some other sites. The groups walking in the two woods showed that relatively few individuals have the knowledge or resources to sustain much interest in flora and fauna. This was also evident in the limited amount of time devoted to discussing these issues.

Some people were disappointed not to see any animals. Perhaps documentaries have led people to believe that natural settings are just brimming with wildlife. As a result, woods can be disappointing for those who are not

expert in natural history or who are not accompanied by a ranger.

Pleasure, although qualified, was expressed by the ethnic groups who walked in Bencroft and Wormley Woods in springtime and for whom the outing was a very special and unusual occasion.

*Paminda: "The streams and the path of the stones and all that, that was wonderful."*

*Rupa: "Where it went down and then up. I like*

*"What I enjoyed about today was finding out bits about the trees and the land. When I have been walking by myself I usually don't pick a walk that's got any forest, or very little, I prefer a bit of open land. I liked finding out about it today. It is a bit more reassuring because the wood is not just a load of old trees, having loads of people behind them ready to jump out and attack you!"*

*(London Afro-Caribbean woman)*

that place, I thought that was really nice. I could have stood there and spent about 15 minutes."

Reena: "I liked the places where there are steps made of the roots of the trees, that's beautiful. That's something you can't find in all the woods here."

Sonia: "It has got some lovely views, but you can only enjoy a good view if you relax! Otherwise it's pointless. You don't take any notice of your surroundings. My point will always come back to safety."

Rupa: "Only if you're in a group of about 10, or even seven or eight, then I think you would feel safe up here."

Paminda: "And plus, you were in the hands of people who knew the woods so well, it would give you confidence."

(London Asian women)

## Attitudes to wildlife

All the groups were asked if they were frightened about any aspect of wildlife or nature in the woodland. It was only brought up spontaneously in the Afro-Caribbean and Asian women's groups where people were drawing on experiences of other countries. Fear of wildlife was not an issue for any of the white groups.

There was very little evidence of wildlife during the walks and the knowledge of what animals might be in woods was confined largely to small and unthreatening species like squirrels, deer and foxes. People were not worried about stinging plants or being bitten by insects. A few expressed individual phobias – about owls or bats, for example – but there was no consensus. The only creatures mentioned to any extent were snakes and the possibility of meeting those on a woodland walk, but even then "snakes are not going to grab you by the throat!" as one London grandmother put it.

English woodlands were not perceived by the white groups to be full of dangerous animals. The Asian and Afro-Caribbean women were, however, more con-

cerned, given their knowledge of wildlife in forests elsewhere in the world. This created some uncertainties about what might be found in UK woods and forests.

There was discussion about religious practices for Muslims and contact with animals, especially dogs. This is important, given that dogs are one of the commonest forms of 'protection' women will use to enable them to walk in woodlands.

Paminda: "Another thing, a lot of Asian women are scared of dogs, aren't they! And it's the thought of people walking dogs, and there'll be horses and animals that, you know, they don't really like to mingle with an Asian person."

Surjit: "It's not that we hate them, don't like them, but it's just that there's some religious things... it's in our Qur'an... when we say our prayers we have to be very clean and hygienic. Our clothes shouldn't be touched with animals, or we shouldn't be touching them if we're saying our prayers... we wouldn't go anywhere near those animals. That's even the cows, sheep, everything." (London Asian women)

Unwittingly, the London men provided the most succinct summary of what kinds of fears might be associated with the 'natural' life of a woodland when they were bemoaning the lack of wildlife on the walk.

John: "Really, the only animal we have a problem with is us."

(London man)

**"If I get annoyed at home, or something, or I have an idea, I just walk out and get into the forest. Because standing in the middle of Chingford, if you have just had an argument, and standing in the forest, is completely different. You can get really relaxed in the forest because you feel at one with nature. Whereas in the city you just stare at grey everywhere you look. It is totally different."**

(London boy)

## Woods as an escape

One reason why people value countryside and open space is that it offers an escape from the routine pressures of daily life. Within countryside ideology, that need to escape has very often been transformed into a need for 'peace and quiet', expressed as a desire to be alone, to engage in solitary contemplation and to commune with nature.

There is little evidence to suggest that this is what most people want from countryside recreation (Harrison, 1991; Harrison *et al.*, 1986). Rather, the

pleasure of being in a wood with 'sympathetic others' is important for most people. Lee (1991) reports that only nine per cent of his sample made their last visit to a woodland by themselves.

Everyone in this study commented on how much they had enjoyed the group experience. But, at the same time, individuals do need space to be by themselves.

Yet the findings of this study suggest that white, adult males are the only group to have an unequivocal freedom of choice to do this. Even for some men, however, a fear of crime is increasing.

