

FOD + AG

Friends of the Downs +

Issue 50

Summer 2023



Photo: Timothy Dowling

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

APRIL 2023

Summer is well along its way. Long hot days and balmy nights have seen thermometers soar to record temperatures. It seems clear to most of us now that climate change is well underway and we can expect higher average temperatures with longer hotter summers, colder winters and regular incidents of extreme weather. On a more positive note, the warm weather has encouraged many more visitors to the Downs, keen to enjoy the cooler air offered by the breezes that regularly find their way up through the Gorge.

Sadly, a few of our visitors do not treat the Downs with the respect deserved by our precious open space. There remains an escalating problem of anti-social behaviour. Disposable barbecues, parking on the grass, racing over the Downs and regular encroachment by the Travelling community are all things of concern to legitimate Downs users as well as those charged with managing the Downs. In a recent Public Forum statement to the Downs Committee, I raised on behalf of FOD+AG those very concerns. My statement affirmed that the Downs bylaws without any sort of enforcement, warning, sanction or penalty are largely redundant. Relying on peoples good-will to behave responsibly is no longer enough.

Distressingly we have also learnt of unpleasant incidents involving the Travellers, including parts of the Downs being used as an outside toilet, dangerous driving and even confrontation with the Avon Gorge & Downs Wildlife Project Education Team. This has led to normal teaching areas becoming no-go areas and puts the whole education programme in jeopardy. I have asked the Downs Committee why the Police are not exercising their new powers to move trespassers on and we have invited Police representatives to the next FOD+AG committee meeting.

Initiated by the Downs Committee and led by FOD+AG the Downs Advisory Panel (DAP) met for the first time in June. Designed to assist, support and advise the Committee on matters of governance and to provide a conduit for individuals and organisations to raise matters of concern, or to suggest improvements. The current composition of the Panel includes three FOD+AG members, two from the Avon Gorge &

Downs Wildlife Project, the Downs supervisor, one City councillor, one Merchant Venturer and one representative from the Sneyd Park Residents Association. The Downs Committee have plans to recruit a Downs coordinator who will work with the Panel. One of the critical roles for the coordinator will be to look at how the Downs might be better funded. FOD+AG has ideas of its own about this subject but if you have any innovative ideas about income generation do let us know. If you want to contact the Advisory Panel on any Downs related issues DAP has its own dedicated email address – downspanel@gmail.com and a telephone line on 0117 963 475. You can of course still contact the Downs Committee direct.

Robert Westlake robertjwestlake@gmail.com



Left: Wildflower Walk on the Downs led by Neill Talbot

Right: A sunny but windy evening for the FOD+AG summer social

Photos: Robin Hayward

THE DOWNS ADVISORY PANEL (DAP)

The Downs Advisory Panel set up by the Downs Committee in a ground-breaking partnering arrangement is now underway. The arrangement details a scheme whereby FOD+AG would form a representative body that could act as a conduit for members, Downs neighbours and stakeholders. The Panel seeks to discuss issues that affect Downs users and bring them to the attention of the Downs Committee by way of informed opinion, and advice designed to assist the Downs Committee in the good governance of our special open space.

The current Panel stands at nine with the flexibility to accommodate additional members as and when required. The Downs Committee is looking to appoint a Downs coordinator whose role will include an element of fund raising. Improving representation for young people was also agreed. The DAP members are Robert Westlake (Chair) plus Bob Bell and Dave Jones (FOD+AG members), Anna Stevens and Katy Grant, (AG&DWLP) Ben Skuse, (Downs supervisor) Robert Bournes, (Merchant Venturers) Steve Small (Sneyd Park Residents Association) and Cllr. Paula O'Rourke (Bristol City Council).

It is envisaged that the expertise within the Panel will be able to respond directly to many of the issues raised about the Downs. The Downs Committee as the Downs Act dictates will of course retain the final say and any individual or organisation will still have the right to present a Public Forum Statement directly to the Downs Committee. DAP's first meeting took place in June and discussed how best to conduct its business and how to be an effective force for the betterment of the Downs.

Members agreed that how we communicate is important and measures to raise DAP's profile and promote the work of the Panel was paramount. Members agreed a range of measures and to make use of all our outlets and social media.

It is anticipated that as the Panel evolves it would not just report issues but be able to proffer solutions, alternatives and advice to the Downs Committee.

DAP also discussed some of the critical issues currently effecting the Downs and members reported that anti-social behaviour and the seemingly unresolvable van dweller situation was high on the agenda. The Panel looks forward to a long and fruitful relationship with the Downs Committee and Downs users.

If you have a Downs specific issue that you would like to bring to the attention of DAP you can contact us via our dedicated email at - downspanel@gmail.com or by telephone on 0117 963 4755

Robert Westlake

Laundry Day on the Downs Van Dwellers Encampment Parry's Lane.



TRAVELLERS - POLICE COMMENT

Chief Constable Sarah Crew has answered criticism from the public that her force is too slow to respond to encroachment by Travellers and has commented further on the Police's approach to the Travelling community.

Police have been given new powers to deal with incidents of trespass, making it a criminal offence but under normal circumstances *'this should not be the first option'* she stated.

She went on to say *'local authorities usually led a "multi-agency approach", with support from the police, to sites occupied by Travellers'*. The chief constable said that, *'while a nomadic lifestyle was lawful and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities were protected, there was a set of clear circumstances where the Police might become involved when trespassers occupied land without permission, but that it was not always understood by the public'*.

She told Police and Crime Commissioner Mark Shelford at the performance and accountability board on Tuesday, 11th July: *'The first thing I would want to do is acknowledge the challenges that are brought about by unauthorised encampments and that's clearly why people are writing to you. They often cause significant concern within communities and to local business owners'*.

