

# Chair apparent

Christopher Stocks talks to **Pam Warhurst**, the dynamic and outspoken chair of the Forestry Commission, about what makes her tick and why she believes that trees have such an important role to play in all our futures

**T**hat Pam Warhurst has one of the most challenging jobs in public service can hardly be denied, but her appointment, last year, as chair of the Forestry Commission seems (thus far) to have left her undaunted and unbowed. While the storm about cuts, funding and the whole future of public forestry in Britain raged around her, she talked to *Tree News* about her beliefs and her passion for getting things done.

Appointed a CBE in 2005 for services to the environment, Pam is in many ways a very public figure, but her background is anything but conventional. A plain-speaking, Labour-voting northerner, she began her career in manufacturing. 'I'm an economist by training,' she explains, 'econometrician if we're counting, and spent my early career working for a textile company before I ran consumer advice centres and then decided to go into retailing.' In the late 1980s she helped set up the Bear health-food shop and vegetarian café in Todmorden, West Yorkshire, a co-operative which is still going strong.

Pam says, 'I guess it was [thanks to the café] that I found my passion for food – and particularly local food.' It also nudged her life in the wider direction of public service, directly or indirectly. 'Things just seem to happen to me,' she says, 'but after campaigning for local services to be improved in my area I was asked if I would stand for my local council. I won the seat and that launched my career in public life.' Most of us would probably have been content to serve a term or two as a local councillor, but by 1995 Pam had become leader of Calderdale Council, which employs thousands of people and covers an area of 140 square miles, including Todmorden, Halifax and Hebden Bridge.

It's an area she loves, and one she's in no hurry to leave. As she's said before, 'The Pennine countryside is for me a very special place. I came here from a red-brick Lancashire cotton town 30 years ago and instantly fell in love with its complex charm. The weavers' cottages, pack horse trails, mills and market towns, heather moorland and dramatic hillsides shout out to me their history. Man meeting nature and putting his stamp on what he saw.'

This response to, and sensitivity to the natural world seems to be the thread that connects the various strands of Pam's life and career together, though she sees it more like a stick of rock – like a latter-day Mary Tudor, she says that 'Environment is probably written on my heart like Calais!'

She's clearly passionate about the subject too. 'Ever since the Earth Summit in Rio in the early 1990s I have worked to get more people to buy in to the importance of taking care of our natural life-support system, this planet we all share.' Fine words, but Pam is keen to stress that, really, 'I'm not one to talk about things. I believe we should all act to make things better, and in my own way I have been doing just that ever since. I guess it's just a frame of mind, but I have never understood why people pass the buck so much in their lives. We are all capable of doing magnificent things if only we have the opportunity and believe in ourselves.'

While she was at Calderdale she formed a joint committee between the council and the Health Service, a connection that she was able to expand on when, in 1999, she was appointed chair of the Calderdale NHS Trust. That same year she became deputy chair of the Countryside Agency, becoming a board member when it was renamed Natural England in 2006. Pam was the lead non-executive board member working on the Countryside & Rights of Way Bill, passed in 2000. While it might not have gone as far as some people hoped, it still arguably gave walkers more rights to roam than they have enjoyed since the early eighteenth century.

Given her career to date, she obviously believes in changing organisations from within, but that doesn't stop Pam being, as she's happy to admit, 'incredibly critical of the way so many of our public services and private-sector companies just keep on with their business-as-usual approach, as if money or any other part of our infrastructure matters a toss if it means our children can't lead happy, healthy lives. And I do believe it's as critical as that. Let's stop passing the buck and get on putting our environment centre stage.'

Again, this might sound like the sort of thing that politicians say all the time, but what gives Pam real authority is the fact that she doesn't just talk the

**Forestry Commission  
chair Pam Warhurst**



## GETTING TO KNOW YOU



talk, for she continues to roll up her sleeves and muck in with real-life, practical projects on the ground. She still lives in Todmorden, and in 2008 she got together with her friend Mary Clear, the town's community development officer, and founded Incredible Edible Todmorden, a community-run organisation that began by encouraging local people to grow their own fruit and veg and buy local produce.

Pam had just attended a Landscape Institute conference in which delegates had been challenged to grow their own food and start taking the environment more seriously. On the train back to Todmorden, as she tells it, she was struck by the thought that, 'Well, I may not be the Prime Minister or Bill Gates, but I can put my shoulder to the wheel and see just what we can do for ourselves to make our town more resilient and our children stronger and better prepared for what's coming.'

From modest beginnings – a few fruit trees and a herb garden by the health centre – Incredible Edible Todmorden quickly became such a success that other towns started to follow its example. Pam reels off some of their achievements so far...

'We have town-centre propaganda gardens that show people just what can grow, we have received lottery money to build an aquaponics unit at our local high school to feed fish to the children at meal times, we have started a bee group, we have increased the profile and income of local food businesses and we are going to create an edible green route that takes in the canal bank and the main streets to make our town look better and teach us the art of the possible in a really fun way.'

But perhaps her biggest challenge was yet to come. In January 2010 Pam was appointed chair of

the Forestry Commission, the first woman to lead the organisation in its 92-year history. For Pam it was a natural step, and one that she sees, quite characteristically, as linking local issues with global ones. Comparing the work of the Forestry Commission with a small community organisation may sound like a bit of a stretch, but Pam clearly disagrees. 'Trees are just like food,' she says. 'They are an easy door to take to get involved in the environment and the big issues around climate change. We need to get millions more people switched on to why trees matter. Caring about their local woods and forests, getting real fun out of them, and through that engagement, understanding that we are not the only species that counts. Without the rest we are lost.'

With the Forestry Commission experiencing perhaps the most turbulent period since it was founded, Pam Warhurst's job may not be one many of us would envy right at this moment. But her home town and the countryside around it, as so often, continue to give her a compass to steer from. 'There's nothing beats having a good chat with the dog, Mollie, as we stride along,' she says. 'And tonight as I walked through our local park, which is surrounded by woods, all I could hear was the force of the wind through the trees and the cries of the birds that fill the world. There's nothing to touch it for putting things in perspective.'

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**Pam Warhurst with children from a forest kindergarten group**