

In this latest episode, we welcome two guests from the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire, Andy Ansell, Head of Estates and Mark Ellis, Head of Visitor Experience. They're here to talk with us about what makes it a special place to visit.

Next we hear from Annie Vickers, a member of Basingstoke Lions about the club's mascot, Lennie the Lion. She'll explain how mascots attract attention at events and how Lennie has become so popular that the club regularly receives requests for guest appearances from Lennie the Lion.

Be uplifted, be inspired.

This is Step Forward and Volunteer. A podcast from Lions Clubs British Isles.

Hello everyone and welcome to the Step Forward and Volunteer podcast brought to you by Lions Clubs British Isles. My name is Romily Broad. Thank you very much for tuning in. And as ever, Step Forward and Volunteer is a monthly podcast from the Lions, featuring stories, information and discussion about local community volunteering. Through conversations with inspirational guests, Step Forward and Volunteer celebrates the positive difference volunteering makes to communities across the British Isles and far beyond. In this episode, we welcome two guests from the National Memorial Arboretum and they'll give us some insight into what makes the arboretum such a special place to visit. After that, we'll hear from Annie Vickers, a member of Basingstoke Lions, about her alter ego, Lennie the lion.

But before we press on, a little reminder to help us get the word out about Step Forward and Volunteer. Let your family know, let your friends know, and of course, if you're a Lions member, make sure other members of your club know about the podcast too, it's very easy to find. You can listen in on the lions website at www.lionsclubs.co or you can search for

Step Forward and Volunteer on apps like Spotify, Podbean, Apple podcasts or Google podcasts or any number of other podcasting apps that you can get on your phone.

Now joining us from the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire, Andy Ansel, Head of Estates and Mark Ellis, Head of Visitor Experience. First of all, this might make me sound a bit silly, but could you tell us what an arboretum actually is Andy? Yeah, well, an arboretum is a bit of a botanical space, with particular emphasis on the trees. Okay, and the National Memorial Arboretum is a rather grand example of this, right? Well, it's an interesting, different differentiation on an arboretum. So your typical Arboretum, say at Westonbirt would major on its collections of trees, whereas we major on our collection of memorials. So we've got over 400 memorials on site. And we differ from other Arboretum's because we've a collection of trees with a collection of memorials. Right, and so 400 memorials, so that's a lot. What kind of memorials are they? Can you give us a flavour? Well, they differ greatly. So we've got memorials that remember people who have sacrificed in conflict, so military memorials. Memorials for people that have served in say voluntary organisations, such as the RNLI, and then civilian services memorials, so the police force, and then all the civilian services that have served the country during wartime. Right. And I think there might be something interesting planned in relation to the pandemic, is that correct? Yeah, at the moment, we've secured an area of around about 10 hectares, which we're looking to develop a new memorial woodland, which will be dedicated to lives lost in the pandemic. Wow, so I think it's been about 20 years that the National Memorial Arboretum has existed Mark. Can you tell us a bit more about how it all came about in the beginning? I can, the idea originally for the arboretum came from one of our founders, Commander David Childs, who was a Naval Commander. And it all started on a visit to Arlington Cemetery over in Washington, which obviously is a very special place for US serving personnel. And David just

felt that it was a shame there was nowhere in the UK that offered something similar. In his words, he was worried that we were forgetting how to remember. So he came back with a grand ambition to do something similar here in the UK, and then started a search for a piece of land where he felt that he could create an arboretum he wanted it to be nature based to start placing memorials and he searched the length and breadth of the country and ended up here on a disused quarry in the Midlands, that's all it was in Staffordshire. Where the land was gifted over by what's now Tarmac on a 999 year lease for one pound a year which they claim they'll never collect from us. Although I understand that most of our volunteers carry a pound in their pocket just in case the landlord comes knocking at any point, and from there, he started turning a disused quarry into a woodland, and started placing memorials. The first Memorial, which is a large wooden polar bear, still with us went in, in 1998. And from there the arboretum has grown, we officially opened to the public in 2001. So we're now in our just 21 years old this year. And yeah, from those very humble beginnings, and I mean, literally backbreaking work by the initial group of volunteers working with David, we've grown something of national significance, which means a lot to the hundreds of 1000s of people that visit us each year.

