

FOD + AG

Friends of the Downs + Avon Gorge

Issue 44

Spring 2022



Hawthorne Granny Down

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

APRIL 2022

This time last year I finished the Spring Newsletter with a message of hope. Hope that we were past the worst of Covid-19. Hope that the vaccine programme would provide the protection we all desired and that life would soon return to normal. Regrettably the virus still remains a significant feature in our lives, albeit in a less virulent form and we have learnt to live with Covid and despite depressingly high infection rates we are returning to something like normal life. You will have noted from recent news bulletins and updates that the Downs Committee has been under some pressure to become more transparent in the way that the Downs are managed. This comes on the back of the court case brought successfully by the Downs for People group against the City Council and the Downs Committee. The concerted effort by Downs for People and others has prompted the Downs Committee to address the issues raised and have proposed to do so with a Strategic Review. Stakeholders including FOD+AG have had the opportunity to contribute to the early debate and remain optimistic that we will be able to do so in the future. As an organisation your FOD+AG committee has confirmed by letter its continued support for the Downs Committee but also supporting calls to become more representative in the way that the Committee conducts its business.

I hope some of you have taken the opportunity to contribute to the survey offered by the outgoing Lord Mayor. The Downs Committee are keen to find out what you, Downs users, expect from the Committee and if changes are made what would you find acceptable. If you missed the survey and you have comments you would like passed on to the Downs Committee, feel free to contact me directly (robertjwestlake@gmail.com) and I can pass on your thoughts. One of the issues we have regularly highlighted is continuity within the Downs Committee. Every year the chair in the shape of the Lord Mayor is replaced, likewise his deputy the Master of the Merchant Venturers and a third of the Committee are also rotated. This does not lend itself to good governance. At the very least FOD+AG has suggested that the outgoing Lord Mayor remains as a Committee

member for a further year. To address issues of continuity and improved representation we would like to see the review recommend a citizen led panel that could sit alongside the Downs Committee in an advisory capacity. Openness and transparency should be a given with citizens able to put questions to the Committee and receive answers based on best practice for public office.

Perhaps the biggest issue currently exercising the Downs Committee is funding. The City Council contributes to the upkeep but a significant sum is raised from the Downs major events. This summer sees the return of a full events programme to the Downs. There will be major events every month starting with Funderworld at Easter and ending in October with the Circus. {Please see Events Page for Full Listings} Not everybody welcomes the events. Residents living near Seawalls have threatened legal action if their lives are again blighted by a noisy concert. Others have raised concerns about overuse of the Downs with claims that events like Funderworld cause lasting harm to the Downs greensward.

So here is the conundrum. How is the Downs to be financed in the future? The reserve is gone, so nothing in the bank and income will be lost from car parking when the zoo decamps from Clifton. There is some income from concessions and from the Downs league football but it is only a relatively small sum.

It will be the responsibility of the Downs Committee to find a balanced approach that can deliver what we want from the Downs without destroying the very thing we want to protect and preserve. The City Council has some responsibility to underpin the Downs finances but Parks budgets are also under extreme pressure. Any income that the Downs can make will help relieve that pressure. We urge the Downs Committee to seek imaginative solutions and alternative ways forward. If members have ideas of their own on how the Downs can generate income, please let us know.

In the last edition of the Newsletter, you will have read about a letter FOD+AG intended to send to supermarkets etc. about the sale of disposable barbecues. We are pleased to report some success with the campaign to eliminate the use of these ubiquitous barbecues.

Led by long serving member Timothy Dowling, letters condemning their use and the damage they cause were sent to local supermarkets, their head offices, local schools and universities. FOD+AG received a prompt response from the Henleaze branch of Waitrose informing us that they would no longer be stocking disposable units and that this would be rolled out nationally. Even better news came with the announcement that Aldi would also desist from supplying these units. Tesco and Co-op have also dropped supplies at some local high-risk sites. Wilco promised to pass on our request to their buying team for review.

FOD+AG has followed up on our earlier action with a further letter to local outlets pointing out the initiative shown by Waitrose and Aldi and strongly suggesting that they might like to follow suit. See page 8 for a further update.

