

FOD

Friends of the Downs

Avon Gorge +

AG

Issue 34

Autumn 2019



Chairman's Report October 2019

The changing of the seasons never disappoints and Autumn on the Downs is no exception. Autumn has always been my favourite season. There is something almost magical about Autumn. The wind wild in the trees. The smell of ripe earth on damp mornings, the sight of falling leaves carpeting the avenues and the special way autumnal light reflects upon the landscape in glorious mellow tones of red and gold. Long gone the heady warmth of bright summer days to be replaced by the melancholy chill of fast approaching winter.

As always, our members have been out and about across the Downs working tirelessly to complete projects and provide events of interest. Earlier in the year in a joint effort with the Downs Education Officer the Lord Mayor opened the Granny Downs Tree Trail. A fantastic new attraction to this underused part of the Downs and created in honour of the late Richard Bland.

We have hosted numerous walks talks and socials delivered to a diverse audience, produced new exciting leaflets and started our winter deep litter collections We have carried out important surveys to monitor butterflies, held conservation Sundays and continue to help with managing the goats.

Your committee strives to provide a wide range of interesting volunteer activities throughout the year, so don't be shy, come and join in.

We continue an ongoing dialogue with the Downs for People and the Respect the Downs groups in trying to resolve the difficult issues of travellers, van dwellers and zoo parking.

This summer it may have seemed like every week there was yet another event on the Downs, from fairs and circuses, to Pride and pop concerts, most weekends an event was either taking place, setting up or packing up. Why this sudden increase in paying events? Once again it comes down to money. Pressure on Downs budgets have left the Downs Committee firmly on the horns of a dilemma as they try to balance the need to protect the Downs and at the same time generate sufficient income to sustain the Downs on into a somewhat uncertain future. So next time you hear the heavy bass of a professional sound system echoing across the Downs remember that every beat is another pound in the Downs coffers.

Chairman's Report October 2019

This summer saw new owners take on the running of Café Retreat. We welcome Melanie and Nigel and wish them every success with their new venture. We would also thank the previous incumbents of the Café, Gayle and John for the fantastic support they have always shown to us over many years. We wish them well.

In October we launched one of our most prestigious projects to date. At the AXA building at the top of Blackboy Hill we presented a photographic extravaganza of Downs and Gorge images displayed through a roadside which ran for two weeks. The launch evening was brilliantly hosted by AXA and Richer Sounds helped with the equipment.

The project was intended to showcase the photographic work of our members and guests and to raise the profile of the Downs and the work that FOD+AG carries out. A big thank you to all members and guests that submitted contributions to the display.

You may have noticed as you stroll around the Whiteladies Road end of the Downs that the once beautiful floral displays are missing. This is a direct outcome of austerity cuts and a severe squeeze on Downs budgets. FOD+AG in a joint initiative with Redland and Cotham Amenity Society are looking to rectify this situation. We have opted to explore a planting scheme around the Thomas Memorial that will provide year-round colour and interest and hopefully will be in place next spring. Further details in our next edition.

As an organisation FOD+AG has many ambitious projects in the pipeline but to get them off the ground it is vital that we develop and grow our membership. Please think about whether you could recruit a new member. It's easy to join and you would be doing your part to help us to help the Downs.

Finally, a reminder that our AGM will held at 7.00pm on November 20th at Redland Bowling Club. All members are welcome so please join us for a lively and convivial evening.

Robert Westlake

Correction: The cover photo of the Summer 2019 Newsletter should have been attributed to Peter Blanchard . This edition: cover photo Graham Balfry.

The Secret Life of Trees

As you wander across the Downs it would be difficult not to notice our magnificent collection of trees, many planted with the foresight of our forebears, some planted to form avenues, others as individual specimens, still others that have self-seeded to form woodland cover on the fringes of the Downs. But have you ever walked through woodland and looked up into a far-reaching tree canopy and got a sense that maybe something else may be going on other than those trees just standing there? Is there the possibility that trees can in some way communicate? Not with us maybe, [at least not yet] but with one another. There is now firm evidence that trees are far more complex than first thought and the likelihood is that they are indeed able to communicate.

