

The Land AWAKENING

During the darkest days of winter, committed volunteers have been out in the Surrey countryside performing vital conservation tasks.



The health of many of the region's green spaces and river networks depends on the goodwill of amateurs and experts willing to give their time and skills.

Watching a large group working away in community-owned nature reserve Teazle Wood, it is striking to observe the extraordinary teamwork and camaraderie. A storm kettle threatens tea, a bonfire is alight, and snippets of fascinating conversations are interwoven with birdsong. There are discussions about nearby medieval sites,

an abandoned Victorian house and brickyard, an unsolved murder in 1834, King Alfred's missing minster church.

The atmosphere is magical – as tortured hawthorns, neglected for more than a century, are gently freed by hand and bow saw, it is easy to drift into thoughts of Tolkien and Beowulf. People have worked this land for millennia, and here we are, people, working this land today. We are probably not so different from our ancestors.

As we stop for a break, we are joined by a robin, and a heron flies low and slowly over our heads. Wildlife

is all around, and it seems grateful, as if it knows that help is here. This winter work is about sensitively letting light back in to dank and choked woodland, encouraging greater biodiversity and enhancing habitats. It is crucial to do this kind of work outside bird nesting season, and no-one seems to be complaining about the odd cloudburst or the heavy clay underfoot. They are a resourceful lot – up goes a tarpaulin between trees, and everyone stays warm and dry.

A new awareness of each tree is gained as we clear away the dead brushwood. Guesses are made at the age of some, and questions are asked about why one species dominates a particular area, and why most of the trees in this part of the wood lean away from the light. Ivy strangles



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one tree quite dramatically, like the mace round a nutmeg. The whole life cycle becomes evident – for every vast dead tree rotting down, there are new saplings vying for the light.

It still feels like winter, but spring is in evidence. With last year's crab apples still carpeting the ground, the first shoots of *Allium ursinum* (the stunning and pungent wild garlic) are nonetheless pushing through, and a vast bank of emerging primroses delights those volunteers who cleared this neighbouring patch from its black tangle of overgrowth last year.

No-one wants to leave, but once the embers are made safe, and the white sun casts its last light over the newly-exposed ground, we head for home, already turning our thoughts to the botanical surveys of spring flowers and the summer's work with butterflies. ■



'Trees are poems that the earth writes upon the sky.'
- Kahlil Gibran, SAND AND FOAM

'The same leaves over and over again!
They fall from giving shade above
To make one texture of faded brown
And fit the earth like a leather glove.'

Before the leaves can mount again
To fill the trees with another shade,
They must go down past things coming up.
They must go down into the dark decayed.

They must be pierced by flowers and put
Beneath the feet of dancing flowers.
However it is in some other world
I know that this is way in ours.'
- Robert Frost, IN HARDWOOD GROVES

THE DETAILS

To find out more about the work of the Teazle Wood Trust and its partners, email lucyquinnell@aol.com, visit www.teazlewood.org.uk or follow the story on facebook: Friends of Teazle Wood.