She went on to say *'It's right to say that the first response should not necessarily be, or normally even be, the use of police powers'*. She said *'the force could become involved in an eviction where an encampment deprived a community of local services, such as a public park, school field or car park, or if there was a significant impact on the environment'*. *'It's really important that this isn't a fear, a risk, it actually has to have happened, but if those circumstances are in place, police powers may come into play'*. She said *'disruption to the local economy, including shoppers or workers being denied access to a site, or even farmland, could also be considered as grounds to evict'*.

FOD+AG comment: The Downs has suffered from regular incursions on to our revered open space. There are reported incidents of fly-tipping, dumped rubbish, littering, dangerous driving, human excrement, intimidation and confrontation.

How much evidence do you need Chief Constable?

Robert Westlake

FLY TIPPING

Around mid-July one of our members reported a serious incident of fly tipped asbestos. This occurred along Ladies Mile.

Asbestos is a toxic carcinogenic substance that when disturbed, can release microscopic fibres and dust into the air. Breathing in or ingesting these fibres is known to create life-changing and terminal illness, including an aggressive form of lung cancer called Mesothelioma.

This is an issue not only for those illegally disposing of asbestos, but also for members of the public walking or living nearby, with children being at particularly high risk if they play near these fly tipping sites.



Photo:

AMERICANS IN BRISTOL DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Having carried out extensive research into my family history, I was interested to learn that my great aunt met her husband while working in a US Army officer's club during the Second World War. She'd followed him back to the States but the marriage wasn't a success. I was intrigued to know where this club was, but the only information I had was that it was near the Downs. This intrigue started me on a project to research the 'Yanks' in Bristol during WW2.

It's clear that little of the Bristol area was unaffected by the American presence during the war. Whether it was for stores, vehicle parks, unloading at Avonmouth docks or hospitals such as Frenchay and Tyntesfield, GIs were an everyday sight for Bristolians. Around 200 separate US Army units were stationed in Bristol alone and these men (and many women) found accommodation across the city in numerous camps or were billeted in private houses.

The Downs was one of the key locations for the US Army in Bristol with Operation Bolero, the military build up to D-Day, progressing at pace. Clifton College had been evacuated early in the war, with the boys relocating to Bude, and became US First Army's headquarters. In October 1943, General George Omar Bradley arrived in Bristol to take command of planning for the assault on the D-Day beaches of Omaha and Utah. He lodged in *The Holmes* (now owned by University of Bristol and located within its Botanical Gardens) deliberately separate from his workspace to ensure his staff were not forced to match his working hours. Just round the corner from Bradley's accommodation, the US Army's olive drab vehicles were accumulating on the Downs.

Gerry Nichols' excellent *History of the Downs* provides the roles of two areas used by the Americans. By Sea Walls the US Army had an armoured fighting vehicle (AFV) depot. This could include military vehicles such as half-tracks, self-propelled guns such as the M7 Priest or armoured cars like the M8 Greyhound. The 1946 aerial photos on *Know Your Place* show elements of the depot all along Circular Road towards Ladies Mile.

Another large area requisitioned was a quadrilateral section of Clifton

Down bounded by Ladies Mile and Upper Belgrave Road. This provided parking for 149 vehicles with six huge canvas hangars (shown in red on the map). One of the units parked there was the 32nd Machine Records Unit (Mobile) whose noisy generators had not been appreciated in Clifton College grounds. These soldiers, tasked with ensuring the army's thousands of men were properly paid, now had to hike across the Downs daily. Their commute, wrote a technician fifth grade (corporal equivalent) named Otis Wollenberg, was vastly improved by meeting the women of the WAAF on the anti-aircraft defences.



The Downs, showing areas commissioned for US Army vehicles.

The Downs was of course the scene of many leisure activities. Kenneth Long, part of the planning staff at Clifton College, would take long walks with a young lady from the WAAF. He described her as 'so beautiful' and being young, foolish and in love he proposed but she looked at him like he was crazy!

I've not found any specific accounts but the Downs was bound to have been the scene of impromptu baseball games watched by intrigued locals. Perhaps the greatest spectacle though was in August 1944 when an American soldier gave a cowboy demonstration near Upper Belgrave Road.

'After cantering around for a while, he started a few practice throws and spins with his rope to the huge delight of children round about. Then to amuse the crowd which had quickly collected, he asked several of the boys to run about, and still seated on his horse, very deftly he lassoed them.'

The article describes the soldier as 'very dark' so he was presumably one of the many African American soldiers stationed in Bristol who received a warm welcome from many the locals.

Bristol's children were always keen to see the American soldiers who they knew to be generous. Every account recalls how they would wait for the GIs to pass and ask 'Got any gum, chum?', often with great success.

The generally mutual affection of Bristolians and GIs couldn't last forever. Following D-Day, the Downs was no longer required for military vehicles and the two sites were decommissioned and the men moved on to France. Efforts were made to return the Downs to its pre-war state although the concrete was only finally removed in 1947. Only one small trace survives in the latrine block built by the Americans by Sea Walls although these were rebuilt in 1963 as the existing public toilets.

As for where my great aunt met her husband, I'll probably never know. There were just so many buildings requisitioned by the US Army that it's anyone's guess. But none of that really matters: discovering all these incredible stories of the time when the city became home to American forces is much more interesting.

Please look at my website www.YanksinBristol.co.uk for many more accounts and details about the US military in Bristol. If you have any of your own stories or can provide more information, please email me YanksinBristol@gmail.com.

