GROWING IN CONFIDENCE

Understanding people's perceptions
of urban fringe woodlands

**COUNTRYSIDE
COMMISSION**

The Countryside Commission works to conserve the beauty of the English countryside and to help people to enjoy it.

GROWING IN CONFIDENCE

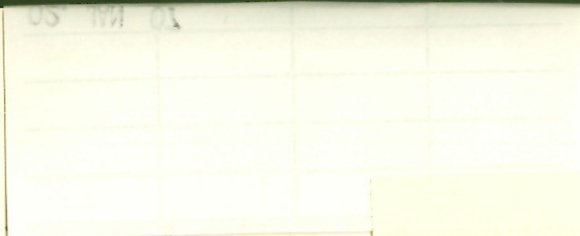*Understanding people's perceptions
of urban fringe woodlands*

A research project for the Countryside Commission
by Dr Jacquelin Burgess, Department of Geography,
University College London

**COUNTRYSIDE
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COMMUNITY FORESTS

Community Forests are an important new initiative led by the Countryside Commission and the Forestry Commission in partnership with local authorities. They will be shaped by landowners, farmers and local communities. The 12 Community Forests cover large areas on the edges of towns and cities where major environmental improvements will create well-wooded landscapes for wildlife, work, recreation and education.

GREAT NORTH FOREST

CLEVELAND COMMUNITY FOREST

RED ROSE FOREST

MERSEY FOREST

SOUTH YORKSHIRE FOREST

GREENWOOD

FOREST OF MERCIA

GREAT WESTERN COMMUNITY FOREST

MARSTON VALE

WATLING CHASE

THAMES CHASE

BRISTOL /AVON COMMUNITY FOREST
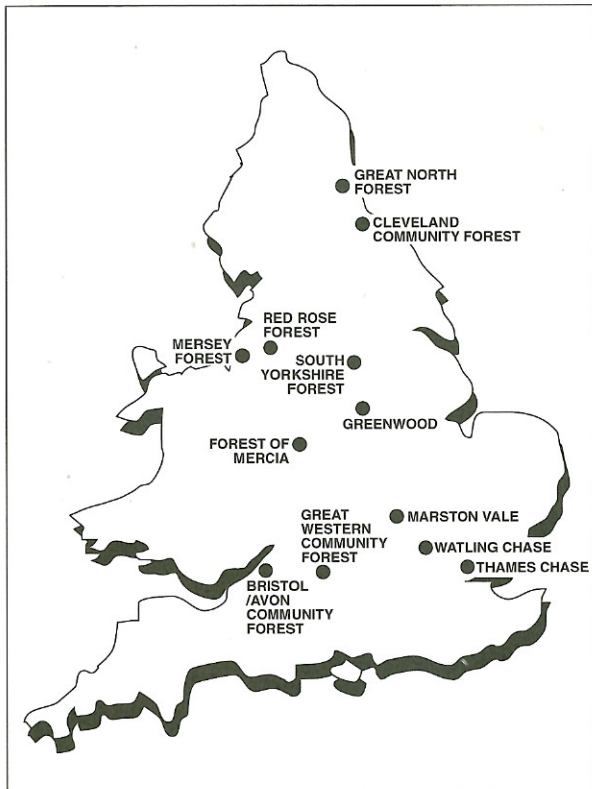
For further information contact:
The Community Forest Unit
Countryside Commission
71 Kingsway
London WC2B 6ST
Tel: 0171 831 3510
Fax: 0171 831 1439

FORESTS
FOR
THE
COMMUNITY

PREFACE

Community Forests are, literally, forests for the whole community. One simple aim behind their creation is to increase the opportunities for people of all ages and backgrounds to enjoy woods.

Woodland is one of our most highly valued landscapes; some 50 million visits are made each year to publicly-owned woods. However, the Countryside Commission is aware that, as with all countryside visiting, there are real barriers to people's access to woods, some physical, some social, and others concerned with perception.

We therefore commissioned this research to gain a deeper understanding of what discourages people from visiting urban fringe woods. Most importantly, we wanted to find out how to assist Community Forest teams and others to take positive action. Chapter 4 outlines suggestions which emerged during the research and in subsequent workshops.