So, Andy, what kind of trees are there? And obviously, it's a year round attraction for, as Mark says, hundreds of 1000s of people. What do you do with those trees to make sure there's always something to see? Yeah, so well, we've got 20, just over 25,000 trees at the Arboretum in total, and around about 400 species and genus of species. So 400 different types of tree in total. And they range really from some very common native trees that you would see elsewhere in any woodland locally, like *Quercus Robur*, the oak and *Fraxinus Excelsior* the ash, through to some quite interesting trees like *Wellingtonia*, which is the sequoiadendron, the giant redwood. And then what we've done recently is added to these

trees, so there's about 25 different types of oak on site. So it's not a huge, interesting collection of native trees. But what we have done is added to it with a collection of Hamamelis, in the last two years. So we hope to have a national collection in the coming years. So we've added the collection of so far 74, Hamamelis, which is the common witch hazel. And they, they come from all sorts of regions in Asia and our own European regions. And what they do have is a beautiful autumn colour, and they flower in the winter. So you get a hue of yellow to orange to red flowers on the various varieties. So that gives us some interest in the winter now. And we've got a number of other spring flowering trees, such as Amelanchier on site and then other trees with autumn colour. So the Liquidambar, so yeah, so it's, it is an interesting place to visit for trees all year round.

Can you, can you give me a sense of just how much effort is required to keep all of that in good order. Yes we are quite a young arboretum but only been 20 years old. So actually, our biggest issue is establishment. So when we plant a new tree, particularly in these last two to three years of where we have seemed to have quite a lot of water, but all at once, and then long periods of dry spells. So for instance, this week, the guys have been focusing on watering. So I've got a team of eight staff who will look after the grounds and the trees, but they're supplemented by anything from two to three to ten volunteers every day. And as I say that pretty much everybody this week has been out watering trees to make sure we don't lose them until they're established. Right, and I suppose you need to contend with things like the heatwave that we're expecting over the next few days as well. Yeah, yeah. So the guys will be out watering next week as well, I suppose the grass probably won't be grown very much next week. So that's what that's what they'll be doing next week. But of course, you know, if you come and visit, it's great. 25,000 trees is a great place to get some shade. So it's a really nice place to visit in the sunshine too.

So, so we've been talking about volunteers. Mark, how important are volunteers to the operations. Volunteers are essential to our operations. I always describe them very much as the lifeblood of the organisation. We've got around 220 volunteers that work with us. And they work across all areas of our activity. So those trees that Andy was just talking about, they helped to plant and maintain those, they work out in the grounds, keeping them looking spectacular, throughout the year. We have some volunteers that help with some admin work for us. So anyone that joins our friend scheme, one of our volunteers, Bob is the person that processes that and sends out the information. We engage a lot with schools, and we have some learning volunteers that deliver some amazing content for schools when they visit and then we have volunteers across our retail, our food services. And then we have a lot of volunteers, obviously service volunteers, and they're the real storytellers and without telling stories about the memorials, we just you know, I always say we're just pieces of rock in a woodland. And it's when we interpret those stories and tell the stories behind them or about the service, sacrifice, the work that people did. That's when it really comes to life. And our volunteers are so engaging. You know, on any given day, there'll be volunteers taking businesses around on buggy tours. And they'll be strolling, the grounds chatting to people, they'll be offering guided walks and talks. And something we talk about a lot is the volunteer experience, and making sure that we give our volunteers a really good time when they're here. So we've all become experts on Hamermalice, that Andy has just mentioned, those witch hazel. And a lot of the volunteers working the grounds really enjoy that opportunity to learn about our horticultural work. And then our visitor volunteers, telling those stories, they do their own research, they really do like to find out about that. They'll listen to what a visitor tells them, learn from a visitor, and use that to help inform stories for others. And just last week, one of our active new volunteers, I was asking him, why he

decided to volunteer with us. And he said he had a great interest in 20th century history and particularly 20th century military history. And he said to me, Mark, coming to volunteer at the arboretum, it's like a free doctorate. I'm getting that level of education whilst giving something back and enjoying spending time with customers. So the volunteers, they just bring that energy, that enthusiasm, that knowledge with which yeah, as I say, the lifeblood of the organisation, we couldn't do without them. I mean, that's a story in itself really, isn't it? I mean, we've got this magical place that's exists to remember, but it's done in a very alive way by the sounds of it.

Actually, Andy, those stories are told through the memorials themselves. Can you give us a flavour of just the variety that we can see in the designs of these memorials? Yeah, absolutely. We've got a huge variety of memorials on site, the range from you know, small dedication plaques that remember an organisation through to our iconic armed forces memorial, which is a very crisp Portland stone memorial with the names of all of the servicemen and women that have lost their lives since the end of the Second World War. So we've got some really interesting steel memorial just recently, we've had 216 Squadron dedicated, which is a zinc, a steel, zinc plated eagle carrying an orb of water, which symbolizes what that squadron did in the transport of troops and supplies. And recently, the UK Police Memorial has been dedicated, which symbolizes the open door of a police station for the officers to return to when at the end of you know, a service or a shift. And that's made out of brass. So we've got brass, we've got all sorts of traditional stone memorials, granites and different colours. Yeah, absolutely huge range of memorials. You know, we encourage people to be as innovative and as artistic as they can that symbolizes something that the organisation that they're representing has sacrificed.

