

Birchgrove

Woodland Grove
Special Edition
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THE BIRCHGROVE WOODLAND GROVE

A Special Edition

In 1996 The Birchgrove Group sponsored the planting of 1200 trees at the Woodland Trust's woodland creation site at Stratton St. Margaret, near Swindon, Wiltshire. This grove of trees will create a living and lasting tribute to the lives of people with haemophilia who were infected with HIV via contaminated clotting factors. It was intended by Birchgrove, that this woodland should become a peaceful place for people to visit and remember those who had their lives so profoundly affected by HIV.

These 1200 trees cover approximately 2 of the 135 acre Stratton Wood, and the wood itself forms part of the group of woodlands freely open to the public and collectively known as the Great Western Community Forest.

This grove of trees will not only be a memorial to those who have sadly died, but will also show the resilience and strength of those who are still affected and living with HIV/AIDS.

PICTURE OF STONE WITH ENGRAVED WORDS



The Birchgrove Woodland Grove Your Questions Answered

Why was the wood planted?

It was intended by Birchgrove, that this woodland should become a peaceful place for people to visit and remember those who had their lives so profoundly affected by HIV. The grove of 1200 trees will not only be a memorial to those who have sadly died, but will also show the resilience and strength of those who are still affected and living with HIV/AIDS. It will also keep alive for future generations a piece of medical history that has largely been ignored.

When was it planted?

Discussions with Birchgrove and the Woodland Trust started in the early 1990's and the wood was eventually planted in 1996.

Why was Stratton Wood chosen as the site in particular?

In 1994 the Woodland Trust had a choice of woodland sites that were available for sponsored planting schemes in the UK. These were Willesley in Leicestershire, Coton in the Elms in Derbyshire and The Great Western community Forest at Stratton. The wood at Stratton was chosen by Birchgrove as it was on flat land and therefore accessible. To make the wood accessible to all in the future it had to be easy to get to. The plot available at Stratton was a very short walking distance from a car park. It was also thought that Swindon was easier to get to by transport with the wood a short drive off the M4.

Is there a tree dedicated to each person affected by Haemophilia and HIV?

Originally the idea was that each tree had an individual marker and number, which related to a certificate for everybody who sponsored a tree in a person's name. After consultation with the Woodland Trust at the time, and others, it seemed a better idea to have the whole wood as a place to visit rather than one tree. In nature some trees thrive and survive and some do not. Some may get snapped in the wind or die themselves and it seemed that if this happened to a tree that was supposed to represent a loved one it would only add to the distress. If you did sponsor somebody and you have a certificate from 1996 this does not relate to any particular tree or trees, but any one of them.

Why are there only 1200 trees and not the exact number of people with haemophilia infected with HIV?

At the time of planting funding was one of the reasons as there was a cost per tree. Also there was debate, and still is, as to what the correct number of people infected with HIV actually was. It has also been reported that some people affected did not want any association with the project and did not want to be represented. The MFT had approximately 1250 known registrants. It seemed that 1200 was a figure that was affordable within the funds raised and representative of the people infected and affected.


Who funded the planting of the Trees?

The purchase and planting of the 1200 trees was financed by individual donations mainly from people with Haemophilia and HIV, and their affected families, and by contributions from Birchgrove Wales and Birchgrove London and South East. The money donated covered both the cost of planting and also provided for the long-term maintenance of the wood.

When can I or anybody else visit the wood?

The wood is open all year round and is freely open to the public. Basically anybody can visit at any time.





How does the Birchgrove wood fit into the rest of Stratton wood and what is planted in it?

These 1200 trees cover approximately 2 of the 135 acre Stratton Wood, and the wood itself forms part of the group of woodlands freely open to the public and collectively known as the Great Western Community Forest.

The Birchgrove plot is in a triangular shape, with the 1200 trees divided by mown rides into roughly 3 copses. It is planted in the north-eastern perimeter part of the Woodland Trust's Stratton wood.

Approximately 97,000 trees were planted in 1995-96 in the Stratton wood and include oak, ash, field maple and birch. Shrubs include hazel, blackthorn, hawthorn, dog rose, dogwood and purging buckthorn.