We hope this report will inspire everyone involved in creating Community Forests – and other woodlands on the edges of towns and cities – actively to help more people gain confidence about using their woods.

Countryside Commission
March 1995

Sir John Johnson, Chairman of the Countryside Commission, helps children plant trees in Thames Chase Community Forest.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Community Forest programme is creating well-wooded landscapes on the edges of 12 major towns and cities. The idea is to increase recreation opportunities for people who already use woods and also to encourage a wider range of visitors. This report looks at what prevents or discourages some people from visiting woodland near urban areas and suggests ways of changing this.

Woods are extremely highly valued landscapes which give people a great deal of pleasure. However, the research carried out for this report confirms that there are some fears associated with woodland close to towns and cities. These fears are largely based on perceptions rather than the reality of the risk: crime statistics show that physical attacks are rare in woods.

By taking the sort of actions proposed in this report, Community Forest teams can reduce anxieties and help people grow in confidence. Like the transformation of the Community Forest areas themselves, this change will not occur overnight, but helping people make more use of woodlands near the urban edge will create 'forests for the whole community'.

The research

The project aimed to:
- find out whether different social and cultural groups felt there were any risks in visiting urban fringe woodland and, if so, what these were;

One of the groups discovering Bencroft Wood.

Enjoying woodland on the urban fringe.

- discover the extent to which fear might inhibit people's use of woods;
- recommend ways to reduce these feelings and increase the use of woodland.

Thirteen single gender groups from different cultures and age ranges went on guided walks through urban fringe woodland and then spent an hour and a half discussing their experiences. The 97 people ranged from regular woodland users to those who had never visited a wood.

Seven of the walks were in woodland near London, the others were in a wooded country park close to Nottingham. They all went through dense vegetation, open areas and along different kinds of paths. They took about an hour at a leisurely pace.

After the walk each group discussed:
- the pleasures of visiting woods;
- what might cause anxiety and why, and the effect;
- specific features of the wood and whether changes in design or management might affect their feelings about it;
- crime and safety in woods compared with built-up areas;
- how to meet the needs of different users.

Horse riding is a way for people to get to know their countryside.

Key findings

The research shows that although people find pleasure in visiting urban fringe woodlands their feelings of anxiety can also affect their use of them. Everyone expressed some anxiety but this varied according to age, gender and cultural background.

A fundamental physical property of woods and forests is the sense of 'enclosure'. This arises from the:

- density of the woodland;
- type of trees;
- height of trees;
- thickness of the tree canopy;
- density of the under storey;

all of which create different strengths of light and shade and variations in how far people can see.

Professionals may find it difficult to understand negative feelings about woods and forests. However, visitors may feel that enclosed forest settings are places where they could be trapped or where threatening people could hide. Their sense of isolation may be increased if they cannot see anyone else who is about. Enclosure is a key to the level and intensity of any fears.

On the other hand, a sense of enclosure is also the main reason why people appreciate woodlands on the urban fringe and want to explore them. They enjoy the tranquillity which an enclosed setting offers, away from the hurly-burly of life outside the woodland.

A number of specific points arose during this research.

- All the women feared being in woodlands alone. For most of the white women, one companion would be enough to reassure them. The women from ethnic groups needed to be in much larger parties before they would feel safe in woodlands.
- Overriding the women's desires to explore and experience 'wildness' was the much stronger feeling that they needed to protect themselves and their children from risk of attack.
- The men were slightly concerned about being mugged but more anxious about getting lost and accidentally trespassing.
- The men were acutely anxious about the perceived risk to their wives, daughters and all young children of sexually motivated crimes.
- The men and the teenage boys recognised that a woman on her own could see them as threatening; this affected their behaviour.

Other concerns stemmed from friction between different groups of users such as horse riders, people with dogs, young men firing air rifles or riding motorbikes.

Fears were reinforced by media coverage giving the quite wrong impression that sex crimes are common, rather than rare, events and that they occur primarily, if not exclusively, in public places. In fact, they are much more likely to occur in people's homes.

Woodland adventures are fun for children.

Building confidence

Although the issues highlighted by the research go far beyond the programme to create new Community Forests, steps can be taken to reduce anxiety, widen access and demonstrate commitment to equal opportunity for all.

The suggested way forward not only draws on the research but also on Community Forest workshops and seminars which have already taken place in response to the findings. The ideas are expanded in chapter 4.