It sounds almost overwhelming in terms of the range of options you might have as a visitor, Mark. Let's say I turn up tomorrow, what can I expect? Well, first of all, you can expect a very warm welcome into a site that's inspiring and a very special place to be. We've won a few awards, very proud to win some awards for the way we look after visitors. So you know, if you want to grab a coffee or bite to eat, you'll be grabbing things that are locally sourced that are produced in house by chef in our shop, you'll find a range of local products. So it's all things you'd expect. And then when you go out into the grounds, there's a whole wealth of ways to interact with the site and to learn about the memorials. You might spend time with one of our volunteers, you might guide yourself around the Arboretum. And I think what most people come away with is a sense of joy. They find that the arboretum is very uplifting. As I say we're storytellers. And of course when we tell stories, so many of those stories are wrapped around happy memories. And even people that we've lost, we tell stories that have happy memories, our volunteers tell some brilliant stories about some of them from their own time, serving the armed forces on the police and brilliant stories, some of which may even be true, but some really, are fabulous stories about their own time in service and then some genuine really heart wrenching stories about the service and sacrifice, but also you get a chance to do a number of activities. We're just entering the summer holiday period at the time of recording and there's a lot of family engagement activities. So the children come and learn about the Queen's baton relay ties the Commonwealth Games as there's a sticker trail for that. We've got an Augmented Reality Exhibition, which again talks about countries around the Commonwealth. And then this summer we've got an arboretum games we're calling it which absolutely ties the links between sports and service and how sports can help people with life changing injuries, rehabilitate. And we're doing that through getting people to play table tennis, basketball,

volleyball, archery, there's an assault course all with our own arboretum trainers as well, to support and guide and encourage through those activities. So really, whatever you want from a visit, be it a picnic in a shaded glade through to a meal, a fun activity, a chance to pay respects to those that have served and sacrificed on our behalf. We can offer all of those in abundance.

It sounds incredible. And it's a brilliant time of year, I should think for putting this message out, please visit and maybe even get involved if you're relatively close. Now. Andy, can I ask? It's relatively young for an arboretum. But what does the future hold? What's the vision? What's the growth curve going to look like do you think? Yeah, so I mean, we dedicate around about eight to ten memorials per year at the moment on average. So there's plenty of space left to do that, we're looking horticulturally to be much more diverse, create a much more of an actual arboricultural arboretum as well as the memorial arboretum to complement it to make it more interesting for visitors at different times of the year, as we spoke about earlier. And then of course, there's the new land that we talked about. So creating a whole new section of woodland, to dedicate to the folks who have lost their lives in the pandemic. And we've got some other interesting strategic projects that are moving on in the background, also.

Brilliant. And so just to wrap things up, Mark, maybe you could tell us why people should on hearing this podcast visit over the next four weeks. Is there anything in particular that they should, should be aware of? Yeah, absolutely. There's every reason to visit in the next four weeks. Our overarching ambition is to be the UK centre of remembrance, a world class inspirational setting freely open to all, and so we'd love people to come along and see if they think that we're reaching that. There's those summer activities we've got, we've got

our Proms coming up in August. So there's always something happening on site. It's a beautiful, inspirational place to spend time. And we'd love to meet people, and particularly people that have an interest in volunteering elsewhere. We'd love to hear their experiences, people that really understand how volunteers drive an organisation and come along, chat to our volunteers, our volunteers always give us some really good feedback about their conversation with visitors. So as the opportunity for everyone that comes along, to actually be part of that conversation, and to help shape our future for what we hope is, you know, at the end of that 999 years, we're asking to extend the lease with our landlords, they can be part of that journey. Thank you very much guys for giving us an insight into the National Memorial Arboretum today, it's been fascinating to learn more, everybody should get there as soon as they can, and maybe we'll get you on the podcast again, in the near future, to find out how things are getting on. Thanks very much. Cheers, bye bye.

Thanks again to Andy and Mark. But now we switch from the magnificence of the National Memorial Arboretum to the magnificence of Basingstoke, Lions own Annie Vickers. Annie has perfected the art of attracting attention dressed as a Lion, so much so that the club regularly receives requests for guest appearances. I began by asking Annie when her relationship with club mascot, Lennie began.