In recent years a quiet revolution has been taking place in our understanding of how trees interact with one another and the vital contribution that our trees make to the welfare of planet Earth. Far from being solitary sentinels living out their extended lives as singular specimens they are in fact far more alert, sophisticated, social and with a degree of intelligence previously unconsidered.

There is now respected scientific evidence from Universities in Germany and around the world that trees of the same species are communal and can form alliances with trees of other species.

Long held beliefs dating back to Darwin have always considered trees as disconnected loners striving for water, sunlight and nutrients - with the winners shading out competitors, a primitive survival of the fittest. But it seems this may not be entirely so. Next time you are meandering through a woodland area and your gaze is drawn to a soaring column and on up to a far-reaching crown think about what may be going on just a few inches below your feet. These trees are in fact inter-connected through underground fungal networks, sharing water and nutrients and also communicating to other trees distress and send signals about drought, disease or attack from invasive insects. These fungi seem to exist in a symbiotic relationship or economic exchange with trees. The fungi's microscopic filaments form the basic network and consume around thirty percent of the sugars that the tree photosynthesizes from sunlight. The sugar is what fuels the fungi as they

The Secret Life of Trees

scavenge for nitrogen, phosphorous and other mineral nutrients which in turn are absorbed by the trees.

To communicate through the network, trees send chemical, hormonal and even slow pulsing electrical signals. Scientists at Lausanne University in Switzerland have identified a voltage-based system that is interestingly similar to animals' nervous systems, although it is not suggested they have neurons or primitive brains. The main topic of tree 'conversation' seems to be distress and alarm. We can only speculate as to what they talk about when they are content.

Trees also communicate through the air using pheromones and other scent signals. One classic example occurs in sub-Saharan Africa with the emblematic Acacia Umbrella Thorn. Should a passing Giraffe start to nibble its leaves the Acacia is able to emit a distress signal in the form of ethylene gas. On detecting the gas neighbouring trees start pumping tannin into their leaves. Consumed in large enough quantities they can seriously sicken or kill large herbivores.

Trees can detect scents through their leaves. When Elms and Pines come under attack from leaf-eating caterpillars, they detect the caterpillar's saliva and release pheromones that attract parasitic wasps. The wasps lay their eggs inside the caterpillars and the larvae eat the caterpillars from inside out.

A recent study from Leipzig University and the Centre for Integrative Biodiversity Research claims that trees can recognise the saliva of deer. When a deer is browsing its leaves, the tree is able to bring forward defending chemicals that make the leaves taste unpleasant. Should a branch become broken the tree can recognise the difference and can utilise substances to assist in healing the wound.

So, whenever you are up on the Downs and you hear the whisper of a gentle breeze in the treetops pause for just a moment and ask yourself if those trees are completely mute or in their own way do have something to say to us.

Robert Westlake

Downs for People A Statement to

1. Downs for People is concerned that zoo parking on the Downs will not end this year, despite assurances given by the zoo's last Chief Executive and the conflict with the Downs Committee's statutory remit. We have drawn the Committee's attention to these concerns many times before. This statement describes developments since the Committee's July meeting.

Zoo's assurances

2. The zoo's current planning permission expires this year. The City Council's planning committee granted that permission on the basis of an assurance from the zoo's last Chief Executive that the zoo would not apply again. Dr Justin Morris, the current Chief Executive, has explained to us that this assurance did not mean that parking would end: the zoo considers that it can use the site for parking for up to 28 days a year without specific permission.

3. This is a claim that the zoo has made before. It was refuted in 1990, with the support of the City Council's legal advisors. We have asked the City Council to confirm this. Meanwhile we are meeting Dr Morris next month to discuss his plans for parking.

4. If the City Council confirms that the zoo cannot use the land for parking for 28 days and the zoo attempts to do so, the Council will be able to take enforcement action.