Design and management

In many urban areas careful design can help reduce crime and the fear of crime. Measures include:

- improving lighting;
- increasing how far people can see;
- reducing the number of places where assailants can trap a victim or hide.

However, relative darkness, reduced sightlines and large clumps of vegetation are intrinsic qualities of woodland. All the groups in the research acknowledged that this presented a dilemma, but they felt steps could be taken towards resolving it. Their suggestions were in accord with the design recommendations advocated by the Countryside Commission's Community Forest advice manual (see Bibliography, page 41). These guidelines suggest providing 'safe' routes and open spaces, increasing sightlines, giving thought to appropriate lighting, and generally improving the appearance of a wood.

The group also recommended improving signs and other information to help build confidence about a wood by:

- more detailed information about waymarking signs;
- information in other major languages used locally, rather than just in English;
- maps which show where a wood is in relation to its immediate surroundings so that people can find their way out quickly.

One of the most important ways in which management and/or maintenance can reduce fear is by rapidly removing features which imply lack of social control and 'ownership' of public space. These include abandoned cars, graffiti and fly-tipped rubbish.

People need people

For women, in particular, design solutions alone will not make them feel entirely safe in woodlands. They need more people on site — more visitors and, particularly, more staff. These include foresters and others working in the woodland, as well as rangers who play two roles that are fundamental in reducing fear:

- 'policing';
- community liaison, especially with children, women, and ethnic groups.

Media strategy

Although violent crime is very rare in parks, green spaces and woodlands, isolated events receive a lot of media coverage. A strong public relations programme could counteract sensationalist reporting. More attention should be given to working with local newspapers, radio and television which play a particularly significant role in shaping people's perceptions of risk in their neighbourhood.

Creating a choice

The need to offer visitors an informed choice underlies all these steps towards making woodlands feel more welcoming to more people. The discussion groups all recognised that measures to reduce people's sense of anxiety and fear could destroy some of the 'naturalness' of the woods. They realised that compromises must be made. The preferred solution of the discussion groups was to create areas within Community Forests to cater for different needs.

Open wood – This would be very open, with well-lit paths and car parks. There would be toilets and other facilities, information in the major languages used locally, and perhaps a ranger base.

Middle wood – This would be more 'woody' and would need easily understandable signs and waymarks. Rangers and other workers should be evident.

Wild wood – This, the most naturalistic of the three types of areas, would be for people with greater confidence or knowledge about wildlife and nature. Waymarking should be unobtrusive.

Within a Community Forest it may not be possible to have all three types of area in the same woodland. However, there are ways of indicating to visitors the nature of a particular area so that they can assess whether they will feel comfortable visiting it.

1. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The research was commissioned to find out more about people's feelings towards urban fringe woodlands. Because Community Forests are deliberately sited close to towns and cities, the research concentrated on feelings about woods on the urban fringe, rather than in deep countryside.

This report looks at the various themes that emerged when 13 groups, drawn from different sections of the general public, walked in two urban fringe woodlands and then discussed their reactions. The report quotes extensively from the group discussions although people's names have been changed.

Perceptions of social risk emerged from the discussions and the report aims to help Community Forest teams develop programmes that reduce people's fears and encourage new groups of visitors. All environmental professionals, such as planners, foresters, landscape architects and managers, have a role to play in reducing fear of crime: everyone, regardless of gender, age, ability or ethnic origin, should be able to use and enjoy public woodland without fear or hindrance.

Forests and people

Woods owned and managed by Forest Enterprise (part of the Forestry Commission) attract 50 million visits a year and research by environmental psychologists, geographers and landscape professionals shows that woods and forests are highly valued for their beauty and wildlife. On the other hand, recreation and access studies suggest they can be less popular than other recreational sites (Irving, 1985, Harrison, 1991).

The findings of this Community Forest research suggest that anxieties about personal safety in urban fringe woods lead many people to restrict their behaviour and/or to control the activities of others for whom they are responsible.

In 1989 a Home Office working group recommended that:
- "fear reduction must enjoy a much higher priority in action against crime both by the government and by the various other agencies involved;"
- "public sector and private environmental projects should only go ahead if it is clear that the reduction of crime and fear has been properly addressed."