Robert Westlake Chair

EVENTS ON THE DOWNS

See also page 18 for events organised by the Avon Gorge & Downs Wildlife Project and page 27 for events organised by FOD+AG.

Foodies Fest 20th–22nd May
Jubilee Beacon 2nd June
Comedy Garden 15th-19th June
Race for Life 25th-26th June
Pride 9th July
Adventure Cinema 5th–7th August
Forwards (formerly Downs Concerts) 2nd–4th September
Student Union event 23rd - 24th September
Circus 27th September – 16th October

Note: these are the dates the events are 'live' there will be build and break periods either side of each event. The organiser of Cycle Sunday has informed us that they are unable to run the event this year.



Photo: Derek Catterall

THE VICTORIAN STEPS AND PUBLIC FOOTPATH

After concern about the current condition of the Victorian steps had been raised by members FOD+AG contacted Bristol City Council Public Rights of Way {PROW} team for further advice. The main problem has been caused by excessive rainfall run-off from Circular Road which then follows a natural line and cascades down towards the river taking any loose stone with it. The situation has been exacerbated further by a blocked drain at Circular Road. Since the FOD+AG led restoration project, shown above after restoration in 2014, and the introduction of the goats into this area the steps and footpath have become surprisingly well used with many new visitors. FOD+AG even introduced a couple of simple benches and handrails to assist the less sprightly to overcome the steepest parts of the steps.

Public Rights of Way responded promptly and officer Eddie Proctor agreed to meet on site to consider the scale of the problem and to look at possible solutions. FOD+AG's inquiry proved to be timely as PROW are in the planning stage of some significant local footpath improvements, in particular access routes to and along the Portway and even better news there is a budget for these works.

RJW

PLANS FOR NEW DOWNS TOILET BLOCK/CAFÉ REJECTED.

City Councillors have changed their minds and decided to reject plans for new loos and café to be located near Seawalls. Permission had previously been granted by planners over three years ago. The Council's development management committee voted 5-4 against allowing the existing toilet block to be demolished and replaced with a glass and timber-fronted single-storey building. The decision flies in the face of an officer recommendation that the scheme be approved and could be reversed on appeal.

Members said they feared the development, near the Sea Walls could be a 'slippery slope' and set a precedent. Concerns that the new building's 'footprint' would be larger than the existing loos were also raised. The application, from the Downs Committee, was resubmitted because the existing planning consent from March 2019, including education booth and replacement toilets, expired a few weeks ago. One committee member Cllr Lorraine Francis (Green) told the planning committee on April 6: 'We are getting into a situation where green spaces are being commercialised. Once we start erecting permanent buildings – outside of a toilet which has been there for a long time – then the next thing you know we are building and building. I'm a bit concerned about developing protected green spaces into commercial use. This is going down a slippery slope.' The council's head of development control, Gary Collins, replied: 'A decision on one application doesn't set a precedent for another. This wouldn't provide a green light to any other proposal.' He said the application should be approved because it met criteria that allowed exceptions for developments that were 'ancillary' to existing protected open space. 'The reasonableness of a refusal, given the lack of any real change in the circumstances and the recent expiry of the planning permission, it would be an unusual decision to make and one that probably would not stand up at appeal,' said Mr Collins. Tory Cllr Richard Eddy said he was on the committee three years ago that was 'overwhelmingly convinced it was a decent scheme' which remained the case. He said: 'If anything, post-Covid, the demand to open these green lungs for the people of Bristol is even more vibrant,

so I urge members to vote for this.'

Labour Cllr Fabian Breckels said: 'If there have been no significant material changes since the last time this was granted, we're going to be on very thin ice if we refuse this now and we then find we get absolutely rinsed at planning appeal. Aesthetically the new building is an improvement on the old. The old toilet block looks quite hideous and almost unsafe.'

Extract from Bristol Post.

COMMENT:

FODAG previously commented in support of the planning application on the grounds that the café would generate sufficient income to provide a new fit for purpose toilet block, a small education facility, the restoration of a small drinking fountain and importantly the cash to maintain them.

