

Volunteering with the Friends of Westonbirt Arboretum



Over 350,000 people a year visit the National Arboretum at Westonbirt to see the unique collection of over 15,500 rare trees - individually tagged, mapped and cared for. The site is also an internationally renowned centre for tree expertise. The Forestry Commission has worked with the Friends of Westonbirt Arboretum (FOWA) to fully integrate volunteering into site management, to develop a sense of ownership by local people and supporters of the site, and to deliver a high quality experience for visitors.

objectives

- To integrate volunteers into the working and management of the site to ensure Westonbirt maintains its international reputation for excellence.
- To support maintenance of the tree collection and landscape.
- To support visitor needs, for information, tours and events.
- To support the administration of the site.
- To support the work of education staff and the learning opportunities offered to schools and visitors.

actions

FOWA volunteer activities include:

- Administration: office assistance, checking tree labels and verifying mapping.
- Education: 28 volunteers are involved in the Arboretum's education programme.
- Guided walks: 20 guides lead walks and special tours throughout the year.
- Coach hosting: meeting and greeting coach parties and providing site information.
- Information desk: manned exclusively by volunteers almost every day of the year.
- Special events: assistance at concerts and events including the Festival of the Tree and Enchanted Christmas.
- Strolling: volunteers walk in pairs offering on-the-spot information and help to visitors along the 17 miles of trails.
- Working parties: hands-on practical tasks including hedge laying, planting, weeding, coppicing, mulching and restoration of the 'Ha-ha'.
- Fundraising: an active team to support the Arboretum's needs, projects include the Great Oak Hall - a green oak building comprising an information desk, auditorium, FOWA office and exhibition space.

achievements

Volunteering is mutually beneficial for volunteers and Westonbirt:

- Career change/development: helping individuals gain practical experience/training.
- Valuing skills and experience: volunteers are doing something worthwhile combining their skills and experience with their interest in the tree collection.
- Making new friends with similar interests: many volunteers have established long-standing friendships with like-minded people.
- Volunteers are highly valued and feel a sense of fulfilment. An annual 'Thank you celebration' is held in appreciation of their hard work and achievements.
- The Forestry Commission has the advantage of an impeccably maintained site; enhanced visitor experience with volunteers providing a friendly and welcoming presence through their information services; more than 3,000 participants joining over 150 guided walks; and 6,000 adults and children enjoying a host of family events organised by the Education Centre.

background

According to the National Survey of Volunteering (1997) just under half the UK adult population are volunteers. Sports, education, religion, health and social welfare are the most common fields of volunteering, with fundraising, events organisation and committee work being amongst the most common activities. People offer their time and services, unpaid, for a number of reasons - altruism, improving self-confidence, meeting new friends, skills development, improved career prospects and health. Volunteers work an average of four hours per week, totalling 85 billion hours per year.

Westonbirt, the National Arboretum is renowned worldwide for its tree and shrub collection. Near Tetbury in Gloucestershire, the National Arboretum attracts 350,000 visitors a year to enjoy 600 acres of beautifully landscaped grounds, containing some of Britain's rarest, oldest and tallest trees. Established in 1829 by Robert Holford, the Arboretum is listed on the English Heritage Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historical Interest as a Grade 1 Listed Landscape, and is home to the National Japanese Maple Collection.

Established in 1985 the Friends of Westonbirt Arboretum has more than 20,000 members, with 287 volunteers actively participating on site. Friends interested in volunteering at the Arboretum meet Cheryl Pearson, Volunteer Co-ordinator for an initial chat to discuss the kind of activities they would like to participate in, but more importantly to ensure that their involvement fits in with their lifestyle. A formal induction follows, where new volunteers are briefed on all aspects of volunteering at Westonbirt. Regular meetings and continuation training give volunteers the opportunity to deepen their knowledge, meet new friends, participate in field trips, and feel a sense of belonging. The opening of the Great Oak Hall in November 2000 gave FOWA a 'home' and an identity, by being a more visible presence on site. Volunteer information assistants were able to personally inform the public of the benefits of membership and raise awareness of volunteering opportunities, resulting in the growth of membership and increase in volunteers.

quotes

"The pleasure of working in the woodland, hearing the bird song and seeing the various colours as the seasons change is a joy and a privilege."

Working Party Volunteer.

"The beauty of being a volunteer is that you can keep the administration to a minimum and the pleasure to a maximum. I don't volunteer because I need my time filled: I do it because I enjoy it – and Westonbirt's a really uplifting place to be."

John Todd, Guides Joint Team Leader.

"Without the volunteers, some of the important plant maintenance work like weeding, pruning and scrub clearance wouldn't get done, and the quality of the Arboretum's landscape would suffer as a result." Simon Toomer, Curator

lessons learnt

- Open channel of communication: volunteers have the opportunity to voice their opinions through feedback sessions, offering good ideas through their involvement in different areas at the Arboretum.
- Ensure their contribution is equally valued.
- Put structure and procedures in place as this builds confidence. An induction gives clear guidance on what is expected as representatives of Westonbirt.
- Volunteers feel valued by the FC. A dedicated member of staff acts as a 'link' liaising closely with volunteers in training and activities.