Evidence from studies in inner city neighbourhoods and peripheral council estates suggests that "the reduction in fear achieved by public participation in neighbourhood affairs seems related to the degree of (actual and perceived) local control over local environments such measures afford" (Smith, 1987).

'Fear' is a strong and painful sense of anxiety that something dreadful might happen to an individual or others for whom he or she cares. 'Risk' refers to the individual's judgement about the likelihood of something hazardous happening and the extent to which he or she will adjust behaviour to reduce the possibility.

The two are closely intertwined, although people easily recognise the difference between feelings which stem from fairy stories about forests and those based on the risk of sexual harassment. If people are afraid of crime they adjust their behaviour to reduce the risk and their quality of life suffers. (See the study edited by Hillman, 1993, of how parents' anxiety about traffic affects children's freedom to play outside.)

This was the starting point for the research: if people believe something to be true they act accordingly.

How sensitive are foresters and those involved in forest management and design to the public's concern for safety? Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) found that environmental designers preferred different scenery from the general public; they also tended "to have a limited ability to predict what the public would prefer".

Joanne Vining (1992) studied the expectations of US forest managers, environmental activists and the public to a plan for felling trees. She found that

foresters and forest managers underestimated the emotion it aroused and this led to conflict with angry residents. Vining says: "Simply listening to (and really hearing) public and interest group feelings and concerns is an important first step that is often neglected".

A number of UK urban forestry texts recognise that trees are not universally liked. Hibberd (1989) for example, points to potential conflict between supporters of tree planting and those who express "attitudes of indifference, and even open hostility towards the council's trees... Vandalism and casual abuse of trees has reached epidemic proportions in some urban areas."

Hibberd also points to the need for foresters to have more regard for the views of local communities in designing new schemes – "urban forestry... is as much about people as it is about trees" – and expresses the hope that people will "develop greater awareness, appreciation and sense of responsibility for their trees".

Safety issues in forestry publications focus primarily on the health and safety of trees themselves and how to protect them from vandalism and damage. The major social concerns are how to prevent people becoming lost and ensure that they are not harmed by dangerous branches, play equipment, etc.

Recent Forestry Authority handbooks (1991, 1992), for example, offer guidance on managing woodlands for recreation. They look at good forest design principally in the context of scenic, landscape and wildlife conservation values. The Authority points out that "many people feel some sort of anxiety when going for a walk in the country, perhaps fearful of getting lost or of being where they shouldn't be" and they are concerned about animal faeces and out-of-control dogs. Similarly, Terence Lee's study (1991) for the Forestry Authority into people's attitudes towards different wooded landscapes reveals surprising levels of concern and feelings of vulnerability. This study has made a substantial contribution to our understanding of the psychological factors underpinning people's preferences for forested landscapes.

Although primarily concerned with measuring visual preferences, Lee's research also explored people's recreational activities and motivations in forests. Approximately one-third of women questioned about their experiences in forests said they would be worried about being alone in them and would feel vulnerable. Given the constraints of the questionnaire, it is not possible to discover in more detail of what women were, or might be, afraid.

Studies of woodland in the urban fringe and large urban parks, rather than the deeper countryside, tend to show greater concern with a wider range of social and environmental issues. In 1985 Irving published a

Urban forestry is as much about people as about trees.

review of recreational opportunities and activities in urban fringe woodlands for the Land Decade Educational Council. This was specifically for woodland owners and/or managers and, reflecting the proximity of large urban centres to nearby woodland, dealt with a number of 'policing' responsibilities for rangers.

In his review of these policing issues, Irving acknowledges that incidents against people are much rarer than those against property, which include car dumping, fly tipping, arson, and theft of equipment, and that they are sporadic and unpredictable.

It is only in the last few years that issues of personal safety in urban green spaces have been given a higher profile in the UK (Burgess, 1988, Valentine, 1989), partly in response to growing awareness that women are more constrained than men because they fear victimisation.

Walker (1993), for example, describes how the Black Country Urban Forestry Unit involved the public in creating more woodland habitat in parks. She comments that managers and designers should respond to the "perceived threat to personal security from natural woodland" by careful design of new plantings, improved lighting and more supervision. This accords with the growing demand for public spaces to be made to feel safe for everyone.