Skylarks are common and there are several owl boxes in the wood - some have become homes to tawny owls. In the wildflower meadow, hawkbit, foxglove, ribwort plantain and yellow rattle can all be seen.

Not only is the woodland designed to provide a "green lung" for Swindon and its citizens but it also helps to prevent further urbanisation of the land adjoining Swindon - north of the A419. At present the old field layout can still be seen from the mature hedgerows in and around the wood. The layout of the woodland at Stratton provides a good native mix of broadleaved trees and shrubs throughout (including: oak, ash, field maple, goat willow and hazel) with stands of walnut, beech and horse chestnut strategically placed in a more parkland setting in the north east. A network of broad rides and paths gives good public access to most parts of the developing wood, the two wildflower meadows and other habitats. The meadows and open spaces provide visitors with good views to countryside and to Swindon Parish Church. Circular walks of varying lengths are possible as are through routes across the site on both public rights of way and Woodland Trust created paths.

Where is the woodland and how do I get there?

Stratton Wood is in the area of Stratton, the parish of Stratton St. Margaret, in the northern edge of Swindon in Wiltshire.

>From the M4 come off at junction 15 and head north on the A419 Swindon by-pass. Continue straight over the first roundabout and proceed along the A419 until you come to the A361 turn off for Highworth. (Also signposts for HONDA) Take this road, following signposts to the crematorium, and continue for approximately half a mile. The Stratton Wood is now located on the right just past the entrance to the Kinsdown Mobile Home Park.

Use link below for map.

<http://www.streetmap.co.uk/streetmap.dll?grid2map?X=417500&Y=188500&zoom=3>

or visit The Woodland Trust web site www.woodland-trust.org.uk and look for Stratton Wood.

Is it easy to find?

The entrance to the car park and wood isn't easily visible as it has no signs. It is an entrance through a gap in a hedge immediately on the right, after the Kingsdown Park Mobile Home park which is signposted. The Crematorium is also well signposted and the Woodland is the 2nd entrance on the right after the crematorium coming from the Honda factory direction.

The entrance is also directly opposite a bus stop for the Kinsdown stop, bus 74. Once in the car park there is a display board by the main gate, which clearly identifies which part of the wood is dedicated to Birchgrove.

Can I get there by public transport?

It is possible to get there by bus. From Swindon Bus Station, which is a 2 minute walk from Swindon Train Station, you can catch Stagecoach 74. Get off at Kingsdown bus stop which is opposite the wood entrance. There are only limited services however, and at the time of going to press there are only 4 journeys a day. From Swindon 09.45, 12.45, 14.45 and 16.45. The return journeys being 09.25, 11.24, 14.45 and 16.25 (Saturday only) and 18.25 (Monday to Friday).

Check with Wiltshire C. C. Travel Line (08457-090899) to avoid disappointment, or check out buses@wiltshire.gov.uk or Stagecoach (01793-522243)

There are also taxis available from the Train station for a journey of approximately 7 miles.

Can I visit the wood in a wheelchair?

At present there is a gate designed to keep motorbikes out which also prohibits wheelchair access. (There will be wheelchair access on the open day.) However in compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act all the Woodland Trusts woods will have to have access for the disabled by 2004 as will all public places. There is a hardcore path that runs through the woods and skirts the perimeter of the Birchgrove plot, which would be suitable for wheelchairs. However if you wanted to get close up to the stone and go through the Birchgrove plot, although the land is flat, it is rough grassland. Ensure your batteries are fully charged or you have someone to help you out of ruts.

How far do I have to walk from the car park to the Birchgrove wood?

From the car park to the edge of the wood it is 180metres on a hardcore path. To reach the stone in the centre of the grove the total distance is 330metres from the car park

Is there ample parking if I wanted to visit with a group?

There is only a small car park that would accommodate up to 25 cars maximum. There are a couple of disabled car park spaces nearest the gate. The wood is regularly visited by members of the public and the car park is in constant use.

Why was a stone chosen to mark the site and why this one in particular?