Teenage boys are constrained by their age, but not by gender. As several research projects have shown, boys consistently have the freedom to range further from home than girls (Matthews, 1992). Several lads commented that their mothers attempted to keep them out of the woods, but as one London boy said, "I just lie".

This contrasts with the Nottingham girls, discussing how they felt walking through a small section of path-way closely fringed with broom.

*Joanne: "The trees are spaced out, not too densely packed so you're not too worried about people hiding behind bushes."*

*Chris: "But where we went - there were the green spiky things on the path. That was too enclosed because you could have people hiding behind that."*

*Joanne: "I wouldn't have thought of being unsafe in daytime."*

*Helen: "But everyone's going on about how you've got to take care and protect yourself. And you just get more worried." (Nottingham girls)*

The London girls' lives were just as constrained and they made similar points about the ways in which adults, especially mothers and grandmothers, were anxious about them. They also made the point that women are just as unsafe in the urban fringe as the city.

For a woman or girl to go to a wood by herself would be almost unthinkable and she would be subjected to the kind of judgement made by one of the Nottingham men: "a woman walking a dog has a reason for being there, rather than just walking there, rashly waiting for something to happen". One of the London grandmothers was a keen naturalist who often wanted to go bird-watching by herself but, she said, "my husband always insists on coming with me!"

The Afro-Caribbean and Asian women felt that, because of the threat of racist violence, they would not be safe even with their husbands and that a group of

several couples would be necessary before they could venture into woods. Their fears reflected great anxieties about threats of racist violence from gangs of white men and/or youths rather than a lone man.

*Paminda: "But if there are two Asians, a man and a woman, then you do get these looks from the white community. Whereas, when I was walking there (all of us together), I was feeling as if I was walking in my own village back home... But I don't think I would go and take my children there. Maybe it's because I'm worried about the safety of my children and the safety of myself. Because no matter what I do, I can't change the colour of my skin. And I might be picked up by, you never know, there might be a few gangs who all come to the woods, and I might be picked up for 'fun's' sake, or something like that. But I would like to go there and take my children out for a walk."*

*(London Asian woman)*

## Fear of sex crimes

Women in all the groups expressed varying degrees of fear of a sexual attack in woodland. These were described in terms of rape and murder. There were also great fears that young children might be 'stolen', sexually assaulted and killed. The white groups also discussed flashing. This is probably people's most common experience of crime in woodlands and in Nottingham was recognised as being a bigger problem during school holidays when flashers could be sure more children were about.

All the women's groups talked about their general fears of being attacked by a man, or men, usually describing the aggressors as 'maniacs' 'weirdos' or 'nutters', with the clear implication that they are out of control. The Nottingham grandmothers thought that some of the aggression against women was alcohol-related. This view was also expressed by one of the Nottingham mothers who lived on the edge of Bestwood and often watched "drunks go up. They take their bottles and you see them come back and they are drunk. That is one thing that does worry me - with the children coming home late."

Woodlands are therefore seen as attracting men who are not mentally stable, either through some kind of psychological deficiency or through alcohol, and who take advantage of the vegetation cover to prey on lone, vulnerable women and children.

This line of reasoning is also advanced to account for the men who flash at women and children. There is, however, a marked disagreement between men and

women about the seriousness of this type of incident. The majority of women in the study have been flashed at in a public place.

*Perdita* "It is such a horrible feeling though. It is so traumatic and dreadful. You don't want to bother risking it for the sake of having a walk."

*Sophie*: "It is imposing on you and your space."  
(London mothers)

Bestwood Country Park is occasionally the haunt of men who expose themselves to women and children, and some of the Nottingham mothers had encountered this.

*Elizabeth*: "It was that man in the kilt that day when he just stripped off... He just came from one side onto the path right up a hill, and no one mentioned it. I have seen him twice."

*Alison*: "Apparently he gets changed in the woods, they say. And the rangers say he has been coming in a while and they don't think he is a threat to anyone..."

*Elizabeth*: "You see, straightaway you think – what is he going to do? It worried me because..."

*Alison*: "He might have been all right for the last three years but it doesn't mean to say he is going to be all right for the next 10."

(Nottingham mothers)

Women have to deal with this sense of uncertainty, in addition to disgust, shock and a feeling that their personal space has been invaded. Men, whose immediate response is to laugh at stories about flashers and suggest women do not really mind either, say that flashers are 'harmless': but if a flasher is deranged, how can women be sure he will not become dangerous? Flashers destroy women's sense of security in public spaces.