Crime and the fear of crime

Environmental criminology seeks patterns between types of crime and where they occur as well as an understanding of the relationships between built environmental features and crimes (Evans et al, 1992). These studies confirm that inner cities and poorer council estates have the highest crime levels. In agricultural areas the risk is considerably below average – although rising (Mayhew and Maung, 1992).

Crime statistics can only give a partial picture. Not everyone regards a crime as important enough to report; certain groups may feel unable to go to the police and the willingness to report particular types of crime changes over time. The Home Office-funded British Crime Survey (BCS) questions people about what crimes they have experienced. It regularly surveys 10,000 people in the UK. It found that of the 15 million crimes committed in 1991, 85 per cent were against property. The statistics also show that the absolute incidence of crime in parks, commons and open spaces is far less than in other environments. The survey does not have a separate category for 'woods'; it contains information on incidents in "parks, including commons or other public space" and "urban wasteland" (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Number of offences in parks and urban wasteland (BCS) per 10,000 interviewees.

	1981	1983	1987	1991
Vehicle offences (Vehicle vandalism, thefts from and of vehicles)	2	5	6	21
Theft of/damage to property (Theft of bikes and other personal and household property, and damage)	2	7	2	9
Assaults (Woundings, common assaults)	6	13	4	11
Threats	5	2	7	11
Contact thefts (Robbery [and attempts] and theft from people [and attempts])	2	3	0	5

Working from the British Crime Survey data, Mayhew reports that the number of offences in parks and open spaces per head of population is very low and vehicles are more common targets than people. All the assaults reported in 1991 were against men. These figures only include incidents involving nuisance or sexual and/or racial harassment if respondents regarded them as 'a crime'.

Although these figures demonstrate that the risks are low, many studies reveal strongly held beliefs that women and children are more likely to be victims of violent crime than men (Stanko, 1987), and that public spaces are more dangerous for them than their homes (Pain, 1991).

The BCS survey in 1982 reported that 60 per cent of women considered themselves to be at least 'somewhat unsafe' in inner cities, and that the fear of rape was the most powerful. As Warr (1985) has suggested, rape may act as a 'master offence' that enhances women's fears of victimisation when lesser events occur. A recent study by Pawson (1993) in New Zealand dealt with 100 rape reports which "lay to rest the myth that rape is a crime of public places". Just under half took place in victims' homes.

Stanko (1987) makes an important general point that recorded levels of fear of crime and risk of victimisation should alert us to "the unrecorded instances of threatening and violent behaviour by males... if women commonly encounter threatening and/or violent behaviour from men who are strangers and from men known to them, how can they predict which man will be violent to them and in what instance?"

Fear of crime in public spaces

Fear of crime is much more pervasive and diffuse than the actual experience of victimisation and is one aspect of social life where the research evidence shows an overwhelming correlation between attitudes and behaviour. Susan Smith (1987) defines the fear of crime as "not so much an event as a persistent and recurring sense of malaise". This is as much a social problem, impinging on the quality of life for all citizens, as it is a psychological problem for individuals alone.

The impact of crime on individuals and social groups, both directly as victims and more diffusely through fear of crime, is a social process sustained by the media, local gossip and rumour, and crime prevention campaigns.

Research shows that the fear of crime depends on the interaction of environmental and social factors. Features like litter, graffiti, abandoned or burnt out cars and empty buildings, as well as loitering youths and vagrants, are a source of anxiety for many people because they indicate a lack of social control and care: this anxiety is displaced on to a fear of crime (Herbert, 1993, Smith, 1986). Removing such 'environmental incivilities' is the basis of much remedial environmental action, as advocated by Coleman (1985) and Newman (1972). It is as true for countryside and woodland settings as it is for urban areas.

In social terms, Painter (1992) argues that local victim surveys show that women are not only proportionally more likely to be the victims of a wider range of crimes than men, but that women are subject to particular crimes and threats by virtue of their gender. Sexual harassment is a common experience for women and creates particular anxieties for them in open spaces.

The threat of male violence has become associated with particular environments. Valentine (1989, 1990) demonstrates the connections between specific environmental contexts and the 'coping strategies' women develop to ensure their safety and the safety of their children, particular avoiding places they perceive to be 'dangerous' at 'dangerous times'.

