

Did you watch body-positive series *Naked Beach* recently, the show that aims to normalise the naked body? Apparently, over a third of us Brits don't like the way we look, so Channel 4's series sought to help people to love their bodies by going naked. This got me thinking... If body image dissatisfaction is such a widespread problem, can going naked, supposedly the most natural thing in the world, be the answer? I decided to investigate.

I'd recently read about Heritage in Crowthorne, Berkshire, a family naturist haven set in four acres of landscaped grounds surrounded by National Trust woodland. Who knew it has been here for 70 years?

I got in touch with David Mann, the club treasurer and, at first, I think he was reluctant to talk to me, saying: "Unfortunately, people often like to focus on the darkside. It's not like that at all."

So what is it like? David invited me to Heritage to see for myself.

The Heritage story starts with a couple in Wokingham in 1941. They threw open their house to like-minded people so that they could experience being naturists.

"Naturism was very avant-garde in Germany between the wars," says David. "Records state the couple became a group of four, which soon became five when a parson joined them. They advertised their fortnightly meetings and 70 people replied to the advert, but only a few turned up to their next gathering. One of the men had a big vision: he wanted to establish a non-commercial naturist club that would be permanent for all time. Then they began looking for a



Berkshire's *best-kept secret?*

Sarah Rodi spent the morning at Heritage, a family naturist site in Crowthorne, to discover the benefits of getting back to nature



ABOVE:
The clubhouse
and cookhouse

BELOW: Treasurer
David Mann

site where they could practice naturism in the open air."

In 1942, they came across this four-and-a-half acre plot of land for sale in the woods in Crowthorne and bought it for £75 an acre. The club was to be owned by the members, and still is today. No one single person owns it and everyone has a say in how it's run. The day-to-day management of the club is carried out by an elected management committee and the president and the chairman are both ladies.

"When they bought the land, the first thing they did was sink a well, so they could enjoy a cup of tea," says David. They began building a clubhouse, which was finished in 1950 and is still here.

"When mains water became available in 1951, there was the desire for a swimming pool, so the members dug that out by hand and it was first filled with water in 1952," says David. "They also applied to the council for the lease of 24 tent sites. This has now grown and been replaced

with 46 holiday huts. It was during this time that there was a change in pace: Heritage changed from a place of work to a place of leisure, which is what it is today."

In 1959, a new metal fence was erected around the perimeter. But in the summer of that year, the southern fence gave way and Heritage was invaded by the army looking for an inmate who had escaped from Broadmoor. "I'm not sure who would have been more surprised!" said David with a wry smile. "The fence has been re-erected, of course. It has to be here to stop people peering in."

In 2000, the swimming pool was refurbished and the huge conservatory was erected. "I think it's the biggest conservatory the company had built to that date!" says David.

These days, Heritage offers pitches for tents, caravans, motorhomes and trailer tents. There's also a pretty holiday chalet, the Daisy, which sleeps up to four adults and two children.

Throughout the year, Heritage

have regular monthly social events with varying themes, Wednesday night sauna night, a games night on a Friday, and a sewing and knitting circle on a Thursday. “We do everything you would do in a normal holiday park; just with no clothes on!” says David.

There’s a heated swimming pool next to the clubhouse and recreational facilities such as boules, miniten and tennis courts, volleyball, shuffleboard and table tennis, a children’s play area, trampoline, as well as a sauna, steam room and hot tub.

“There’s a cookhouse where Sunday lunches are served, such as beef cobbler, fish and chips... It’s all voluntary work. We all pitch in. We get paid in coffee. There’s a great pioneering spirit here,” says David.

People come for a night, a week, a fortnight or for longer.

“After visiting once, a lot of people become members. If you try it, I’d be surprised if you gave it up. Most people have an epiphany about becoming a naturist between ages 35/45, perhaps due to going abroad and chancing upon a naturist beach and thinking they’ll give it a go. Our active eldest member is a lady who is 92,” says David.

“Looking back on my own life, I was born in Blackpool. We lived in a hotel overlooking the beach. I was astounded at the lengths people would go to hide their

“Many people have an epiphany age 35 and decide to give naturism a try”



LEFT AND ABOVE: The swimming pool in 1952 and now
BELOW: Holiday lodge the Daisy

bodies while they got changed. I remember thinking: ‘Do I really want to put myself through that?’ Years later, my wife and I were talking about it and decided to give it a go. Heritage was the nearest naturist club to us.

“When you take off your clothes, you feel like you’re unburdening yourself with life’s worries. You feel free.”

David goes on to explain he thinks there are different degrees of naturism. “There are those who are naked sunbathers, who don’t want to get tan lines, and those who like to walk around free from having to wear clothes.

“There is no such thing as a perfect body. People here are of all shapes and sizes. No one is judging you. There is a video of Heritage on YouTube; in it, Kathy, the lady being interviewed, tells how on her first visit she was speaking to a lady who’d had a mastectomy and she did not even notice. That media perception of how you should look; you don’t get that here.”

That does sound refreshing.

“We dress to the weather, of course,” David adds. “If it’s cold, you don’t have to be clothes-free. And there are a few rules. You have to carry a towel with you

and sit on it for hygiene purposes. You can look, but don’t leer. And don’t touch. No photography is allowed. Plus children must be supervised at all times.”

As I get in my car to leave Heritage, to head out into the world again, I thank David for showing me round what is a beautiful holiday park.

“I hope I’ve shown the positive side of naturism,” he says. “I’m talking to you in the hope that naturism will become more widespread and accepted in society. It is possible attitudes toward public nudity are improving, but there is still a reticence. People sometimes like the idea but are too scared to try it as they’re worried they might bump into someone they know. There are more ad-hoc events like naked bike rides and naked swims these days, though, which is a great thing.”

Perhaps people are cottoning on to the belief that naturism is the way to a more positive body image. You’ll have to try it to find out.

David says Heritage has been Berkshire’s best-kept secret for 70 years... that was, until now. ♦ heritageclub.org; watch the video at youtu.be/JVr6WOr6eDU