## The breakdown of trust

Underpinning all these points is a sense that it is no longer possible to trust other people who may be in woods and forests. Public space has been defined by Waltzer (1986) as "the space we share with strangers, people who aren't our relatives, friends or work associates". Encounters with strangers are managed on the bases of trust, regulation and social control. Within public spaces such as woods the notion of trust no longer functions properly – if it ever did. Women and children perceive any man on his own as a potential threat. As a London man said, somewhat bitterly: "It's not some men they don't trust, it's all men".

Because woods are not crowded with people, those who visit them may feel there is no one around to help or to enforce acceptable behaviour from, for example, groups of youths 'having a good time'.

Countryside rangers are increasingly asked to fulfil a 'policing' role in this shifting social terrain, a responsibility that may sit uncomfortably with their environmental management and educational roles. Worries about crime in woods are part of a wider social debate about 'the collapse of law and order'.

## Communicating fear

In designing and managing Community Forests it is essential to understand how local environments become commonly perceived as dangerous and threatening. Local gossip and knowledge of local events is of great importance for monitoring the relative safety of public open spaces, including woodland. Media coverage also creates reputations for certain settings and reinforces the sense of fear and anxiety.

Women across the generations monitor and control each other's behaviour in public spaces. They talk to each other about things that have happened locally, in the context of local media reports about crime and the national media treatment of certain high-profile cases.

All the groups in the Nottingham study talked about dreadful things that were said to have happened in Bestwood. Details were scant – a girl might have been raped; a body may have been found; apparently someone was murdered – but there was a sense that these events were being reworked into a local myth.

By contrast, no-one could provide any stories or information about what went on in Bencroft. The wood was not 'known' and therefore, not 'owned' in the same kind of way. However, somewhat ironically, it seemed that the 'horror stories' in the mass media had more 'reality' and impact on people's evaluations of risk than this background history.

In all the groups there were the same kind of comments about media coverage of certain sex crimes in public green spaces. They all mentioned the killing of Rachel Nickell, sexually assaulted and then stabbed on Wimbledon Common when out walking with her child and dog in July 1992. Young mothers in London identified particularly strongly with this case. One said she had stopped walking since Rachel Nickell died.

*Charlotte*: "I think we felt, of all the people it shouldn't happen to, it shouldn't happen to somebody like her, who was just walking, enjoying the countryside in a fairly well used area."

*Sarah*: "And with a child. You think you've got your dog and you've got a child and you're safe."

*I mean, you're not anywhere where you should be in any danger. In broad daylight, you're in a place where people are walking all the time."*

**Gina:** *"It's like order and unity just went overnight."*  
(London mothers)

People feel devastated by these reports. But has society become more dangerous, are there more violent crimes against women and children today than there were 20 years ago – or is it the way in which the media present these events?

Detailed research by Soothill and Walby (1991) shows that during the 1980s coverage of sex crimes became mainstream news, especially in the popular media. Coverage has expanded dramatically to full details of the event, the police search, the inquest, the court case, and then occasionally, what happened to the accused after being found guilty. The Nickell case received further coverage on the anniversary of her death.

The work by Soothill and Walby suggests that sex crimes are no more nor less common than in previous decades, but news reports create a public understanding that things have got much worse – with consequent effects on behaviour. Hence comments like this from one of the London Asian women: "I used to go a lot to the Forest because we live next to it. But because these things are happening in the world, I stopped going there. I'm scared. I'm afraid. Anything can happen, anytime. You never know."

Or the Nottingham mothers talking about the local media:

**Linda:** *"Everything is more out in the open – newspapers and... We used to have newspapers but not like they have today really. Cover everything don't they?"*

**Alison:** *"And every time you turn the telly on there is something. There is somebody else somewhere."*

**Maureen:** *"There must have been three murders on the news last night. Because we said 'how many more?' That is all you hear about."*  
(Nottingham mothers)

A common feature of media reporting, as the study by Green *et al* (1987) also shows, is the way police and family comments are used to emphasise what has become understood as 'legitimate and illegitimate violence against women'. The time and place of the attack become significant; so too, does the search for 'a motive'. The victim is seen as being in some sense culpable if she is out after dark or on her own in green spaces.

The impact on women's lives of the stream of stories becomes part of "the system" referred to below by one of the mature women in Nottingham as the group tried to understand the source of their fears, and what was different about society today.