'Flashing' (a man exposing his genitals) is probably the most widespread sexual assault most women and children experience in public spaces in general. Most incidents occur in the street. Studies by McNeill (1987) and Valentine show that flashing happens much more often than is reported to the police. Giggling, a nervous reaction used afterwards in the retelling of such events, is often misinterpreted by men when they discuss how they think women feel about flashers. The impact of flashing on women's behaviour in public spaces is not trivial. Many women limit where they walk after an incident.

Although flashing mainly occurs in streets and public parks in urban areas, the perception of woodland is that its vegetation could offer cover for an aggressor. There might also be few people around. It is within this context that women have to decide whether to visit woodlands, take what is perceived as a risk, and deal with the potential consequences.

Media coverage plays a crucial role. In a seven-month study in Birmingham, Smith (1986) found reports of violent personal crimes, including robbery, accounted for five per cent of crimes known to the police but constituted over 79 per cent of column centimetres devoted to crime news in the local paper. Conversely, 80 per cent of recorded crime was theft and burglary, yet it received only four per cent of news space.

By sensationalising those very rare violent crimes in open spaces in naturalistic settings, the media contribute to the deepening anxiety and reluctance to take risks. This reduces the number of people who feel comfortable about using these areas freely.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The research concentrated on seeking the answers to three questions that are important for the development, design, planning and management of Community Forests.

- What are the range and intensity of perceived risks associated with urban fringe woodlands among different social and cultural groups?
- To what extent do the range and intensity of perceived risks vary for people living close to urban fringe woodlands and those living elsewhere?
- How are perceived risks in urban fringe woodlands talked about among different communities and does this amplify or reduce people's anxieties?

The choice of location

The study was carried out in Bencroft and Wormley Woods, south Hertfordshire, west of the Lee Valley Regional Park (Figure 2); and Bestwood Country Park, a woodland on the northern fringes of Nottingham (Figure 4) which lies within the Greenwood Community Forest area.

Bencroft and Wormley Woods

These lie within the Broxbourne Woods system in South Hertfordshire. Bencroft is owned by Hertfordshire County Council which is introducing new management regimes that include coppicing, replanting native species and work on drainage and footpaths carried out by the countryside rangers service. Wormley Wood is owned by the Woodland Trust and is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

The woods are in the urban fringe, a couple of miles from the M25 and close to a number of large settlements, but they feel like woods in deeper countryside. There are basic visitor facilities, waymarked routes and a central bridleway, but no toilets or other buildings.

Bestwood Country Park

Bestwood Country Park, Nottingham, is a remnant of Sherwood Forest. It is in the urban fringe, with school playing fields and large areas of housing on the southern and western edges. To the north and east is farmland. Bestwood village, once a mining community, lies to the north west of the park.

The country park was reclaimed from dereliction and neglect between 1974 and 1982 and now there are picnic sites, horse trails, well-surfaced paths, extensive and detailed signage, a field classroom, adventure playground, public toilets and car parks. Locals use it a lot: unlike Bencroft and Wormley woods, it is rare not to meet other people when walking around. The park is staffed throughout the year by rangers who organise public events and there are volunteer rangers from the local communities.

Method

It was decided that single gender group discussion, combined with a site visit, would be a suitable method.

This approach was chosen because:

- the walks took people into real woodland (judging and responding to landscape photographs is not the same as actually being there);
- people usually visit woodland in groups, rather than by themselves;
- discussion (rather than quick responses to questionnaires) allows people to express more of their feelings.

The groups were chosen to represent a range of social and cultural experiences, as well as different ages and geographical backgrounds. As far as possible, they were matched in the two locations. They were together for a minimum of three and a maximum of six hours.

The adults were contacted through existing outreach networks. The teenagers were volunteers from sixth-form colleges. Many of the younger people did not use woodland often. Some members of the groups, especially those from ethnic communities, had never visited English woodland.