Practically as long as I've been a Basingstoke Lion, because when I first went to their first meeting I just thought, why haven't we got one? And I just went off hunting to find one and I found Lennie. I think he cost me 65 quid. And yes, it's 2012, he's done well.

So just to confirm, Lennie, was something you found and it's still in use to this day because we're talking you know, ten, ten years, maybe even more. Still in my loft. Wow. Have you maintained and looked after Lennie yourself all that time. He's fed twice a day. Now he gets

washed in the laundry, the head and if you've seen the pictures of it, if you looked at what I've sent and those around. You need to just sponge the inside of the face. I use an airbrush and hand soap, the feet I don't put in the washing machine because of the plasticky bit of the sole. But they do get worn. So yeah, it's a lot of gaffer tape keeping that together. And also where the fur meets the sole, you just take a nail brush and give that a scrub. But no, he looks, he looks brilliant. I mean, he's as fresh as a daisy every time, lenor or comfort or others are available. And the head, is you just have got to be careful with the head because of the mechanism that we have inside to basically help you breathe.

Which is an advantage, presumably. That's quite important really. That would be a real downer on the event you're at, wouldn't it? I mean, how often would Lennie get to escape the loft and go and entertain the crowds? Well, it depends on the events that are coming up. And we have something we do quite a lot in the Summer, which is called the Lion's Den, which is basically kids putting golf balls into holes. If they've got enough helpers for that then Lennie will tip up for that. Christmas, always the tin shakes, so long as the weather is appropriate, or can be inside. World Sight day, which is something that I started in 2012, because my professional life was always involved with that. So he's out that day and persuading people to bring in their spectacles.

Whatever, the 50th anniversary of the club, I was fortunate to be elected, I think fortunate I'm not sure, their first female president and I just dragged him off to anything I could find, I'd scour the papers to find an event, usually a charity do of some sort in the Summer, and then pop him off to that. Then it's got to the point now with the other day, we had one where they said, please can we particularly have Lennie?

So this is, its President Lennie. (lots of laughter) Nobody knew, but I suppose so.

Yeah, it's just nice to bow and scrape literally, you know, even say hello, and bow and high five with the kids. So lots and lots of fetes. The National Trust during the beginning of lockdown, or June, let's say, when nobody could do anything. Again, I was looking for stuff and wasn't President, I just always look for stuff. And they were having their 125th Anniversary. So I said well, let's say happy anniversary, happy birthday. So we sorted out the sort of tea zoom thing. And in my dining room really and Lenny was at the dining table waving to people to say happy anniversary. When Homebase wanted to do they were letting out the front space of the outside of their shop to do a sausage sizzle barbecue. So Lennie tipped up at that. We've had before, and we're going to do again, an awareness. I've done several awareness days, but this particular one three years ago, I'm repeating in July, particularly on a school holiday Saturday. I mean during the school holidays Saturday.

So we will have a second class, second-hand book sale, which brings in the parents and we've also got kids books. So you know, while they're looking at the books, we've got the kids, I mean, it is actually fine. I'm smiling and grinning while I'm talking to you about this, but they can't see your smiling underneath the head. But you get so much more out of it yourself, than just standing with a bucket. Because the kids and you really only want the little ones, as they get a bit bigger and they want to pull your tail. I can see your hair behind that. But the little ones they love to dance, if you've got your Christmas music on, 'Do They Know It's Christmas?' I have a blast.

What advice would you give to anyone else that was thinking of taking up a similar role.

There's advice and there's needs. When you think how much language is body language as opposed to verbal language. So it's really important to be moving, to be waving, to be dancing, to be wiggling, to be, I mean with the head, you can make yourself look, you know,

I clap when people give you money, you give them a little clap and or thumbs up, or thank you. High fives are really good. Or if a kid is scared, you're down on one level, the lower level rather and looking less threatening. And you can do, I mean I'm always doing this if I'm a bit, you can't see this but what else can you, you know if the kid looks right and then I'm oh Lennie's shy. By the hand with the paws. And then the mum says oh look Lennie's upset too, you know, and then kind of do a peep po thing and whatever. I mean, things to do enjoy it. Move, enjoy it and there's lots of bits and bobs that you should and shouldn't do really as well.