Oliver Davey

AVON GORGE AND DOWNS EDUCATION PROGRAMME

A DISTRESSING EVENT

We had 56 children from Weston super Mare visiting the Downs for a morning session. The children were aged between 4-6 years and had a number of adult helpers with them. We use a secluded 'classroom' area surrounded by bushes and trees so we are removed from the main body of the Downs for our education session and it was found to have a large amount of human excrement on it with many wipes/paper around the excrement which we dealt with. We were not able to use another area as the children are very young and there was no time to walk young children over to another space once they had been to the toilets in the former Bristol zoo. It is necessary at their age to use the toilets before the session. The toilets at Sea Walls are far away and are unusable for our children who would be at risk of safeguarding and sanitation issues given previous experience of taking children there. While 29 5-6 year olds were seated on the ground a car began to drive into the classroom area. Two of our volunteers asked the driver to move. He backed away but parked on the trail we use. They asked him to move again and he refused and was very rude. Our volunteers calmly moved away so as not cause an altercation. However, I am very concerned that 29 children were in an extremely vulnerable position with a volatile person at the wheel of a car illegally on the Downs. The car drove off finally back to the travellers camp once other people had come out of the bushes to get in.

This situation is not tenable. There needs to be careful consideration as to what risk we are willing to take in particular where young children are concerned. This incident could have been very serious. Luckily our volunteers managed the situation very well and the school went away very happy with their session, but it could have been a very major safeguarding and health and safety issue. I have written to the Downs Committee so that they are aware of the impact the travelling community have on the provision of engagement and education on the Downs as well as on the people who work or volunteer for the AGDWP, from a safeguarding and health and safety perspective.

Anna Stevens Avon Gorge & Downs Learning Manager



AVON GORGE AND DOWNS EDUCATION PROGRAMME QUARTERLY REPORT

In April, May and June we directly engaged with 1844 people through the learning and community engagement programme; we ran 2 workshops, 5 walks and 2 family events.

Events We ran the annual *Discovering birdsong on the Downs* course with ornithologist Ed Drewitt, a photography workshop called *Through the lens*; Francis Greenacre (former curator at Bristol Museum) led a history walk entitled, *A step through time* and Robin Hayward from FOD+AG led a walk *Trees of the Granny Downs* - both of these being part of the Bristol Walk Fest. Robin talked about the history and folklore of the trees with Anna adding additional scientific information. The *Gorge-ous spring plants* walk with local botanist Libby Houston was very successful with sightings of many of the rare species found in the Gully including fingered sedge, Bristol rock cress and dwarf mouse-ear. A *Dawn Chorus Spectacular* proved as popular as ever ending with breakfast at the Downs Café with wildlife presenter Mike Dilger.

We ran several events aimed at families including a *Spring into Easter nature hunt* and *Marvellous meadow mini-beasties* in the meadow and woodland areas.

Public engagement We ran two stalls on the Downs to encourage people to take part in a *Bioblitz* as part of City Nature Challenge 2023. The aim was to record as much wildlife as possible between Friday 28 April – Monday 1 May 2023 using the iNaturalist app.

Festival of Nature The AGDWP had a strong presence at the two day Festival of Nature, in the same tent as guests of Bristol Zoological Society. Members of the public were able to make a willow bird feeder, dissect an owl pellet, and measure and weigh a (pretend) peregrine falcon chick.

Sparks Project We successfully completed our installation at Sparks Bristol the day before the opening of the site on 13th May. The installation is of a rock face to portray the Avon Gorge. Through a series of scenarios, members of the public can follow a route opening fairy doors to learn more about the wildlife of the Avon Gorge and

Downs and to encourage positive behaviours when in nature such as not leaving litter on site. For more information on Sparks please visit <https://sparksbristol.co.uk/about/>.

Education We taught 52 sessions to a total of 1042 school children from 12 schools in Bristol and further afield. In April, Vanessa visited the two Year 2 classes in the grounds of Christ Church Primary to help them learn the importance of mini-beasts. This was to complete the offer of visits to each year group in-school for a flat rate of £250. To complement these sessions, the school brought each of their year groups to the Downs for an educational session. We have been able to allow school groups to use the toilet facilities in the Bristol Zoo Gardens site and use a pleasant lawn area as well as an undercover outdoor area to eat picnics.

Volunteers continue to help with projects Over the three months 25 volunteers gave 331 hours of their time.

Silky wave moth survey Anna and Vanessa joined Neil Green and Nicola Cooke from Bristol Zoological Society's native species team to help conduct the yearly silky wave moth survey, a rare moth only found in the Avon Gorge and two places in Wales. They monitored several transects in the Gully/Walcombe Slade. The sightings were impressive with an overall count of more than 70 moths being recorded on that day – a healthy figure.



Bird Surveys We have continued to conduct monthly surveys on the Downs with a volunteer from Bristol Ornithological Club in various areas of the Downs: Fairy Land and Zoo Banks; the Gully area; Seawalls and woodland above Sneyd Park; and the scrub patches above the Rangers' Pound.

For further information visit our website to find out what's on and how to volunteer <https://avongorge.org.uk/> Tim Clarke

THE START OF AN ADVENTURE IN CITIZEN SCIENCE

FOD+AG's Butterfly Monitoring Team, now entering its 14th consecutive season of collecting and recording data for UKBMS, was recently invited to visit and give a short talk to members of the Friends of the Old Sneyd Park Nature Reserve.