Each group was conducted by at least two women – a researcher and a community liaison officer, usually from different ethnic backgrounds. A ranger also accompanied some groups on their site visit. The project had the support of senior managers and staff in the Lee Valley Regional Park, the Greenwood Community Forest and Bestwood Country Park Rangers Service.
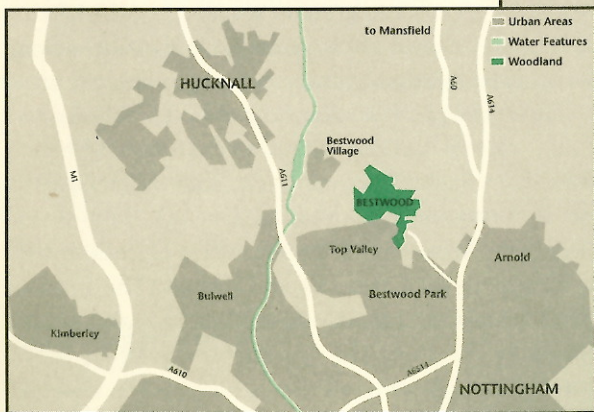

One of the groups exploring the woods.
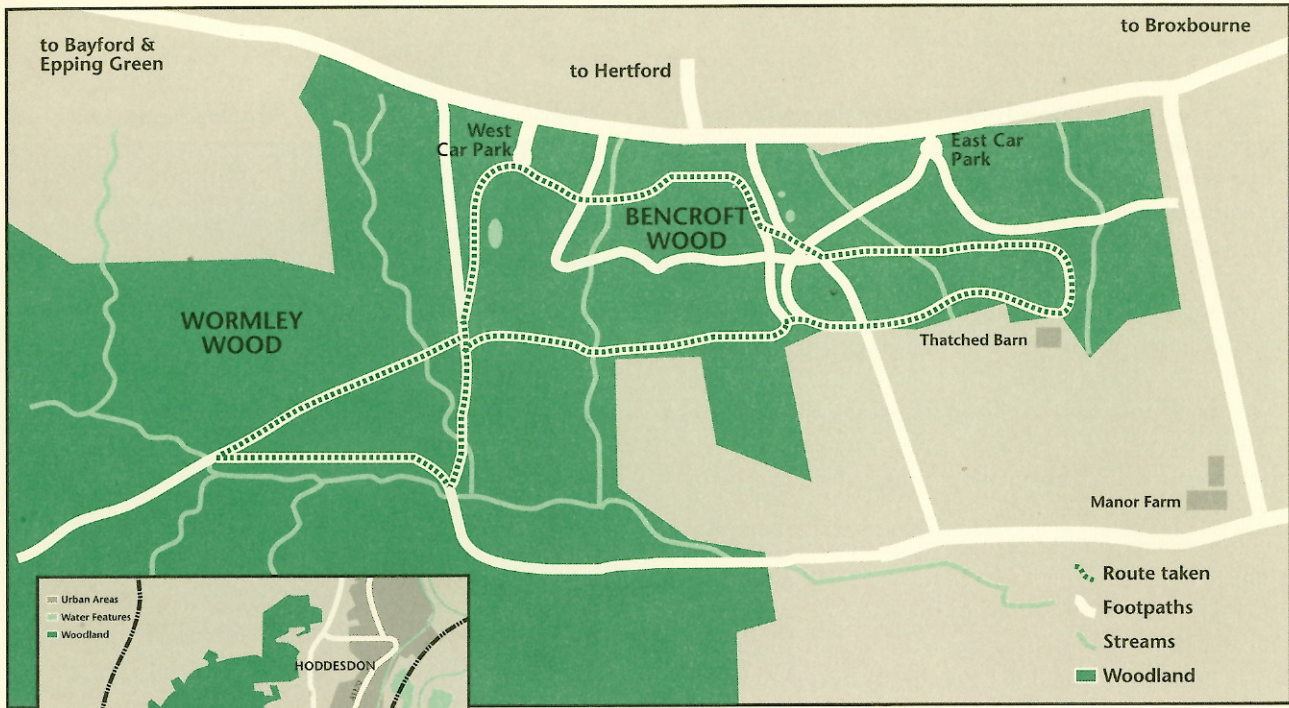
(Left) Figure 2. Bencroft and Wormley Woods in relation to their surroundings.

(Above) Figure 3. Section of Bencroft and Wormley Woods, showing the route of the woodland walk.

(Above) Figure 4. Bestwood Country Park in relation to its surroundings.

(Right) Figure 5. Section of Bestwood Country Park, showing the route of the woodland walk.