

Conkers Aerial Walkway

Location: Leicestershire, UK
Client: The National Forest Charitable Trust
Dates of involvement: 2006 - ongoing
Size: 400m (length)

Imagine the impact of planting 30 million trees in your neighbourhood.

The National Forest is an inspiring story of how nature can return to a post-industrial landscape.

Only 25 years ago, a huge area of the East Midlands was in a state of scarred trauma. Centuries of mining had taken its toll, and further economic decline ensued with the subsequent demise of heavy industry.

The vision of the National Forest was to turn the landscape 'from Black to Green' and to that end, planting began for the first large scale forest in England for over 1000 years.

In 2006, we started working with the National Forest on a masterplan for its 'heart', the area around the Conkers Centre in Leicestershire, including a visitor strategy to connect people with the evolving forest.

The masterplan contained many features including an aerial walkway that would transport visitors over a functioning, but rarely used, railway line from one end of the park to the other.

Working with structural engineers, Arup, we devised a 'ribbon' structure that weaves visitors through the treetops, soaring above the railway line, and arriving at a lakeside outdoor amphitheatre. At 400 meters it will be the UK's longest treetop walkway. Rising gently up it is designed to be accessible for all; from pushchairs to mobility scooters.

An important aspiration for the walkway is to support school children visiting the forest. At several points along the walkway are treehouses or 'eyries'.

The eyries are designed to be adaptable, functioning as covered viewing platforms as well as event and educational spaces. Big enough to accommodate over 40 children, the eyries will demonstrate the versatility of timber to create playfully crafted curved enclosures.

We have developed the design using our in-house virtual reality technology. By exploring the journey in a cinematic way, we have been able to fine-tune the structure to create a compelling experience, and, more critically, explain the proposals with real clarity to the National Forest and all stakeholders.



Above: Views from the Heart of the Forest Masterplan
Below: Illustration of the Conkers Aerial Walkway



Conkers Aerial Walkway





Above: Heart of the Forest Masterplan

Our masterplan considers the variety of people and ages who will use the forest park and responds with a variety of places within it; some scenic and tranquil, others active and playful. It enhances existing routes and provides new ones for a variety of modes of transport.

As well as the Conkers Aerial Walkway (1), other landmarks include the Conkers Tower (2) providing views over the forest park, the Water Sports Centre (3) on the lake and the Creative Forest Experience building (4) as a unique rural woodland and forest craft attraction where visitors will be inspired to take part and share skills from around the world.