Old Sneyd Park Nature Reserve



The new OSPNR Committee is keen to promote greater interest and involvement within their local community for their delightful Green Space and its wildlife. It fell to me to offer some help in their endeavours and was why I spent a pleasurable afternoon on Saturday 10th June with a group of enthusiastic would-be conservationists exploring parts of the Reserve in search of butterflies. What follows is my talk.

Introduction to Butterflies Likely to be Found in Early June Around Old Sneyd Park Nature Reserve.

Welcome! My name is Martin and in the world of nature, I'm a neighbour from along the Avon Gorge where I help to look after the Downs and its wildlife like you do your Green Space. We are called FOD+AG and one of our interests is butterflies, or 'flutter-bys' as one of my children insisted on calling them.

(Honey bees deserve their name, but butterflies? – do they make butter? and yes, they can fly, but are they Flies?)

Some of you have already been on a 'bug hunt' this afternoon, so you also know that much of the world's wildlife is made up of very small creatures, but did you know that of these 'minibeasts' over 1 million are Arthropods – animals with jointed legs and a skeleton which

contains their softer body parts? Almost three-quarters of arthropods, including butterflies and bees, have a number of features which they share as Insects: having: 3 body parts - head, thorax, and abdomen; 3 pairs of legs; 2 pairs of wings and a 4 stage life cycle—an example of complete metamorphosis:



Stage 1

Male and female meet and pair up.
Her eggs are fertilized by his sperm inside her body.



Stage 2

She lays her eggs on a leaf chosen to give the right food for the larvae which hatches from the egg. We know these as caterpillars and they do nothing but eat.

Stage 4

The hard case of the pupa cracks and a new butterfly emerges. It has 6 legs and 4 crumpled wings which must expand and dry to allow it to fly. It is now an adult or imago.



Stage 3

When fully grown it looks for a safe place to hide while it goes through a remarkable change. First it grows a hard case for protection. Meanwhile inside its body completely reforms. It has now become a chrysalis or pupa



There are 59 butterfly species native to the UK although this number is likely to change gradually in the future. Each species has : a distinctive appearance, distinctive food plants, a distinctive habitat and distinctive life cycle timings.

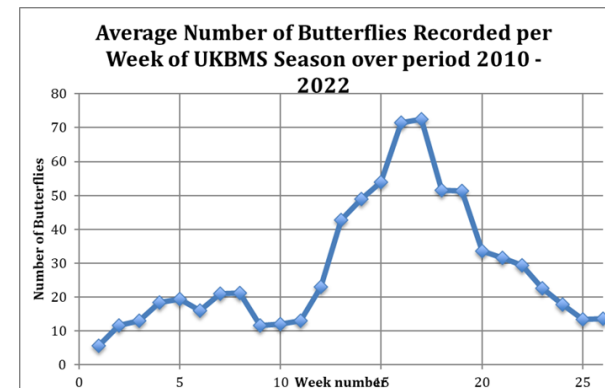
Looking for butterflies takes patience, watchfulness, time, and a big slice of luck! So armed with these and an Identification sheet, prepared by Committee member Sarah Powell what did we manage to spot on June 10th 2023?

As predicted, for reasons outlined later*, both numbers and variety were low but we did see 6 of the species illustrated on Sarah's ID Sheet – Large White, Small White, Marbled White, Speckled Wood, Meadow Brown and Holly Blue; as well as 2 others – Green Veined White and, as we left, a Red Admiral.

What we observed was a snapshot of a community on a single afternoon in June 2023, but with local commitment of a team of

volunteers, the committee hope to build up a record of the whole season's (April 1st – September 29th) community.

FOD+AG teams of monitors on the Downs have got records since 2010 and each year a poster can be produced as a summary. The FOD+AG 2017 Gully & Walcombe Slade Transect is enclosed. From these we can abstract data and represent it in the form of graphs, which in turn allow us to begin to detect patterns in behaviour. The graph below is such a presentation showing the average changes over 13 years in butterfly numbers through the 26 weeks of the butterfly season



Interpretation of the graph may be easier with the knowledge that Week numbers refer to the date of the start of each week :
Week 1: April 1st,
Week 5: April 29th,
Week 10: June 3rd,
Week 15: 8th July,
Week 20: 12th August,

Week 25: 16th September. The season ends Week 26 on 29th September

*One such pattern important to the June 10th walk is that the number and variety of butterflies recorded always shows a drop at the beginning of June between a springtime flush and a mid-summer peak! Whilst personally disappointing if your first butterfly hunt isn't as exciting as it might be, remember all records are useful in increasing our understanding of the health of butterfly communities, of their wider ecological implications and what might help in conserving threatened wildlife.

In conclusion, this brings us on to Citizen Science. Many, or might I hope most, readers of FOD+AG's magazine do so because they share our concern for the survival of our beautiful planet so that we can hand on its remarkable treasures to future generations. In recent

years a global awareness of the threats to the planet has been growing but in addition people all over the world have begun to demand action by those in power to acknowledge collective responsibility for the situation and to implement change before it is too late!

