

Your members views required on a new project

Dear Kirsty,

I'm writing to you on behalf of the Thomas Hardy Society to request your members' views about a project at Thorncombe Woods called **Rites of Way with Mr Hardy** which is being developed during the course of next year.

Rites of Way is a community development project to create an audio journey through ancient woodland around Thomas Hardy's birthplace near Dorchester. It will bring underrepresented groups to the woods, create a sense of ownership of the place, enhance wellbeing and bring a new audience to the work of Thomas Hardy.

Participants will include 15 learning disabled young people, music graduates, visual arts graduates, wildlife volunteers with mental health issues, volunteers from the Thomas Hardy Society (THS), National Trust, and members of the New Hardy Players.

Community arts group ScreenPLAY will deliver the project, bringing all the elements together to create an app for smartphones and tablets, enabling visitors to listen on their headphones as they are guided through the woods with stories of the trees, Hardy's characters and his own recollections - all voiced by actors.

By working with artists and therapists in a nurturing green environment, the participatory groups: sixth form students with learning disabilities and adults with mental health issues will gain a sense of purpose, confidence and self-esteem by being part of the project.

Rites of Way will enhance the Thorncombe Woods and Hardy's Cottage visitor experience, bringing new groups of both young and older people into the landscape to explore Hardy's Wessex, creating a sense of connectedness with the environment and enhanced well being. Those unable to visit will be able to enjoy the stories of the woods by using the app in armchair mode.

It will be promoted by the Thomas Hardy Society, National Trust and Dorset Council with a permanent display and free postcards at both the Visitor Centre and TIC, and will continue to be available as a digital download.

It is being funded by the Lottery's Heritage Fund and Dorset Council's Leisure Development Fund, and we would appreciate your views on the project which we will pass on to the Council's Leisure Services Manager.

regards - - Alastair Nisbet

