



**T**here's a slight apprehension about venturing into the woods. Perhaps this unease and wariness have been instilled in us from childhood through the fate of characters in *Hansel and Gretel*, *Little Red Riding Hood* and *The Gruffalo* – stories with a dark and mysterious setting. Away from the world of make-believe, it is natural for us to feel out of our comfort zone in unfamiliar surroundings. We experience different emotions, anxiety and wariness, but it shouldn't necessarily instil fear – nor should a trip to the woods, if you know what is good for you.

Faith Douglas is a true advocate of the power of

## Bathing on beech trip

*If visitors to Thorp Perrow go down to the woods today, they'll probably find Faith Douglas hugging a tree and getting back to nature. **Sally Clifford** reports. Pictures by **James Hardisty**.*

trees for both our mental health and well-being. Faith literally lives and breathes her work – the home she shares with two of her four children is set amidst within the beautiful landscape of Thorp Perrow in Bedale, North Yorkshire, which is her workspace as part-time curator of the Victorian arboretum.

It is through this role that Faith is passing on the many health benefits exploring this natural environment can bring.

The former nurse worked in mental health and trained in mindfulness as a technique to look after her own well-being. "I used to walk in the woods after a shift," says Faith, who was eager to explore more about the benefits it brought her.

Her passion for nature prompted her to retrain in horticulture. She began working for the charity

Horticap, delivering horticulture therapy to adults with a range of learning disabilities.

In 2012, Faith created an education garden within the arboretum with a group from Help for Heroes' Phoenix House recovery centre, at Catterick Garrison, and was offered the role as garden projects leader in 2013.

Her motto is for us all to "connect in nature". The walks she runs at Thorp Perrow, Dalby Forest and Swinton Park Hotel and Spa are very much based on this mindset, whether focusing on digitally detoxing – stepping away from social media and technology for a short while – strolling in silence or taking our shoes off to feel the earth literally beneath our feet.

Barefoot walking is natural in some other cultures, as Faith explains. "In our culture we

deem it to be a bit weird, but your whole body changes having skin contact with the ground. It lowers your blood pressure, your heart rate and you get a natural energetic boost. It is a really mindful activity.

"The benefits are brilliant, other cultures have found that people report less back problems, less neck problems and they walk completely differently. They have less lower body problems.

"The health benefits are absolutely fantastic and it's great fun. You don't have to be a child to kick your shoes and socks off – it's just a great thing to do."

Barefoot walking will be among the mindfulness activities Faith that is offering alongside bushcraft and survival expert Paul Holden Ridgeway, as part of the Op Spartan weekender from March 25 to 27

**COMMUNING WITH NATURE:** Main picture, Faith Douglas forest bathing; top, smelling the flowers on a witch hazel; above right, relaxing beneath a large beech tree; above, standing barefoot on a patch of star moss; middle, feeling the texture of the bark on an ash tree.

in Richmond. Op Spartan was founded by Stephen Burns MC to support veteran and uniformed services.

A night walk that Faith is planning in November will showcase the arboretum in a different light. "The idea is that at that time during the evening the light levels are such that night vision kicks in. All the leaves will have dropped from the trees. There are really dark skies here – you look up and you can see the silhouette, you can see this backbone, this skeleton and it is completely different looking at trees," she says.

Forest bathing is another way of engaging people with the natural environment – something Faith discovered through her mindfulness and reiki practice. It is a technique practised by different cultures all over the world. ➔