In places like the UK, which have the means to do so, part of this enlightenment has been to recognise that a relatively highly educated population can make a valuable contribution to monitoring the nation's ecology. Some of you will have taken part in initiatives such as Garden Bird and Garden Butterfly Counts using the basic scientific skill of Observation. This is for fun and is where Citizen Science begins - but it need not end there. To increase data's scientific reliability requires:

1. replication – repeating at regular intervals
2. standardisation of data collection criteria
3. recording – including both biological and abiotic data
4. reporting – for comparability between weeks and locations

These are addressed by the UKBMS protocols – but should still be fun! One of the reasons I was so pleased to be asked to visit OSPNR relates to a principle underpinning modern approaches to conservation. One of the most serious threats to conservation in urban landscapes is the potential isolation of species in small, disconnected pockets. In the past both animals and plants were able to travel over even large distances because, what we call Green Corridors, existed interlinking wild places. Hedges and tracks, which were a feature of our landscape, have almost disappeared in many areas. Partly as a result of urban sprawl and partly from the intensification of agriculture it is estimated that around 118,000 miles of hedgerows have disappeared since 1950 with the obvious loss of habitats and many of the species dependent on them, but perhaps less obviously, the shrinkage of the gene pool in isolated communities reducing the ability of species to survive as local numbers decline. What is being established in the Avon Gorge, largely by voluntary groups, is a gradually extending continuous Green Corridor of monitored butterflies into which OSPNR would fit. It is also why FOD+AG is delighted to be involved in helping another enthusiastic member of OSPNR, Laura Sharp, to set up a UKBMS Transect in the Reserve. We wish them every success. Martin Collins

THE GRANNY DOWNS SUMMER 2023

Is there a summer? What comes this way now?

1st April. Silent sky. Nesting is all very well but I miss the showy communal stuff, the squadrons of singing starlings, bouncy clouds of giggling goldfinches. Now it's all about individuals and pairs and nesting and above all keeping safe and hiding. Ah, the shy greening of the hawthorns ... but Camelot is the lake district yet again.

2nd April. The tips of the ash trees look like broccoli, fortunately they don't smell like it though.

3rd April. Aha! First butterfly. It's a small tortoiseshell. And here's a bluetit on a catkin, backlit. Nothing, nothing can compare with the grace of this.

6th April. The greening of the Granny Downs has passed the point of no return!

8th April. Ladybirds on this alkanet, and my research has revealed that a collection of ladybirds, called an aggregation, is referred to as a loveliness of ladybirds!

11th April. A whole lot of fussing about in hedges going on. Branches keep shaking.

14th April. The shades of green keep changing, intensifying day by day and the grass is sparkling emerald.

17th April. This daisy is completely pink! Others around it are pink rimmed, but this is all pink.

22nd April. What's this? There's a jackdaw plodding thoughtfully ahead on the path with someone's discarded shopping list in its beak. And that birdsong, a chaffinch! I can see him; it really is a chaffinch. If you wonder why I am excited about a chaffinch, it's that they are rare on the Granny Downs now. And now blossom by blossom, it unfolds...

23rd April. How did this happen? The lacy cow parsley ... about to flower... Nuthatch calling urgently. Nest attack? Before I came to Bristol, I was not aware of these pretty, bossy little birds, and most of my friends have never seen one. Yet on the Granny Downs (Camelot) they are everywhere, and I wrote an article for the church magazine on how to spot one. Crucially, they are not birds of hedges or bushes

and they do not perch on fences or walls to chat to us. Nor do they rocket arrogantly past us, like blackbirds en route for a bush. We will never see one pecking around on the grass. Nuthatches are birds of trees, and I think this is why they remain mysterious. Most tree life is mysterious to us and we tend not to take binoculars with us as we go to work. Once, I had an office with a window overlooking the canopy of a lime tree and I was astonished at the bird and butterfly life up there ... AND as to my search for orange celandines, here is a deep orange dandelion! New one on me.

24th April. Yet more cuckoo flower. The Holy Grail of tiny pink flower is the double flowered version, like miniature rose buds. As for the cuckoo, that has not been seen or heard on this side of the Downs for years. So much powder blue speedwell in the grass. Horse chestnuts have spires of buds on them. Can it get more beautiful here? Oh yes, it can...

27th April. Every lunch time, a blackbird sings his arias here. And they seem even more lustrous lyrics in wet air. Which is a good thing because it is all we seem to get at the moment.

28th April. Not strictly the Granny Downs but one of the roads leading off it. Just one goldfinch twitters on the roof every morning between 8.15 and half past nine. Just one, in the same place. I live opposite and am tempted to find a significance in this.

30th April. So many horse chestnut spires opening into flowers now, bottom blossoms first. Is there any flower that opens the top buds first? Will research. But so dark and wet and I cannot find one single daisy fully open. Most are closed buds.

1st May. And today I cannot find any *closed* buds!! Sun shining through the lemon cascades of laburnum. My goodness what a year for dandelions!

2nd May. I am sure the trees have grown by six feet! The horse chestnuts touch the sky. And here's a development. Today community returns. Starlings searching for food together in the grass, goldfinches bouncing along together and here's a group of blackbirds ... No longer furtive nest building. Now it's feeding time.

4th May. Where are the swifts??

And here's a crow showering in the cut grass, tossing it all over his head and fluffing his wings in it. I am always surprised by the sweetness of crow behaviour as they don't have a good press. In the past, I've seen a crow drinking from a buttercup, and another crow, a baby, fluffing itself with incredible sweetness. This freshly leaved silver birch looks as though it is about to curtsy: truly the lady of the woods. 7th May. Snow white blossom on the hawthorns, two holly blue butterflies and a song thrush opera. The song thrush repeats the single notes more often than the tuneful ones, I would say the average is single notes 8 times, tunes 4 times. And where on earth are the celandines now. It's all buttercups and daisies.

9th May. A swift, I really saw a swift! Just one, but a swift!! This is so exciting. When the sky is full of swifts, the other birds react to the electricity and fly with greater panache.

11th May. Cuckoo flower around the ladybird tree, and pink rimmed daisies! A pink morning. I love the month of May.

14th May. Another holly blue butterfly. These are darker than the common blues, and fly in a more determined way.

18th May. My goodness, the horse chestnut blossoms define the height and circumference of the trees and they are more magnificent than we usually see.