The Downs Committee's statutory remit

5. As we noted in our statement for the last meeting, the Committee has a straightforward statutory remit: to manage the Downs so that they "... shall for ever hereafter remain open and unenclosed ... as a place for the public resort and recreation of the citizens and inhabitants of Bristol ". By no stretch of the imagination can the words "... public resort and recreation ..." be considered to include the operation of a private car park.

The Committee must act within the law.

Impact of parking

6. The zoo promised some years ago that it would report to the Committee on the use of the car park twice a year, in January and July. We can see no

Downs Committee re Zoo Parking

evidence of a July report in the papers for this meeting.

7. Our own observations showed zoo parking again prevented people enjoying an otherwise popular site on the Downs for much of the spring and summer. They are denied access not only when it is covered by cars but for much longer periods because it is fenced off. Its existence and the zoo's poor management encourage a parking 'free-for-all':

- The car park has again been left unattended in the afternoons (something we have complained about before) so that anyone can drive in.
- No attempt is made to close and clear the site promptly at 6.30pm, when the planning permission ends, so that cars continue to park there.
- Drivers remove the rope barriers to park on the site when it is officially not in use.
- People park on the grass nearby to enjoy the Downs – it is not clear this is not allowed.
- The entrance to the zoo's car park makes access by travellers easier.

8. *We would welcome an assurance from the Committee that they will not allow the zoo to park on the Downs again.*

Downs for People September 2019

Conservation Activities

With the ending of funding for the Downs from Bristol City Council, FOD+AG is continuing to enhance its role in the practical conservation of the Downs. In this newsletter we have articles looking at the wide variety of projects that FOD+AG undertakes both maintaining and improving the Downs. Please do look at the items in the noticeboard on page 19 for upcoming events, or get in contact via robinhaward@blueyonder.co.uk if you are not sure what you would like to get involved in yet but want to help.

Luke Hudson

History of the Downs

By the middle of the 19th- Century Bristol was booming. The City docks had become a hub of vast international trade with ships plying their trade right across the world. A consequence of all this activity was that the Docks and surrounding area had become a particularly noisy, hectic and malodorous place to be, particularly for the many middle-class traders who had chosen to live close by the businesses they ran. It was this that provided the impetus for this affluent group to start moving away from the City centre and look elsewhere to set up their homes. Clifton had long been a desirable place to settle but topography and high property values made this difficult. At this time the Downs was still considered a remote and distant landscape with expansive rolling downland grazed by sheep. However, the ever-increasing pressure from prosperous newcomers for more houses and villas meant that fields and meadows were increasingly being swallowed up by encroaching speculative developments.

It was the Merchant Venturers who were becoming increasingly alarmed at the perceived misuse of the Downs, not just the often illegal encroachment but the nuisance of unauthorised quarry activity. In an attempt to call a halt, the Merchant Venturers gladly accepted an offer from Sir William Draper to act as Downs Conservator. In 1849 the 'Clifton Improvement Association' was formed and for some years actively planted shrubs and installed seating on the Downs. However, this resident led initiative had become disbanded by 1855, due mainly to active opposition from some of the quarry operators and general public apathy.

By the end of the 19th Century The flat landscape of the Downs plateau led to it becoming the go to place for events and sporting activities and was considered Bristol's main sports ground. During the Victorian era cricket and athletics were two of the fastest growing sports and whilst sport and events had long been popular on the Downs it was the provision of a tram service from the city centre to Apsley Road around 1875 that put the Downs within convenient reach of the general population.

A typical example of major events were the Royal Agricultural Shows, when thousands flocked to the Downs to see the latest innovations in farm machinery and the finest livestock to be found. The event of 1873 was

Mid 19th to 20th Century

commemorated with the elaborate drinking fountain, sadly no longer operational, which is still in place on Stoke Road.

Another great event led to 30,000 people assembling on the Downs to celebrate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee but despite these well attended extravaganzas it is worth noting that for many working people of the day leisure time was limited, or even non-existent and often restricted to Public Holidays. On high days and holidays thousands of citizens would flock to the Downs to relax, enjoy the fresh air and the wide-open spaces and obtain some relief, if only temporarily, from their often difficult and humdrum lives. On occasion the behaviour of the hoi polloi became just a little too boisterous for some of the nouveau riche denizens of Clifton, leading to great concern from the authorities.