We highlighted concerns that without the income there is a very real likelihood that the current facility, like many across the city will close down for good.

Not all our citizens live local to the Downs and without these basic facilities a simple visit particularly for older denizens can be an anxious experience. RJW

The toilets and drinking fountain today



BARBECUES ON THE DOWNS - UPDATE

Our campaign to rid the Downs of disposable barbecues goes on. You will have seen from previous reports that we have achieved some success by contacting retail outlets and institutions both locally and nationally. We have received confirmation from Waitrose and Aldi who have acknowledged the environmental damage that these units cause and will no longer stock them. More recently we have received confirmation from the Co-op's Director of Sustainability and Communication that Co-op stores local to the Downs will be instructed to remove disposable BBQ units from their shelves. We have also received responses from Tesco and Wilco who informed us that they will refer our request to their purchasing teams.

This is an excellent start but there is a long way to go. The problem is not just about the suppliers of disposable barbecues, there is a mountain still to climb in respect of public education. That is why we have also communicated our concerns to local Halls of Residence and schools.

It should also be noted that the lighting of any type of fire on the Downs is prohibited under the Downs bylaws so if there was money for enforcement the problem could be solved. We must also get across the environmental damage and risk to wild life that these destructive items cause.

To highlight the scale of the problem FODAG member Timothy Dowling reports that, *'On Sunday morning 27th March, during an unseasonably hot weekend one of my fellow-early morning colleagues and I counted more than 60 discarded disposable barbecues on Clifton Down (we did not go over Durdham Down or the area around the Observatory and Promenade). As you are aware, there were burnt patches all over the Downs following that weekend. No matter what instructions appear on the packets, these are clearly not followed by many users.'*



Photo: ?? Tim Dowling

RUBBISH WRECKS OUR RECREATIONAL RESOURCES OR A LITTER ORATION

Since 2008, when FOD+AG was first formed to help care for the Downs and the section of the Avon Gorge adjacent to it, each autumn and winter we have taken on the role of local 'Wombles'. Monthly scourings from September to March – when our presence is least intrusive in the lives of our resident wildlife – have made a significant impact on the quantity of litter accumulating in areas of scrub, woodland, small copses, ditches and hollows which characterize the landscape of this unique green space.

Over this period a total of some 200+ volunteers, some very regularly and others less frequently (although nevertheless equally welcome), have turned their concern about litter into time and effort spent in generous and enthusiastic action.

As Downs users will, however, testify the problem persists. Thanks to the tireless efforts of the Downs Supervisor and his team, who clear litter from the areas of open grassland which covers much of the Downs, we know that its 400+ acres are remarkably free from the eyesores and hazards left by antisocial visitors. Meanwhile FOD+AGs commitment has been to complement their activities in the parts that mechanical clearance cannot easily reach. However – and here's the rub, these are the places where the impact of litter is less obvious to human sensibilities but more hazardous to our wildlife

That fact, together with the recent discovery during Robin Haward's dead hedge rebuild in January 2022 of the dead bodies of two mice trapped in a discarded glass bottle, shown below, is why I have requested the republication of an article in Issue 28, written 4 years ago, highlighting why litter and wildlife do not mix.



Photo: ??

On Litter (written January 2018)

Some of you might have heard an interview/discussion on the radio recently. The interviewees were a woman supporting the introduction of swingeing fines for drivers caught throwing litter from moving vehicles and a man arguing against it, despite being a volunteer Womble, on the grounds that fining would be impractical and an inappropriate use of legislation against the individual. I was left with a sense of confusion as to the purpose of the item and a feeling of frustration that the importance of the issue itself had been subverted by a spurious argument about personal liberty. Having reached the end of our 9th season of Deep Litter Clearances in which a record number of volunteers took part – for which I and the Downs Ranger thank them, this article is a timely attempt to explore these matters and to explain why this was a missed opportunity to inform and educate.

