

IF YOU GO DOWN TO THE WOODS TODAY....

By A. Spotter

The only thing Cliff Richard wants for Christmas this year is peace on earth. So he says. Obviously, he wouldn't mind a number one either, but it would be too self referential, and just, well, plain honest greedy, to sing about that. The real tragedy of Sir Cliff's lament (and believe me, there is enough tragedy in that song to keep Sir Derek and Sir Ian in doublets over the festive season) indicates that he has not yet discovered the tranquillity and Zen like serenity of the Woodland & Wetland Patch in the Hermitage of Braid.

It is almost a cliché to say that when the pressures of life become too much, we turn to the restorative properties of "fresh woods and pastures new". After all, who hasn't decided, at some point in their life to pack it all in and go and live the good and quiet life in the woods? Henry Thoreau, Bill Oddie, numerous Vietnam veterans, and Jodie Foster in the blockbuster "Nell", to name a few.

So if you are growing weary of the half hour queue in the post office; if the charm of Christmas shopping is losing its Magic & Sparkle, if you find yourself having a Dianarama over the Queen's Christmas message – there is an alternative.

The Wetland Wood is a small oasis of calm, easily accessible even in midwinter, thanks to established pathways and boardwalks. And with well placed interpretation boards, for even the most inept spotter, there is always something to see. Even at this time of year, the wood is alive with nature – you might not get a whiff of a partridge in a pear tree, but you will see both holly and ivy, and the resident robin who is very vocal and will probably follow you about on your walk. This is one of the few instances of being whistled at which you will genuinely enjoy. If you have your wits about you (sherry trifle permitting) you might also spot the pair of bullfinches which may, or may not, be nesting in the wood itself. Twitchers should also be on the look out for the tree creeper, and the army of blue, coal and great tits using the wetland for their daily ablutions.

For the more contemplative, or those wanting to make an afternoon of it away from the madness of the play station and the James Bond movie, there is no better place to read Thoreau's "Walden", in particular, the chapter "The Ponds". Emulate the great man himself and find yourself a tree stump to sit down on and imagine the pond as a "distiller of celestial dews". This is a place to truly enjoy the restfulness of nature on a humble scale. If you are looking for peace on earth this Christmas, or just a quiet piece of earth, you have found it.