

# WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

A former Royal Marine Commando is using his skills to lead fascinating walks in the wild woods of Hertfordshire.

Richard Burton pulled on his boots to join him

The last time anyone of military rank led me on a hike, it briefly involved a siren, distant smoke and the narrow alleyways of a Middle Eastern settlement. Today, the only sounds I'm hearing are those of a song thrush, an idling brook and the occasional snapping of a birch twig.

This assignment is, thankfully, much closer to home and I'm in the considerably safer surroundings of Northaw Great Wood with former Royal Marine Commando Ian Finch. The only defensive lines on his mind are those of the pollarded hornbeams that flank Cuffley Camp.

'If you look that way,' he's telling me, 'you can see a long line of them. That's not unusual. They were often grown as natural hardwood boundaries.' He goes on to tell me how the logs on which we are standing would typically be used for anything from piano keys and cobblers' shoe stands and, at one time, Roman chariots.

How can you recognise it's hornbeam? He draws back his sleeve and shows the veins in his forearm, similar to the vertical markings in the pale grey bark of these deciduous broad leaves, known for being gnarled, twisted and – like his old brigade – hard as nails.

So here we are, enveloped, despite being just north of Potters Bar and the M25, by 540 acres of often dense forestry. We're following bracken pathways through an area whose history is as rich as its flora and fauna, parts of which were once the playgrounds of Norman barons and used to,

variously, provide timber to fuel local hearths and satisfy the desires of those with a wont to hunt deer and wild boar.

My guide, while aged 42, is no longer in the fatigues of 42 Commando but nonetheless suitably clad in the Zelensky green that trademarks the woodland walks and camping expeditions with which he now makes his living.

His new company, Walk Wild, takes small groups on such rambles half a dozen times a month, as well as monthly camping trips in some of Hertfordshire and Essex's most verdant countryside; each trip with a strong educational emphasis. Northaw Great Wood, a Site of Special Scientific Interest since 1953, is one he knows well – very well, in fact, as someone who grew up and lives in Potters Bar. But there are many others, such as the 10-mile route among the historic beeches of Epping Forest, where he will dig deep on subjects such as how trees can help us navigate, which plants can help us find water and which species are used by native people the world over.

Or there's a bracing 16-mile circular trek from Berkhamsted to Ivinghoe Beacon, taking in some of the Chiltern's most beautiful and diverse landscapes, such as the ancient and beech woodlands of Ashridge and the dense pine forests and high farmland on the way to the Ashridge Estate.

Back at Northaw, he takes a break from explaining the logic behind the pruning, pollarding and coppicing of large areas of birch, oak, ash and sycamore, and pauses to take in a holly tree. 'Now, ▶



The ancient woodlands of Ashridge Estate, one of several places to be explored with Ian



these are super-intelligent,' he says, explaining how a tree will re-form itself to adapt to new surroundings, such as the emergence of a bridle or pathway, so as to avoid getting knocked about.

Hollies are known for their heterophylly, an ability to alter, for example, their leaf morphology in response to environmental changes. But I never knew how that manifested itself until he pointed it out. Nor did I fully appreciate the way individual tree species help the efficiency of the forest by 'feeding off each other', their symbiotic relationship with fungus and how important man-made intervention is, given 'the lack of natural forest fires'.

As we pass the edge of Cuffley Camp, he recalls his first camping trip there as a child – a rather terrifying one given that he was huddled in a small bell tent during a thunderstorm.

Luckily that didn't deter a love of the outdoors. Long before he joined the marines and trained in Arctic and mountain warfare, he and a pal at Chancellor's School in Brookmans Park would wander off into the woods to build campfires and construct makeshift shelters for the night.

He credits the military with developing his confidence, along with key skills such as 'planning, communication and leadership' – not to mention the sort of map-reading expertise that 'has got me out of a tight spot more than once'. So, it was natural that later, when working as a fitness instructor, he decided to put those skills to good use.

During our walk, I calculate we've seen a dozen people. 'That's a lot,' he says. 'And only because it's a bank holiday. Normally, we'd see four or five in the entire trip. One of the reasons is it's very much a local wood. Most of those who come here live within a few miles.'

So, what sort of people join him on his expeditions? 'All sorts. I'd say it's about 60-40 in favour of women, although there isn't a typical client. I do get quite a few repeat visitors who like to get out and about every few weeks.'

They include parents with young children, fitness types and retirees who have enjoyed everything from the glorious dappling sun to snow that once tipped the temperature scale to -8 degrees. So, is learning about the woods and wildlife the draw – or merely a chance for some peace and quiet?

'It's obvious that people really do want to increase their awareness,' he says. 'And they do show genuine interest, which is pretty impressive. And they bring a lot of knowledge too, which probably has something to do with the access to information we have these days.'

*'How can you tell it's hornbeam? He draws back his sleeve and shows the veins in his forearm'*



Tracking animals, all part of a day out in the woods

'I like to think we're just sowing the seeds of people's love of nature and giving them the tools to enjoy it. That, and teaching them nature is not a scary place. I like to include a mindful 15 minutes in a walk just to reflect and hear the birdsong.'

Great Northaw Wood itself is an interesting case study, combining the welcome spaces of a country park, while maintaining the protection of a nature reserve. Some of that protection falls to local volunteers who help with such things as managing vegetation, controlling invasive species like rhododendron, which if unchecked – like the wood itself – would run wild.

None of this surprises Al Maceachern, chairman of the Herts Stag Walkers group, when I ask his take on what Herts has to offer those looking for wilder places. He points out that woodlands of the Chiltern Hills and the chalk streams and heathland 'where the likes of the rare pasqueflower can be found' make Hertfordshire an ideal rambling county. All in all, he said: 'Hertfordshire has an excellent rights of way network to enable walkers to get out into the countryside, and there is a great variety of landscapes to explore.'

All well and good but I can't help ponder whether, for someone like Ian who has travelled relentlessly, once retracing the footsteps of the Cherokee homeland exodus and paddling hundreds of miles along the Yukon in Canada, that a stroll through a Home Counties wood may lose its appeal?

'That's the thing, it doesn't. It changes all the time. In a while, we'll see the bluebells and the ferns up to seven feet high. Those who come back regularly see those changes and that keeps them coming back. And me.'

'It's like a sanctuary; somewhere to come and generate ideas and think. Seriously, how can you not feel relaxed in a place like this?' ♦

**For more on Ian Finch's walks, trips and workshops, go to [walkwild.co.uk](http://walkwild.co.uk)**