As so often happens in such journalist-led items the initial premise was anthropocentric. The questions it posed focused on the impact of litter on people or their pets – effectively extensions of themselves. Questions related to what our environment looks like, to how dangerous it is, to whether it represents a risk to health and safety of children and pets and to how much it costs, important as they are, miss the central point. That point, for me, is highlighted by the following quote:

'We don't own the Earth. We are the Earth's caretakers. We take care of it and all things on it. And when we have done with it, it should be better than we found it' - Katherine Hannigan

In other words, what should be at the heart of all aspects of our philosophy and practical management of the natural environment is 'stewardship'.

If we recognize that our treatment of wildlife - animal, plant or microbial, and of the ecological balances that they maintain, is what matters then we as well as they will benefit. To thoughtlessly or, even worse, deliberately destroy green spaces like the Downs and Gorge which infiltrate our built environment, should be seen as an affront to that special gift of intelligence which evolution has bestowed on us.

So what is the impact of litter on the natural environment and its communities?

What is litter? There is no legal definition, but it includes anything from crisps to cigarette butts; from take-away cartons and containers to dog waste; and manufactured materials which do not biodegrade from metals and glass, to plastics and expanded polystyrene; Littering should also be understood to include fly-tipping of products such as household and garden waste – and make no mistake, those of you who have never been on a FOD+AG DLC, we are increasingly confronted with such fly-tipping even on the Downs and in the Gorge.

Table 1: What Commonly Constitutes Litter

Litter Type	% of sites affected
Smokers Materials	83%
Confectionary packaging	69%
Soft drink cans and bottles	54%
Fast food packaging	24%
Snack packaging	21%
Alcohol bottles and cans	20%
Broken glass	8%

Is littering getting worse? According to the Local Environment Quality Survey, the amount of litter is currently consistent. However fly-tipping is increasing as is littering associated with food and soft drinks 'on the go', whilst that due to plastic bags and dog fouling has decreased. Interestingly, at a time when smoking is on the decline, the proportion of sites surveyed littered with smoking-related materials was 83%.



Photo: ??

How can litter harm wildlife? A comprehensive list could be almost end- less, so I will restrict myself to habitats like the Downs and Gorge (excluding the River Avon) and to the most common hazards.

- Animals, especially small mammals can become trapped inside cans and bottles where they can starve, drown or die of exposure.
- Larger mammals can get heads or other parts of their bodies stuck in containers where they can starve or suffocate.
- Mammals and birds can cut themselves on sharp metal edges of cans or broken glass which can lead to death or infection.
- Millions of invertebrates drown in any container which becomes filled with rainwater or melted snow.
- Plastic 6-pack rings can trap animals restricting their ability to move and escape from predators.
- Chewing gum in wings of birds can also restrict movement to find food and avoid predation.
- Chewing gum in fur or feathers can reduce the effectiveness of insulation in preventing exposure especially when fur gets wet.
- Plastics and latex, mistaken for food can enter digestive tracts or respiratory tracts blocking them and causing starvation or suffocation respectively.
- Mammals and birds can become entangled in string or netting from which they cannot free themselves.
- According to 'Keep Britain Tidy' 226 million cigarette butts are discarded annually forming a concentrated toxic risk factor for scavenging wildlife.

... and specifically due to fly-tipping:

- Domestic waste can attract scavenging behaviour by both mammals and birds and this has been linked to a significant proportion of wildlife injuries/fatalities from being hit by traffic.
- A proportion of domestic waste including cleaning materials and containers is directly toxic.