20th May And today the horse chestnut blossoms look like thousands of ice cream cones offered to the sky.

22nd May. Aha! the time when young starlings chase their parents, and their parents try to give them the slip! Noisy business. And yesterday, on a telegraph wire, a baby goldfinch fluffing and begging for food from a parent. So sweet...

23rd May. Apparently the swifts are flying through France and should be with us at the weekend.

26th May. No swifts yet. But there is an excitement in the breeze... As the blossoms fall from the horse chestnuts and line the pavements, the lime trees are about to bloom...

28th May. Dinner plates of elder blossom. Traditionally signifying the beginning of summer. Fortuitous colour combinations holly blue on wild roses. The Victorians were keen on fortuitous colour

combinations as a way of appreciating wildlife.

29th May. Swifts, bursting into the sky like the Red Arrows!! Horse chestnuts shaking their heads in the wind as though defying the move to summer.

31st May. Blackbirds singing throughout the Granny Downs and, I am sure, throughout the land. It's a beautiful world, not that I've seen much of it, never really travelled, but we, my family and I are happy with this portion of this planet.

Summer onwards! 2023

3rd June. Two speckled wood butterflies on this bramble bush. Oh what genius of evolution could create a butterfly with spots of sunlight on its wings... I look closely and the spots are not random. They are an exquisitely arranged pattern, and there are eye spots at the top of the wings and along the base.

4th June. Supposedly our hottest day this year. The leaves of the trees have darkened and little apple green conkers have formed on the horse chestnuts. Somehow the trees are even more imposing, echoing Delamain's observation that *trees have conquered the earth*. He was primarily concerned that trees gave birds somewhere safe to sit, of course. White hawthorn blossom has gone but the pink remains.

8th June. Darker and long shadows and here is a midday robin singing its heart out. I am, of course, careful in my choice of pronouns as both sexes are alike and both sing. Edmund Selous describes the robin as *a little round globe with a sunset in him*. He also muses that our feelings towards robins are very much marked by context. That we feel differently towards a robin on top of our local hedge (associating it with home and garden) than we do towards a robin in a dark forest, robbed of domestic environment. I've only seen a robin in a dark forest once, and it was mid moulting, but I will give more thought to context in future.

10th June. Hot and dark and the blackcap is the most vocal today. And brambles are coming into blossom.

Geraldine@geraldinetaylor.co.uk

Photo: Barry Beard

DOWN'S WALKING GROUP

For some years FOD+AG member Tim Dowling, has been leading the Downs Walking Group which is part of Ramblers Wellbeing Walks Bristol, a partnership between the Ramblers and Bristol City Council, and which also includes eight other walking groups (which are listed here: <https://beta.ramblers.org.uk/go-walking/wellbeing-walks-groups/ramblers-wellbeing-walks-bristol>).

They meet weekly from 10.30am on Mondays on the grassy area just north of the Downs café by the Water Tower and set off for the walks on the stroke of 11.00am so any latecomers need to catch up.

Crossing Stoke Road together, the walk leader and back marker hold up any traffic, wearing hi-viz jackets. Otherwise all group members need to take responsibility for crossing roads safely.

The Downs Monday walks need people to pre-book attendance. An email (bcc) is sent every Friday to all members of the Downs Walking Group inviting them to book in or not for the walk on the following Monday. Participants are asked to confirm by 6pm on Sunday evening. All the walks are about 2 to 3 miles long and the pace is fairly gentle with a pattern of alternating regular and irregular weeks. The 'regular' weeks walk the same planned walk and is the easiest of the planned walks. On the alternative ('irregular') weeks there is a repertoire of four different walks from which to choose.

The group walks in ALL weathers and has only been cancelled for adverse weather once in the last thirty years because of extreme black ice. During the two extreme heatwaves we arranged for the walk to start from 9.00am to complete it before high temperatures were reached.

Originally linked with improving mental health the walks were opened to all in 2012 and there is a wide range of people attending from all walks of life and most people find the mixture supportive and helpful. The sessions are aimed at improving both physical



and mental health. The atmosphere is generally positive and full of good humour. Much of the focus is on the natural world and we have become adept at recognizing the common birds and butterflies. We also enjoy listening out for birdsong and admiring particular trees on the Downs.

Friendly dogs are very welcome and we sometimes have three or four dogs attending the Monday sessions. There is usually an opportunity to let the dogs off the lead for a time (but **not** near the goat enclosure).

From 2012 the age range gradually increased so that most people are in their 50s, 60, and 70s with a few people in their 80s and 90s. Numbers attending are generally 30 to 40. While looking out for newcomers to the group and people who might cause concern, people are advised that they are responsible for themselves for the duration of the walk, ensuring that their GP would be happy with them participating in a walk covering 2 or 3 miles maximum.

We do **not** carry first aid equipment and there is **not** necessarily any first aid trained person with the group.

People are asked to inform the leader or back marker if they are leaving the group early.

Tim is looking for walk leaders to join him.

If anyone from FOD+AG is interested in becoming involved he would be happy to meet with them and talk about it further. If you are interested in becoming a Walk Leader, please contact FOD+AG Chair on robertjwestlake@gmail.com

The next 'regular' Monday walks are on 28th August; 11th and 25th September, 9th and 23rd October, etc.

