

Bedgebury National Pinetum and Forest

An adventure for all in a world of trees!



Bedgebury National Pinetum and Forest is set in 815 hectares of ancient woodland on the border of Kent and Sussex and is a popular visitor attraction and tourism destination in the South East. A £2.1 million investment to provide a visitor hub, exciting play areas, a learning centre, and new routes through the forest, has seen the transformation of Bedgebury from a forest focused on timber production, into an award-winning centre for outdoor recreation. The result is an increase in visitor numbers that has exceeded all expectations.

objectives

- To enable greater access to Bedgebury for visitors of all ages and abilities, especially children and the disabled.
- To develop potential for lifelong learning through schools and educational outreach.
- To stimulate new interest in outdoor activities throughout the year by delivering high-quality facilities and services, delivered in partnership with businesses and community groups.
- To help strengthen the local economy by attracting visitors to the area, and offering related business opportunities such as a café and bike hire centre.
- To make Bedgebury financially self-sustaining, safeguarding its long-term future.

actions

- **All ability trails:** Network of paths and dedicated walking routes.
- **Cycling:** Safe off-road family trails, singletrack mountain biking for enthusiasts, a dedicated free ride skills area, cycle hire, bike wash, and adapted cycles for people with disabilities. Bedgebury Forest Cycle Club has grown from a small group of enthusiasts to a popular club that manages the tracks and provides coaching. Bedgebury also offers cycle skills training.
- **Play:** Plant-hunters play trail - a kilometre long selection of activities ranging from a play village to a dramatic shipwreck, with natural play evolving around the formal facilities.
- **Horse riding:** Mapped and waymarked horse riding routes linked to existing bridleways, and a secure box park and picnic area for riders with Toll Rides Off-road Trust (TROT) membership.
- **Visitor hub:** Information centre, 'Friends' room, café, showers and toilets, fully equipped education and community room – all heated by woodfuel from the forest.
- **Commercial enterprise:** Bike shop, with cycle hire (including adapted cycles and motorised Trampler for those with limited mobility); 'Go-Ape' aerial assault course.
- **Activities and Outreach:** Co-ordinated taster sessions, education, training, and outreach programme of skills development, especially for disadvantaged groups.

achievements

- Increased visitor numbers from 40,000 to 270,000 each year and growing, exceeding Sport England's three-year target in less than two years.
- 55% of visitors come to Bedgebury more than once a month.
- Created largest space for outdoor recreation for people with disabilities in South East England.
- Successful Concessions Scheme (over 13,000 visits in 2007).
- Key tourism destination - won the Tourism South East Sports Tourism Award 2007. Voted best picnic site in the South 2007 (Warburtons Bread).
- Individual education visits up 50%.

background

Bedgebury National Pinetum and Forest is easily reached from London – it is situated on the Kent/Sussex border with a population of 11.8 million living within 35 miles. At 815ha Bedgebury is one of the largest forests in the South East and one of the biggest Ancient Woodlands in Kent. Home to the National Pinetum – the largest collection of conifers on one site in the world. Established in 1925, the internationally important National Pinetum houses more than 10,000 specimens from five continents. Visitors come to view the scientifically important tree collection, and experience the tranquillity of a peaceful and breathtaking landscape. An active Friends group, with 3,000 members, supports the work of the National Pinetum.

With its vast forest and cultivated landscape, Bedgebury was an ideal location for recreation and sports facilities to meet Government targets to improve the health of the public. With only 65% of adults in Kent participating in sport or recreation once a month (compared with a UK-wide figure of 75%), an innovative approach to sporting activities was needed.

'Green exercise has important public and environmental health consequences... Obesity already costs more in public health terms and will overtake smoking as Britain's biggest killer in 10-15 years time if current trends persist.'
Essex University, Environment and Society study, April 2003

Recognising the opportunity to provide a central hub for outdoor activity, Sport England - through the Active England programme - supported the Bedgebury. Capitalising on Heritage Lottery Fund investment Sport England funded the new visitor facilities, a path network, play furniture and staff to deliver an activities and outreach programme that would benefit people of all ages and abilities.

quotes

Visitor comments:

'I am a paraplegic, totally wheelchair bound, with a young family. We all love the Pinetum and the access here is second to none.'

'I can see why you won an award. Usually most children's activities are so expensive, but this is outstanding value for money and I have recommended it to everyone I know. We will definitely come back!'

'I was so incredibly grateful to be able to hire the Trampler and to once again enjoy the beauty, peace and tranquillity of this wonderful place.'

Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance Scheme (VAQAS)

'Bedgebury has developed into a very exciting venue for many active families yet also retains the tranquillity and beauty of the Pinetum.'

funding

Total Project: £2.1m

Forestry Commission

Big Lottery / Sport England

Friends of Bedgebury Pinetum

Interreg

Bernard Sunley Foundation

Garfield Weston Foundation

Dulverton Trust

Kent County Council

SEEDA

lessons learnt

- Early planning and consultation alleviates future conflicts.
- A flexible approach allows new activities to develop and the site to evolve to meet visitor needs.
- Never underestimate the popularity of a project, have contingency plans in place to deal with this and prepare front line staff for change.