Many of these hazards affect individuals, but what must be remembered is that the knock-on effects on wildlife populations and communities are significantly greater due to the disproportionate risk to young animals, whether due to their natural inquisitiveness or to

their becoming orphaned and so lacking parental protection. Contaminated garden waste can allow invasive species such as Japanese Knotweed or Himalayan Balsam to spread through native floral communities. Areas degraded by rubbish-dumping become less biodiverse and, according to the Campaign for Rural England, often leads to land being bought for development resulting in habitat loss. So, to return to where you came in, whilst I acknowledge that 'policing' littering might be very difficult, is that a valid reason for doing nothing? Why should swingeing fines be seen as an attack on the freedom of the individual? Is personal freedom a sacred cow which cannot be challenged – even when the resulting behaviour restricts the freedom of a majority of others? Whose freedom is most at risk in such situations? Is it the selfish 'litter-louts' or is it the majority of the human population and the wildlife with whom we share the Earth? The only long-term solution to this problem is, of course, education, but personally I cannot see why a few high-profile prosecutions would not help to start the ball rolling in the right direction. After all there are already laws against littering and fly-tipping but clearly some hold them in contempt! I hope I can be forgiven for riding this particular hobby horse through this edition, but I suspect I am not alone in voicing this concern. Correspondence on it would be welcome.

The factual content of the article above has not changed markedly since its first publication, although Table 1 should be supplemented to include the increasing frequency of laughing gas steel ampoules.

There is an alarming paradox in human behaviour at work here.

At a time when all of us, but particularly youngsters, are confronted by the twin threats posed by:

- a world Covid-19 pandemic (when outdoor green spaces offer a valuable haven)



Photo:

- a world global warming-induced climate change disaster (when our very survival depends on greater understanding and conservation of our green environment as well as its ecological biodiversity)
- isn't it strange that so many people, and I have to reiterate - so many youngsters - are thoughtless about, or perhaps perversely intent upon, trashing what might be a part of our salvation. To make a difference need not be difficult. It's about raising awareness. It's about education.

What I would like to see is the following:

For everyone who reads this in the current Newsletter to bring it to the attention of friends, neighbours, relatives and especially to the youngsters in your lives.

For those youngsters to take it into their schools, colleges, clubs and community organisations and get it onto the agendas of school councils, student unions and other committees as an urgent target.

In short, for all of us to spread the word.

The message is simple – when you snack or picnic, take a bag for your rubbish and take it home for Bristol Waste to dispose of.

The time energy and resources saved can then be directed to the more constructive activities undertaken by the Downs Supervisor's Team and by voluntary groups like FOD+AG, to say nothing of the benefits that will accrue for the safety and pleasure of Downs users and it's wildlife.

Martin Collins
Feb. 2022



Martin's Wombles and a recent haul

Photo: Martin Collins

CONGRATULATIONS TO MARTIN.

A couple of months ago Martin Collins was nominated for an award scheme run by Bath & Bristol Parks Foundation for his volunteer contribution and was successful in the 'Outstanding Long Service' category. Martin with typical modesty has accepted the award on behalf of FOD+AG and has generously offered to donate the financial award to a FOD+AG project.

From the Foundation: We teamed up with Bristol City Council and Bath and North East Somerset Council to celebrate the brilliant volunteers who go the extra mile to make our parks and green spaces special. We received a phenomenal 157 nominations for volunteers that are making a difference in their local community for work in 2021.

They said. Martin is a founder member of Friends of the Downs & Avon Gorge and has served as a committee member for the group from the start. He gives tirelessly of his time and takes a lead role in many important flagship projects.

STORM EUNICE

The recent storm caused some damage on the Downs as these photos show.



Photo: ??

Left and centre: Tree 7 listed as one of Richard Bland's top 20 trees. With a girth of 500cm, the largest tree on the Downs planted c.1850. It had been noted as majorly diseased before the storm.

Right: A holm oak by the water tower lost a large branch.

NATURAL ENERGY AND THE DOWNS

World-wide demand is calling for greater use of natural energy – and less use of fossil fuels. The Downs and Avon Gorge are well supplied with natural energy potential - wind, sun and tidal. The existing central water tower complex adds to that natural potential. Public spaces in other areas/countries are already moving toward a greater natural energy policy.

As energy costs continue to soar and unlikely to come down again any time soon, is it time to consider revolutionary and innovative ideas about how are public open spaces could help. Nowadays, plenty of cities across the nation are developing innovative public projects, merging the benefits of green energy innovations with ambitious infrastructure reuse. They are maximising the use of these advancements to impact the world positively.



Photo: ??