These photos were taken by Tim on the Downs



A DOWNS MISCELLANY

Unicorn on the Downs Bristol is used to displays of interesting sculptures around the City and this summer upholds this tradition with a brand new sculpture trail. The Bristol Unicorn Festival will raise money for Leukaemia Care with a nine-week art trail leading you around some of Bristol's most iconic landmarks. The Downs is hosting its own life sized mythical beast, The Popcorn Unicorn at Seawalls, but you can



Photo: Robert Westlake

see from the image that this particular beast is minus its horn, presumably a victim of mindless vandalism. The Unicorns stand an impressive two-metres in height and the brightly painted sculptures have been created by Bristol artists like Inkie and Silent Hobo, as well as children from St Werburgh's Park Nursery school. In total there are 59 Unicorn sculptures, each one a unique design. UnicornFest will finish with an auction so you can get your hands on one of these unique creatures yourself.

Did you know that the name for a collective of Unicorns is a 'Blessing' and the idea of using Unicorns originates from Bristol's coat of arms, which can be traced back as early as 1569. It can be viewed above the main entrance to City Hall on College Green, whose roof also features two golden unicorns.



Mere Stones Visitors to the Downs often ask about the origin of the carved stones seen around the Downs. A good example of these seemingly randomly placed stones are located near the Downs Café. If you are facing the Café look a few yards to the left and you will see three stones protruding from the soil. There is in fact a line of them running from here, westwards, to the top of the Goat Gully.

They are of course not just any old placement; they are in fact important Parish boundary markers and are known as Mere stones. Most date from around 1800. One stone still bears the inscription WP indicating the boundary for Westbury Parish and there was once CP for Clifton Parish on the opposite side. The parish boundary was also the boundary between the two medieval manors of Henbury and Clifton and as a consequence the boundary between Durdham Down and Clifton Down. Earlier still the same boundary divided two Anglo-Saxon estates. In a charter of 883 AD, the site of the three stones is called 'Sweordes Stan' (sword stone) and the site of a surviving parish boundary stone at the top of Walcombe Slade (the goat enclosure) leading down to the river is called 'Eowcumb', the valley of the yew.



Photo: Robert Westlake

Cooks Folly, Sneyd Park The house was built in 1858 by Henry Goodeve, a noted doctor and surgeon, who arrived in Bristol after many years in practice in India and the Crimea. It is built in the Picturesque Gothic Revival style of Pennant rubble with limestone dressings. The design was originally a romantic counterpart to Cook's Folly, built by John Cook as a prospect tower in 1696, and visible in many topographical views of the Avon Gorge. The tower was demolished in the 1890s.

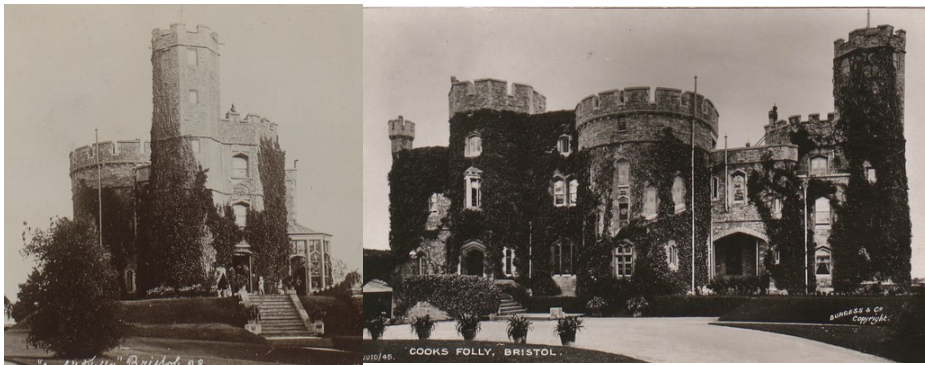


Photo: Bristol Archive

CROWDFUNDING TO REFURBISH THE TOILETS!!

One afternoon, not too long ago, enjoying coffee and cake in the little café near the water tower on the Downs, I asked my companions from Redland if they were familiar with Victoria Hughes (right) and her book, *Ladies' Mile*. To my surprise, they had never heard of her. Off we trotted to visit the subject of the story, the Stoke Road toilets and its blue plaque. I was dismayed to see the very sorry state of the building, particularly the exterior. To overcome my embarrassment I promised to obtain a copy of the book for them.



Despite searching on internet book sources and in local second-hand bookstores and charity shops, there was not one copy available for sale. Yes, there were a few copies in Libraries West but not one that I could actually buy for myself. I contacted the publisher, Abson Books, who originally printed the book in 1977 at their Wick premises. The current company purchased Abson Books Wick about 40 years ago, but it did not include the *Ladies' Mile* title. They added they get repeated enquiries about the book but had no idea about copyright. As this lasts for 70 years after the death of the copyright holder – this seemed an end to my search. A check with the Intellectual Property Office showed that I could apply for an Orphan Works Licence to republish the book myself. This involved, firstly, a diligent search to prove that I had consulted the relevant sources including all literary booksellers and other published books, newspapers, magazines, journals and periodicals – all with dates and findings. The second search was to prove that Mrs Hughes was the copyright holder and was no longer alive. It was necessary to obtain her will to establish whether she had bequeathed copyright but there was no specific bequest to her beneficiaries (her daughters, both of whom had died by the time of my search). The major portion

of her estate was left to one daughter so I obtained her will in case there was any reference to copyright but there was nothing. Out of courtesy I have been in touch with three of that daughter's beneficiaries – one is Mrs Hughes' grand-daughter who informed me that her grandmother did not bequeath copyright. I also researched the editor of the book, David Foot, to find that he died in 2021. After months of searching I was delighted to be granted a licence to reprint the book – but that's not the end of the story.

To publish and print 2000 copies, really the minimum for worthwhile refurbishment, the costs are high which is why I have set up a crowdfunding page with a target of £6000. You can find it here www.justgiving.com/crowdfunding/ladiesmile.

