

Forest of enchantment

There was once a man who built a secret woodland trail – a magical experience both for children, and those who rediscovered the wonder of life through a child's eyes...

It was a unique path, half nature trail and half symbolic journey, and the story of its creation and the gentle visionary responsible are celebrated in a special exhibition, *Jamie McCullough's Beginner's Way* at the Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World (CCANW) in Haldon Forest just outside Exeter where the original track enticed many thousands of visitors in the early 1980s.

The forest for McCullough was an intensely emotional place and he wanted

everyone to experience that, using special interactive "sculpted places" to evoke excitement, a sense of adventure, surprise, delight, and even fear.

Features along the Beginner's Way included an ingenious "one-way drawbridge" that tilted when you stepped on it, a mysterious earthen tunnel to be crawled through, stepping stones crossing brooks, a beautiful rose window created from arching branches hung from tall trees that made viewers sense the cathedral-like

solemnity of the surrounding woods, along with fun features such as a wooden bowl carved from an old tree stump for collecting acorns and seeds.

Part of the trail's charm was its secret nature. Jamie stipulated that there should be no publicity, signposts or maps, and each person felt that the path existed for them alone, expressing their delight in notes and drawings pinned in a little shed. "Today I've been to Paradise. Thank you," reads one.

Sadly, Jamie died in 1998, and most of

"Today I've been to Paradise. Thank you," reads one of the notes

the walk has long since vanished into the undergrowth, but the CCANW's fascinating exhibition of photographs, sketches, notes, and Jamie's own words and poems reveals a legacy that still lives on in people's hearts and imaginations.

The Beginner's Way in Jamie's own words was "...not just a way for beginners but a possible way to contemplate beginning again in a new direction."

Visiting this exhibition will make you view Haldon Forest in a totally new way as you experience it through Jamie's eyes, not just as a collection of trees but as a forest of enchantment. □

• *Jamie McCullough's Beginner's Way*: Saturday 3 March-Sunday 29th April (admission free) CCANW, Haldon Forest: Open Tues-Sun (inc. Bank Holidays): 10am-5pm: tel: 01392 832277