'His Majesty King George V arrives at The Royal Agricultural Show 1913.'

At this time Clifton and Durdham Downs were still in private ownership and the Corporation had little or no influence on how it was managed, so in the public interest and working with the Merchant Venturers, the Corporation

History of the Downs

sought to obtain Commoners rights on Durdham Down. These were acquired in 1857 and using ancient grazing rights turned out thirty City of Bristol sheep to graze, thus ensuring its survival as common land, even though sheep grazing on the Downs had already begun to decline. More importantly it was the first step in safeguarding the Downs for public enjoyment.



'Bank Holiday on the Downs c1910'

Throughout the 18th Century and into the 19th mineral extraction across the Downs had steadily increased. Large scale quarrying had changed the face of the Gorge for ever. Land around Upper Belgrave Road was extensively worked for lead, clearly evidenced by the still uneven ground and known locally as 'the Dumps.' At Westbury Park clay pits were dug, hence Clay Pit Road. Although filled in and efforts made to drain the area it remains a boggy spot until this day.

In 1859 Samuel Worrall caused great public concern when he attempted enclosure of land at the top of Pembroke Road. This led to the Corporation to resolve:

Mid 19th to 20th Century

‘That the Downs Encroachment committee be authorised to enter into negotiating with the Merchant Venturers and the Lords of the Manor of Henbury and Westbury for the purpose of either by purchase of manorial rights or other rights or in such other manner as may be desirable of securing for the Citizens of Bristol under the sanction of the legislature the free enjoyment of the Clifton and Durdham Down’

It was planned to achieve this aspiration by way of an Act of Parliament and the Clifton and Durdham Down Act received royal assent on 17th May 1861, thereby protecting and securing in perpetuity the 441 acres of the Downs for public enjoyment. All subsequent works would be for the express purpose of ‘improving’ and ‘managing’ the landscape for recreation.

To initiate the required improvements the Downs Committee was created, seven Merchants and seven representatives of the City Council assembled for the first time in November 1861. The Committee as it is till this day was chaired by the Lord Mayor. One of the first acts of the new Committee was to appoint a Downs Ranger with a remit to ‘beautify’ the Downs. Works included the installation of seats, drinking fountains and monuments.

In 1869 Alderman Proctor submitted proposals designed by the City Surveyor Frederick Ashmead for the laying out of roads around the Downs, it seems managing traffic was of concern even then.

In a report to the Committee Alderman Proctor made the following observations and proposals.

‘When, at the last meeting, I ventured to lay before you a plan suggesting the arrangements of the roads, the planting of trees and the railing in of a portion of our beautiful Downs, I felt very much obliged for the ready consideration you then gave to this important and often discussed subject...’

‘..... I am induced to press this subject for your consideration at this particular time because of the removal of the Turnpike Gates; this will induce an increase in carriage traffic over the Downs to which the amount in past years will bear no comparison....’

‘..... It is in my opinion, very desirable to arrange for the accommodation for

History of the Downs

those who visit the Downs for the express purpose of loitering about and enjoying the beautiful prospects, and also for those who take the drive for the sake of the air, or cross the Downs without desiring to wait in any particular place....'

'....in proof of the necessity for extensive arrangements for the convenience of carriages in the vicinity of the Sea Wall that I have seen upwards of forty vehicles there at one time, during the setting of the sun in September....'

Robert Westlake

Source Material: 'History of the Downs' by Richard Goldthorpe



'Sheep at Rest on the Downs'

Granny Downs Summer into Autumn

Announcing the first ripe blackberry 21st July – this is the earliest I have recorded this. Also a small conker fell on my head on 12th September, but I haven't been keeping records for that! The gentle (usually) transition from summer to autumn is the most exquisite on the Granny Downs – oh the golden light through those beech and lime trees! This year, an unusual feature has been the presence of dragonflies. Whether this is a response to the influx of painted lady butterflies I don't know, but certainly, I haven't recorded them on the Granny Downs before.