My intention is not to make any gain from book sales, far from it. I have pledged 100% of proceeds from book sales to The Downs Committee with the proviso that they use it for the refurbishment of that iconic Victorian toilet block on Stoke Road which figures in the 'remarkable and shocking' story of twilight Bristol.

A MATTER OF CONVENIENCE

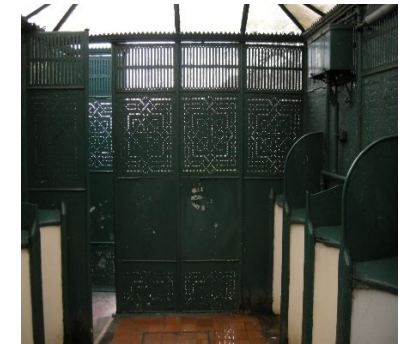
It is perhaps a sad indictment of our times that most of Bristol's public loos are no longer available to use. Successive cost-cutting by the City Council have seen provision made for our convenience by our Victorian forefathers gradually become redundant. Some have been demolished, others repurposed like the one on the Wells Road which became a barber shop (The Gents), while one on Sea Mills Lane became a house. Several became cafés. The one on Sea Mills Square became the Café on the Square, while the former Gents on the Downs is the Downs Café. More recently, the one by the Suspension Bridge (right) has become an education space with refreshments kiosk and two unisex toilet cubicles.



By the early 70's there were around seventy public loos across the city, many were in parks, on street corners and housing estates. By the 80's many had become run down, marred by graffiti and frequently vandalised. By 2004 there were still 66 units and this was when the first wholesale closures began. Since 2018, the council's Community Toilet Scheme (CTS) has tried to fill the gap in provision. So aside from being able to use facilities in, say the Central Library or City Hall, dozens of businesses and organisations have theoretically signed up to allow the public to use their toilets for free but many do not encourage the practice or display the necessary signage indicating availability. Sadly, only a handful of our public loos remain. The Downs has fared a little better. With financial support from the Downs Committee the Downs loos remain open. The urinal at Blackboy Hill (interior right) is currently closed for repairs.

Whether all the current Downs loos remain open is a vexing question. The World War Two toilet block at Seawalls shown below, a throwback to the Second World War, is not the finest example of lavatorial architecture and

the Downs Committee to its credit has tried to replace it with a café, education hub and a toilet facility. The idea being that income from the café would ensure the loos remained open. The uniqueness of the Downs and the Downs Act designed to protect it means to get final



permission the proposal will need to be debated in Parliament and the approval of the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, plus a large sum of money. In a previous life The Downs café at Stoke Road was a Gents toilet block.



Currently both sexes are catered for in what was the old Ladies loo, the other side of the Water Tower. This loo, like most loos had in times gone by been serviced by an attendant.

You can learn more about Bristol's loos in a Bristol Cable article at <https://thebristolcable.org/2023/04/bristol-public-toilets-history/> RJW



DOWN'S AMBASSADORS REPORTS

There have been a number of observations of orchids including green winged, pyramid and common spotted, in locations including zoo banks and the uncut grass strip along Westbury Road. Nick Wray, curator at the Botanic garden requested at the AGDWP meeting that ambassadors assist with seed spreading next year to encourage growth and he will provide advice on the method. The many trees that were planted this winter/spring, particularly on Granny Downs and the Westbury road area, were very heat stressed during May/June and some appear to have died. The large copper beech on Granny Downs was taken down in June, it had been progressively deteriorating for a number of years.

There are quite a number of reports of riding of electric bikes on the Downs, parking on the Downs, fly tipping, and Travellers leaving rubbish. In April a pedestrian was seriously injured near Seawalls and the vehicle driver arrested. These detailed reports are useful evidence to discuss with the Police how better enforcement can be introduced. One item of encouragement is a view that the damage from BBQs may be reducing. The clearance of rubbish from the Pride Festival took a number of days and there is still some residual small litter on the site

Some progress is being achieved with parking on the grass along Westbury road as the property owners/manager were reminded that byelaws prohibit vehicles on the grass. Dave Jones



A study in contrasts Above: FOD+AG volunteers weeding the roundabout at Blackboy Hill; Below: Parrys Lane slip road on a summer's day



COMMITTEE:

Robert Westlake (Chair), Dylan Aplin, Bob Bell, Martin Collins, Derek Catterall, Terry Hannan, Joan Gubbin, Robin Haward, Tim Clarke, Luke Hudson, & Dave Jones.

Secretary:(application welcomed) **Membership:** mail@gubbin.co.uk

Subscriptions: £10.00 per individual or £19.00 per household per calendar year. Please ask for a standing order.

You can apply via the website: www.friendsofthedowns.org

OR

by post: The Membership Secretary, 3 Wallcroft, Durdham Park, Bristol BS6 6XJ.

Please Note: Deadline for submissions for the Autumn edition is 20th October 2023. Articles/photographs to: fodagcontent@gmail.com

Disclaimer: Articles submitted to the magazine express the author's views and these are not necessarily endorsed by the Committee.

SOCIAL MEDIA:

Website: <http://www.friendsofthedowns.org>

Facebook: Do please join the group on Facebook, and like/share the page to spread the word. @fodagbristol.

Instagram: Friends_of_the_Downs.

Downs App is available to download.

ARCHIVIST WANTED!

As things about FOD+AG and the Downs get more and more interesting we need an archivist—could this be you? It involves sorting and storing documents/articles/newsletters/magazines in some sort of order!

Contact Robin for more details at robinhaward@blueyonder.co.uk



Photo: Timthy Dowling