**Kathie:** *"But we're putting our fear into our daughters. That's what we're doing."*

**Jessie:** *"Are we being over-protective? Are we being paranoid?"*

**Jo:** *"I feel we're protecting them."*

**Brenda:** *"Yeah, but you can't, can you, you can't protect them all the time. I mean, my daughter, she's 16, she's a black-belt, she's an instructor, so she's got more chance of defending herself than I have. And yet, I keep saying to her, 'no you can't go there, no you can't do this, no you can't do that'."*

**Jo:** *"But you can make them aware of the dangers so that they don't get into trouble."*

**Brenda:** *"Yeah, but it's yourself isn't it? It's your fear in yourself."*

**Researcher:** *"But look at this instance. We've got a lovely park here and our daughters would probably want to have the pleasures that we had, and we're not allowing them to have them."*

**Irene:** *"But, it's not us that's not allowing really, it's the system that's not allowing it."*

(Nottingham grandmothers)

Despite these profound anxieties and the level of social pressure on women and children only to visit woodlands under very constrained circumstances, people do use them: the extent to which they do so, depends on the coping strategies they employ and their evaluation of the potential risk.

## Risk evaluation

A central issue for the groups was how to assess the actual odds of being attacked in woods and forests. Where is someone in more danger – city street or forest path? There are several strands to this risk evaluation:

- where the wood is 'imagined' to be located: in the city, in the urban fringe or in the deeper countryside;
- whether there is a community attached to the wood – is it 'owned', who would give help and assistance if needed?

- whether the city or the wood would be more attractive to a criminal intent on sexual assault or robbery with violence;
- a desire to know the 'actual' figures of criminal activity in woodlands – although it is highly unlikely that these could influence whether more people would feel more confident.

## Location

The imagined location of the woodland – in the deep countryside or part of the city – was significant for both the London and Nottingham groups and caused ambivalence and uncertainty.

In the case of Bencroft, the inner London groups felt they were being taken to the ends of the earth. They were beyond street lights and pavements and the wood felt as if it were in the heart of the countryside. Some found this worrying. One London Asian woman said: "We're city people. The wood is a different territory, so it does frighten you." These feelings were reinforced because the groups saw so few people in the wood and it is entirely surrounded by agricultural land. For many of the women, this was potentially quite frightening; they kept asking what would happen if someone was attacked and needed help.

People drew comfort in the city from the belief that others would either deter a potential attacker or, at worst, come to their assistance. "But they can't look out of their windows if it's in a forest," one London girl said. Many more people were needed in the woods for women to feel safe: "...if you feel like all of a sudden somebody's going to attack you 10 yards into that walk, or in the middle of being lost. It all boils down to the same thing. If there are people around, you're not afraid" (London mother).

Foresters were working in the wood and the women all commented on how nice it was to see them because it enhanced their sense of security. Fear that people would not assist in woodlands in deep countryside was amplified for the Asian and Afro-Caribbean women by their common experiences of racism. Through an enormous range of insulting behaviour and non-verbal cues, they are made to feel 'alien' and unwelcome in the countryside. Given those feelings, why should they believe that people would help them if they were attacked or hurt?

*Meena: "This is the second time I've been in the countryside. We find going into the countryside or out on walks like this, that we're looked upon as aliens, you know, 'What are they doing here?' It's really white-dominated, and I think that puts us off."* (London Asian woman)

The groups who lived near Bencroft also felt it was a countryside wood but less safe than it used to be. A dominant image from the London grandmothers was of a previously secure countryside now threatened by the city. The city was symbolised by men able to travel by car, commit a crime, and then disappear without any prospect of being recognised and caught. Mobility thus renders 'country' people as much at risk as their city counterparts.

This fear also chimes with the 'stranger-danger' messages that children constantly receive at school and at home. Men who are not known to you are a threat – especially if they are in a car. A burnt-out car in the car park at Bencroft was a reminder of this undesired penetration of the countryside by the city.

Most of the people in the Nottingham groups lived close enough to Bestwood to walk there. It is also a short-cut linking Bestwood mining village to the large housing estates south of the park. Despite this, some of the groups found being in the wood more akin to countryside – feelings inspired by the peace and quiet, the bird song and the lush green vegetation. The number of people using the park make it feel much safer than Bencroft. The presence of rangers and the involvement of volunteer rangers maintain a sense of security. The park is well used by many dog-walkers – including individual women with no other company apart from dogs – and people recognise one another.

The park has, at least during the day, a comfortable and friendly atmosphere. The level of social interaction in Bestwood represents the kind of community expression that people believe has been lost from urban settings and may now only be found in deep countryside.

## The 'imagined community'

The 'imagined location' is thus intimately connected with an 'imagined community' who might be available in time of need.

This represents another reworking of the idealised values of countryside in English culture. It becomes important because of the widespread belief that there still exist in the countryside people who know one another and would come to someone's aid. The "dirty old men" – as the London boys described them – would be known and there would be informal surveillance (and control). The group members who lived near Bencroft described themselves as "country people" rather than "townies" who want burger bars; leave litter; break fences; make noise... and might have criminal intent.

Bestwood has active volunteer rangers and is well used but it is also subject to the pressures of being a