In keeping with the Woodland Trusts wishes to keep their woods as natural as possible it seemed appropriate for a standing stone of local origin. The stone is permanent and blends into the woodland landscape. It was sourced from an underground glacial riverbed within a 50 mile radius of the site near Devizes. Windsmere Stone and Granite, were only one of a large number of stone masons and quarries we approached in the Swindon area. They are a small family based company that showed a personal interest in this. Steve Johnstone, the

mason, knew that our request was unusual and unique and he went the extra mile to locate a stone that was both. Three of us met up at the wood to see where the stone would go, with Steve, and went to the Farm near Devizes to see the stone and give our approval before he started engraving. The stone is situated near the centre of the Birchgrove plot and the engraving faces south.

Wiltshire is the county of standing stones with the famous village of Avebury and its stone circle close by. It seemed appropriate that Birchgrove too had a standing stone with words set in stone.

In 2001 a plaque was installed in the wood bearing the same words but visitors could not find it due to its size. A large standing stone seemed more fitting and cannot be missed by visitors.

What does it say on the stone?

“Birchgrove - This grove celebrates the lives of the 1200 people with Haemophilia infected with HIV”



Why were those words chosen?

There was a lot of debate about the wording, and many people's perspectives were taken into account. The words used were those that were printed on the plaque, which was installed in 2001 in the wood. They were chosen after a meeting of Birchgrove readers in which most sentiments were explored. We had to keep the words to a minimum for engraving reasons and to heighten the impact of the message.

This woodland has been an initiative of Birchgrove and was kept in the title and there were 1200 trees planted. The words "celebrate the lives of" were probably the hardest to come to an agreement on. The word commemorate was popular for obvious reasons, but commemorate wasn't appropriate for those still living. Although Birchgrove hopes that the wood will be used as a place to commemorate those no longer with us, it is also hoped that to celebrate all those lives would be more appropriate for the deceased and the living. To celebrate the lives of all of us is important. We are not celebrating what has happened to us. We are however keeping alive the reasons why we were all infected by keeping the words "infected with HIV" on the stone. Some suggestions were that we included "infected by contaminated blood products" or "contaminated factor VIII sourced from commercial donors". There were many suggestions but as space was a determining factor we had to keep this concise. For those of us that know it is obvious. For those that do not know our story and what happened to us then maybe the words will encourage them to ask some questions.

As the plaque had been in place for over a year with the same words it was decided to keep the same words for the stone. We appreciate that people may have wanted different wording to be more appropriate to their personal circumstances or feelings. For instance some of these people may have had Von Willebrands, not Haemophilia, but the wood does not exclude them. We hope there is an understanding that it wasn't easy choosing the words to please everybody and we hope that we have been considerate and meaningful for the vast majority of people that this wood represents.

Who funded the stone and when was it put in place?

The stone and its installation was funded by individual sponsors after a Birchgrove fundraising initiative in 2003. One of Birchgrove's readers Stuart, completed a sponsored cycle ride from Lands End to John O'Groats in June 2003. Stuart was accompanied by his two companions Skip and Doc, and was supported on the ride by various support drivers and people who offered overnight accommodation and food. After a lot of preparation and training the cyclists eventually covered 993 miles in 102 hours of cycling over

a total of 15 days.

After the ride Stuart said "I'm proud to have done the ride to raise money for the Birchgrove Woodland - and I'd do it all again if I had to. To see the stone in place at the woodland will always make me think of my ride.

I hope the Woodland remains a special place, something that means so many things to so many people, that it might be somewhere for our community to be proud of who we are by what has happened to our community.

Somewhere that people can sit and think quietly about the more important things in life - the family, friends and individual's involved over the last twenty years. A symbol, not merely of the pain and heartbreak of all involved, but of enduring friendship, love and respect...in the past, in the present and into the future."

The stone was finally installed in the woodland in September 2003. During the installation considerable media interest was shown by local Wiltshire TV, Press and Radio, which was facilitated by the Woodland Trust's press officer.

Opening Day

At 1pm on Sunday 23rd May 2004 Birchgrove will be having an official unveiling of the stone, giving people an opportunity to visit the wood and to share the experience with others and mark the occasion.

Please contact Birchgrove for further information.