

# Forest's grant boost

IT'S HATS - and hopefully wellies - off to the Friends of Blackley Forest who have finally won the right to stroll through the award-winning nature reserve without having that sinking feeling.

The custodians of the countryside have been awarded a grant of more than £24,000 to surface a corridor across the unique woodland sanctuary to make walking less of a pain and more of a pleasure.

It has taken almost two years for the application to be approved by the Big Lottery with Community Spaces and Groundwork and work is expected to start in the spring and finish in time for an open day on June 5.

Historically ramblers have had to don gumboots to wallow in mud as they yomp the sodden trails leading to the River Irk, the bird nesting area and generally around the wealth of flora and fauna that makes the forest so unique.

But with or without a downpour the ground is so boggy that walkers almost have to wade across the land - and unwelcome motorcyclists whose bikes churn up the soil as they roar across the terrain don't make it any easier.

by Pat Hills

Dot Keller, chairman of the Friends, said: "We are absolutely delighted. A proper path that can accommodate a wheelchair and a child's buggy will make all the difference. It has taken a long time but we are almost there now."

The programme will include five directional signposts and two new gates at the entrance on Ellbourne Road and Blackley New Road to stop rampaging bikers.

The pathway will snake 3,000 square yards across the Forest from Victoria Avenue to Blackley New Road with a spur to the birdscreen, a popular point for twitchers to observe the nesting habits of the birds.

It will be raised at various points to address the underground springs that bubble beneath the ground.

Blackley Forest, a community nature reserve that was replanted in 1853 to commemorate the Queen's coronation, was once the home of wild boar, deer and eagles.

These days it attracts many different species of bats, birds, fish and other creatures, not to mention the human race who escape the daily humdrum to enjoy the breathtaking beauty of the haven.



WALKWAYS: Forest friends welcome the news SMNPH20102201010181