There have been many feathers on the turf as a result of moulting birds and I managed to find a goldfinch feather, so tiny and such a brushstroke of gold.

This is the season of the flying seeds and surely, the little revolving lime seeds have the most exquisite flight of all (especially against the backdrop of the autumn sun) and one of the slowest: sycamore keys are faster. Remember, to be the true helicopters as it were, the sycamore keys need to be single, not double.

Talking of conkers, what an abundance here and red now (mid September). Compare the different red of each tree, and the unique watermarks on each conker. These watermarks are most evident when they are freshly broken from the case, and alas, they fade after a couple of days in the sun.

And talking of red, this is the moment coral pink and red patches appear on the sycamore canopies. Just one Granny Downs moment: 8.47am 17th August: Boiling skies, mad wind all night, sheets of rain ... and then one moment ... the sun came out and I looked around because wonderful things can happen on weather margins – as they did. Birds weaved through shrub islands, speckly juvenile robins, adult robins, wrens, juvenile blackcaps, blackbirds ... snatches of song. Young birds cannot resist the sun and took turns on the highest twig. Painted ladies taking flight over the grass ... a dragonfly ... 17th September: I'm standing at the Blackboy Hill end of the Granny Downs looking down the footpath. The autumn sun is low and golden and the canopies are from dreams. Suddenly I notice hundreds of white cyclamen naturalised under the horse chestnuts - Narnia indeed.

Geraldine Taylor

Mid-Autumn in FOD+AG Land

As October brings its autumnal transformations to the Downs and Gorge what is there to catch the eye, quicken the pulse or warm the heart?

As always, but worthy of repeating, eyes wide for the glory of autumnal colours just beginning to put in an appearance – yellows, golds, bronzes and reds are starting now to infiltrate the greens of summer gradually setting alight the landscape before the skeletons of trees reveal themselves for another winter.



Early in the month, in fact from now, for a bronzes I would recommend Saville Road with its avenue of grand horse chestnuts, but be quick - this year, before blustery winds strip their leaves; and in the longer term because of the threat to this species of a mixture of leaf miner, fungal infection and bacterial attack, which like Dutch Elm disease during the mid 20th Century, might decimate the nation's population of another iconic feature of the UK countryside. It might be of interest to know that recent replacements in this avenue have used the Indian Horse Chestnut which appears to have some natural resistance to this blight.

The added bonus of a stroll through the current avenue, particularly to those with children, is the glut of beautiful conkers studding the grass verges,

Mid-Autumn in FOD+AG Land



Now the yellows and golds are prominent, contrasting spectacularly with a spectrum of green memories of summer as well as the richer, darker evergreens. For these try the Promenade. Here the bonus is slightly longer term where return visits up to and into early November will be rewarded by the gradual transition from copper and green through to rich browns, golds and reds making the journey through both space and time quite magical.



Elsewhere the more long-lasting islands of berried holly and hawthorn and the hipped wild roses with their cloaks of old man's beard are a constant reminder of the time of the year. (see over)

Mid-Autumn in FOD+AG Land



And what is FOD+AG up to against this background. Well, in addition to the ongoing activities, this year we had a new venture. With the generous help and sponsorship of AXA, a rolling display of photographs of Downs and Gorge in the window of the AXA building at the top of Blackboy Hill. This might reinforce our oft-repeated plea to residents of, and visitors to, Bristol to go to see what a gift to body, mind and spirit we possess on our doorstep.

As much of our wildlife, plant and animal, prepares for its own particular form of hibernation there is a great deal for FOD+AG working parties to get on with. Our presence and activity are far less likely to disturb them. So how could you be involved?

Throughout the autumn and winter there is a monthly Deep Litter Collection team at work on the last Saturday morning of each month scouring the undergrowth for litter which less public-spirited visitors discard there to the detriment of the health, safety and attractiveness of the natural environment. If, like me, you are equally dismayed by the unconcern or downright deliberate vandalism demonstrated by this anti-social minority behaviour, come along and make a difference.