Nobody listening to this will have seen the range of interesting performance arts you've just done for me. But I have a perfect idea now of how you can go about expressing yourself without words as Lennie. Do you have in your background, any performing arts pedigree? I'm beginning to think that maybe, maybe there is. Pedigree is a bit strong, there's history, yeah, history, I suppose. I mean, yeah, I've done stuff through the years. But I think as you get older, dear listener, you get more confident about it, or whatever. Yeah, back to school days, I did stuff, growing up living in Devon where I lived for a while I did stuff and here I belong to some people will know of it, Rock Choir, I've been in it since it began in Basingstoke, which is 14 years. I'm personally part of a group of ladies and one man who go around care homes and residential care homes. And although you're singing songs to an age group, which just love to hear them and get back in again. I find I'm automatically kind of working with the crowd. But yeah, so you know, Lennie himself has become, my neighbours know. When I do a book sale, I actually invited all the neighbours in first, I had my sitting room set up like a library practically, and there was 30 quid in the bucket before it went to the event. And it goes to the event at seven o'clock in the morning, because it's a lot to set up. And it's heavy duty stuff. And it's a long day. And then, you know, you've always got the

problem of who is physically able to cope with that, and volunteer to help. But then the neighbours will go, Lennie's out again.

I mean, talking of help, you know, I'm getting the impression that it's a bit of a labour of love. How especially I suppose if you're talking to other lions, who might be interested in, in jumping in a mascot suit, how important is you know, support and help from other lions gonna be. How important is it to you? Hugely, hugely, my broken phone, there weren't enough of us there to do the photographs, my phone, but you know the story. So no, let's, let's take the listeners behind the scenes. So before we had a chat today, we were talking about how we were struggling to get your phone to work for our purposes today. And that's because your previous phone had, had an accident? And you said yes, it fell out of my paw, which made me pause, because most people wouldn't say that. And then I realised, right, this is part of being Lennie. I mean, how difficult is it and what do you have to be aware of? However, it is your breathing mechanism, whatever that is and how that's going to work. So normally it would be lungs. Well, indeed. But for a couple of hours, which is the length of the shift and with a head on like that and sometimes in 30 degrees and even hotter than 30 degrees.

I benefit from having a partner who's an ex anaesthetist and a bit of a Mr Fix It, and he used a computer fan and a pack of eight batteries, which are attached to a belt around my waist, the batteries. A cord goes up from that to inside the head to behind my eyes, where there's a small computer fan. A button operating it goes down my arm into my paw. On the very hot days, if needs be, I wear a camelback water carrier between my back and the costume, with a pipe that goes down the other arm, that I can slide up via the paw, up and under the head, and get some water and if I have to. The paw issue, it has just always been in

character, which it really is important actually. I mean, I never turn up, you know, my head, as soon as we come into the carpark I put the head on. The person who does it has to be fit, and well, and I think energetic.

Never change in front of somebody keep the illusion going. Think about, if you're having a photograph taken with the children, get them to give you written permission, it's very important that you are down on the level of the little ones. You know, because that's making it easy to relate. And, you know, you've got to think about whether somebody needs breaks and how long. Other people may not be as energetic, or as whatever as you, but you do need support. You need other people within the club to take it on. And I'm very fortunate that we have two people who are a bit younger than me, and they work. So when they can, they will assist as well. Great.

And so that just about brings us to the end of our chat, but maybe you could tell us what's next, what's up and coming for Lennie, in terms of opportunities are? For anyone, the 30 July in the malls in Basingstoke with the face painter and to be honest, I've only ever called it a summer event but it's really kind of Lennie's library lair and he'll sit in his lair and he or she will play with the kids and take the bucket money.

Presumably after that you will be on holiday, jumping off the Spinnaker. Oh, okay, abseiling down the side of a hospital. No the next thing, actually the next thing after that will be World Sight day, because that's October. Right, so that'll be a, an important one. Great. Well look, thanks very much for giving us an insight into the world of Lennie the Lion in Basingstoke. There's a lot that goes into it. And I'm personally impressed with how much effort and energy has to go into it, and engineering it turns out, that was surprising, and hopefully some useful comments and tips for other people who might be willing to, to have

a go at that, if they're not already. You clearly get a lot out of it. And so hopefully others could too.

That brings us to the end of this month's episode of Step Forward and Volunteer. Thanks very much to Annie. And if you're in the Staffordshire neighbourhood this Summer do make sure to pay Andy and Mark a visit at the National Memorial Arboretum. Thanks again to them for lending us their time today. Don't forget, you can subscribe to the Step Forward and Volunteer podcast via Spotify, Podbean, Apple podcasts or Google podcasts and make sure you never miss an episode. And you can catch up with past podcasts via www.lionsclubs.co.

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Thank you very much for tuning in. We'll be back with a new episode this time next month. Until then, bye bye.