

Kalsa Wood

**Khalsa Wood,
Nottingham**

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Harbant Kaur Sehra, community development worker, was originally approached by Groundwork Nottingham in 1994 to work with children and young people in Asian communities, gathering and sowing seeds in a park. She went on to organise countryside access taster trips with the Hindu Muslim and Sikh communities.

Then in 1999, Harbant co-ordinated a very significant event:
13th April is the usual date of Vaisakhi, the Sikh festival that celebrates the founding of the Khalsa - the fellowship of baptised Sikhs. Khalsa was founded by Guru Boginda Singh in 1699, and so 1999 saw the celebration of the 300th anniversary or tercentenary of the birth of Khalsa. This was a big international festival, and many British Sikhs went to India to celebrate.

Yet, thanks to a very high profile campaign by Harbant, 600 people attended a special ceremony in Bestwood Country Park - the founding of Khalsa Wood.

People in the Sikh community are very motivated by faith. This includes a reverence for nature, a commitment to family and community life, and a tradition of 'sewa' (altruism and volunteering). Vaisakhi is a time for people to stand up for their beliefs. The Sikh community in Nottinghamshire were looking for an appropriate way to express these values and mark this important occasion. With this in mind it was decided to stage a grand tree-planting ceremony and plant 300 trees!

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As one young person has explained,
"I am a Sikh, I might be involved with other voluntary organisations but I want to know more about my own community, my own identity and I want to pass this on to my children."

volunteer from Sikh Community Youth Service (SCYS) quoted in My Time, My Community Myself: Experiences of Volunteering within the Black Community by Seema Bhasin, National Centre for Volunteering

Of course, trees are a wonderful symbol of sustainability. Children will remember the special day when this wood was established, and in the future they will reflect on the meaning of that occasion for their community. And in years, maybe centuries to come people will look back with pride at the contribution these families made to creating a beautiful green space and conserving the environment. What better way to express the enduring values of your culture than by cultivating a living monument to stand as a legacy for the future and a lasting testimony to your commitment and faith.

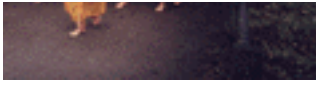
So the success of the event was due in large measure to the conviction of the community. As Harbant put it, "If we do something in name of religion, like voluntary work or giving to charity, we are very keen." On a practical note, Harbant was also able to contribute to the day's success by planning a high profile campaign.

The idea was to plant 300 trees, one for each year of the tercentenary of Khalsa. To do this, Harbant aimed to attract 300 people to plant one tree each. In order to make sure everyone in the community felt included and no-one left out, she sent leaflets to all the Gurdwaras, put details in the Punjabi press and advertised on Asian community radio. She was able to provide transport thanks to a grant from Green Connections.

To her delight, over 600 people arrived on the day, and in spite of terrible weather, they dug holes under umbrellas in the pouring rain! At first one tree was allocated to each family. This worked well, because it encouraged family members to work together, and gave them a sense of 'ownership' of the particular tree, and hence the Khalsa wood as a whole. As the first plantings were completed, people returned to help plant the remainder, so the entire day was a great communal effort.

And there was a grand vegetarian barbecue - in true Sikh tradition of the 'langar' where a meal is shared by all, regardless of social barriers.

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The trees chosen were oak saplings, which were transplanted from other parts of the park where they would not have fared so well. They were lifted and brought to their new site in advance by volunteers from the Sikh community with the help of park Rangers, Groundwork and Princes Trust volunteers.

Many people who have come to Britain from the Punjab share a common heritage of having been farmers by trade so they have skills and knowledge about growing plants, but they do not have so many opportunities to practice those skills over here. They may very well grow vegetables in a small garden, or perhaps keep an allotment, but this partnership with Bestwood Country Park provides access to land for planting trees, which would not otherwise be possible for most families.

Rather than mark each tree with a plaque linking it to the family who planted it - this might not be such a good idea, in case some of the trees were to die - the whole area has been dedicated with one large wood carving in the sign of Khanda - the symbol of Sikhism. This was filmed by Carlton TV and Harbant has a video of the occasion.

Many Sikh families are living in the city of Nottingham and surrounding towns and villages in the county. As well as providing a focus point for community celebrations, Khalsa Wood is also a place for family outings and quiet retreat.

Since the 300th Vaisakhi there have been annual gatherings. A further 200 saplings were planted in 2000. In 2001 foot and mouth disease precautions meant that 400 more young oaks had to remain in their pots to be planted on another occasion. More recently, at a tree-planting ceremony in February 2002, 100 fruit trees have

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been added, and it is hoped that, once mature, these will provide a good crop and help to generate some income to support the Ranger service.

It is no wonder, considering all this, that Khalsa Wood has received so much recognition from the mainstream environment sector, including:

Award from BT / WWF - environment in the community

Acorn Awards - trees of Time and Place 1999/2000 shortlisted (small acorn)

Harbant asked to go to London for DCMS' planning meeting on social inclusion policy

Nottingham Council have a clear vision of the importance of trees in the environment. You can read more about this on their website

http://www.nottinghamcity.gov.uk/coun/departments/leisure_com/trees/default.asp

People in the Sikh community understand this and they are also very aware of the part played by trees in preserving people's health and wellbeing. There is a strong concern to see that the trees are growing well, and to continue improvements to the Khalsa Wood, to make it a welcoming and safe place for the whole community. For although the Sikhs have been a central force in creating this new green space, Khalsa Wood is a resource for everyone, and it is open to the public at all times.

This sometimes means that Asian people may feel vulnerable - there has been a problem with vandalism, which police are trying to tackle. Harbant is concerned that this has led parents to feel less safe to allow their children to visit the wood on youth group outings. They have done other activities like horse riding instead, but it would be a pity if they did not choose to build on the emerging tradition of community activities in Khalsa Wood. Harbant remains optimistic.

Following the success last year of a Punjabi play, staged in November with lottery funding, there are plans this Easter to perform poetry about Khalsa Wood. A brilliant writer came before and gave poetry workshops to the young people, in the Sikh tradition of revering nature - these were published in the Punjab Times. Watch the Newsflash item on this website for details of future events.

There are plans afoot to create a gateway into Khalsa Wood, to put up carved posts and form a pathway leading through the oaks, and to install places to sit near the fruit trees as a meditation area.

The project also links to a project in Delhi where a worker from Manchester is helping to set up a tree nursery to supply trees for planting around all the Gurdwaras in the province.

Other useful links and contacts:

Nottingham Agenda 21 website

http://www.nottsagenda21.org.uk/action/h_vol.shtml

has more information on Khalsa Wood and other green initiatives in the area.

<http://www.lhi.org.uk/index.html> - Local Heritage Initiative has more information on Khalsa Wood, it allows you to comment on the project and gives information on how

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you can do a similar initiative in your local area.

Sikh Community and Youth Service, 27 Park Road, Lenton, Nottingham NG7 1LB
(tel. 0115 950 7481)

[booklet available on Sikh History in Britain - aimed at teachers, parents and young people].