Mid-Autumn in FOD+AG Land



To provide protection for our rare limestone wildflower meadow, so-called 'dead hedges' are constructed and/or repaired each winter. These guide runners around such sensitive habitats to conserve their biodiversity and integrity. (see below) When materials become available, it will be a chance to learn and practice his ancient craft. Look out for details of these and other conservation sessions on our website, Facebook, emails or newsletter.



Mid-Autumn in FOD+AG Land

Ongoing are Conservation Sundays, currently on Observatory Hill, where the Iron Age Hill Fort ramparts require regular maintenance, largely involving scrub clearance. Also needing maintenance during the winter are the Victorian Steps in the Gully, as a follow up to FOD+AGs European Green Capital Project of 2015. The improved access this has given to the little known corner of the Downs to a variety of visitors must not be compromised for want of regular clearance and renovation. (see previous page)

We hope to begin work soon clearing the remains of the route of an old tramway, used historically to transport dredged material from the floating harbor to infill disused quarries on the Downs. The restoration of this heritage site is complicated by the fact that it is in an SSSI and thus subject to regulation by Natural England as well as the need for it to be preceded by professional barrier construction to comply with Health and Safety regulations.

Martin Collins

Our Downs and Gorge

October 1st at 6.30 saw the official launch of the FOD+AG photo display 'Our Downs and Gorge'. Fifty members and guests enjoyed the hospitality laid on by AXA and they enjoyed seeing the superb photographs on two screens. The main screen was later moved to face outwards through AXA's window so that all passers-by who wished to stop for a moment could see a range of Downs and Gorge photos as well as a display about the work of FOD+AG. The display ran from 6.00am to 9.00pm each day, finishing on October 22nd. It was good to be able to chat to other members and guests in the impressive entrance hall to the AXA building and to enjoy Prosecco and canapés after the two official speeches of welcome. Many thanks to AXA's team of Anna, Michelle and Jake and to the team from CBRE. FOD+AG hopes to be working with members of AXA's staff who would like to take part in practical work on the Downs or who would like to learn more about such a fantastic place. Many thanks to the FOD+AG team of Bob, Robin, Caroline and Jac for their work in assembling the whole event.

Robin Haward

Noticeboard: Events

Scrub Clearance: Wednesday 6th November 1:30pm and Sunday 24th November 10:00am

essential to register: robinhaward@blueyonder.co.uk

Walk with Neill Talbot Identifying Trees in Autumn 2.00 - 4.00 Sunday November 17th

register with robinhaward@blueyonder.co.uk

AGM: The 2019 AGM will be held at Redland Green Bowls Club on **Wednesday 20th November at 7.00pm.**

Deep Litter Collection—Saturday 30th November 10:00am Venue:tba, - thereafter last Saturday of the month

email: martinandglen@hotmail.com.

Butterfly Monitoring and Goat Monitoring: If you would like to get involved please email: martinandglen@hotmail.com.

Dead Hedging and Alexanders Attack: Working parties to help maintain the hedges and remove invasive weeds.

Robin Haward 0117 974 3385 or robinhaward@blueyonder.co.uk

Please see back cover for other information

COMMITTEE :

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

KEY CONTACTS:

Membership: Joan Gubbin

Articles for the Newsletter: Robin Haward / Luke Hudson

Please Note: Deadline for submissions for the Winter edition is 10th January 2020. Articles to robinhaward@blueyonder.co.uk or fodagcontent@gmail.com)

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

Please go via the website

OR

by post: The Membership Secretary, 3 Wallcroft, Durdham Park, BS6 6XJ, 0117 973 9799.

SOCIAL MEDIA:

Website: <http://FOD+AG-bristol.weebly.com> The website has further information on events and a regular blog on the Downs.

Facebook: Do please join the group on Facebook, and like/share the page to spread the word. [@fodagbristol](https://www.facebook.com/fodagbristol).

Instagram: [Friends_of_the_Downs](https://www.instagram.com/friends_of_the_downs/).

Do please send any Downs & Gorge photos to fodagcontent@gmail.com.