Is there anywhere on the Downs that we could consider moving towards the use of natural sources of energy and reduce the use of and reliance on fossil fuels. The Downs could be an area where there are opportunities to move toward the use of natural energy. The thought of course of our beautiful Downs blighted by serried ranks of noisy wind turbines and banks of solar panels would be a step too far

but would it be possible to consider for example solar panels on the Water tower or even a wind turbine. This would have the potential to supply power to the Downs dressing rooms, the café and the toilet block with any excess energy fed back into the National grid.

Green energy companies are becoming numerous. Many offer innovative solutions to reduce our carbon footprint. There are even companies that produce park benches that incorporate solar panels or smart bus shelters equipped with small wind turbines with phone and laptop charging points, handy if you are out and about on the Downs with a low battery and need to send that urgent email.

At this moment in time such ideas may seem farfetched or unlikely but maybe in the very near future we will all have fewer choices about how we decide to obtain our energy and will be forced to adopt innovative and ground breaking ideas

MYSTERY SCULPTURE BEHIND THE WATER TOWER

A sculpture of a Bristol woman who became famous as an 80-year-old has appeared outside the toilets where she worked for decades.

The statue shows Victoria Hughes comforting a woman. It is the only other current life-size statue of a woman in Bristol who isn't Queen Victoria or a naked nymph! Mrs. Hughes was a lavatory caretaker, or 'loo lady', in the toilets on Ladies Mile, and was a support and comforter to the many sex workers who worked on the Downs at that time.

Victoria, from Bishopston, retired in May 1962, and then, at the age of 79, wrote a book about her experiences, which was published in 1977.

Bristol Post



AVON GORGE & DOWNS WILDLIFE PROJECT

events programme Spring 2022

Pre-booking is essential, go to bristolzoo.org.uk/all-events or call 0117 4285300. *Details of meeting points are given after booking.*

Thursday 5th May Butterfly Britain (Talk)

Butterflies have been collected and studied in Britain for hundreds of years and their decline over recent times has been dramatic. Enjoy Oliver Smart's stunning photographs as he takes you on a journey to see many of the resident butterfly species of these isles. His talk will cover the behaviour, habitats and the relationships with other plants and animals that make these little insects so uniquely special.

7.00pm - 8.00pm, £6.00

At Bristol Zoo Gardens. Venue accessible to wheelchair users.

Friday 13th May Music with Mummy® on the Downs (For under 4s)

Let's make some melodious music on the Downs. Decorate and play a shaker, sing, dance and meet some wildlife puppets with Fiona from the well known 'Music with Mummy®' franchise (of course daddies, grandparents or any other responsible adults are equally welcome!).

10.00am - 11.00am, £5.00 per child (babies under 1 and adults free!)

Sunday 15th May Writing the Downs (Course)

The Downs are haunted by a rich human and ecological history. In this creative writing workshop led by Dr John Wedgwood Clarke, Poet in Residence, we'll explore the people and flora and fauna that have shaped its distinctive landscape and think about how the traces of the past can inform writing our own experiences of the Downs.

10.30am – 4.00pm, £25.00

Run in conjunction with the Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council via the *Wastes and Strays* project www.research.ncl.ac.uk/wastesandstrays. The event consists of a guided walk on the Downs in the morning and an indoor writing workshop in the afternoon.

The Project is a partnership of Bristol City Council, Bristol Zoo Gardens, Natural England, University of Bristol, the Society of Merchant Venturers, Downs Committee, Bristol Zoological Society, National Trust and Forestry England. We also work in partnership with the Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge.

DOWNS COMMITTEE:

The Committee met at City Hall on the 21st of March and started the meeting with Public Forum statements from FOD+AG, see the Chair's letter on page 2, followed by the Downs for People group who, in a strongly worded statement, called for the Master of the Merchant Venturers to retract what was claimed to be a largely inaccurate public statement made at the January meeting and referred to the role of the Merchant Venturers in the past. There were also reminders that this is the last chance for the Downs Committee to provide financial information about the Downs for People court case. Otherwise, requests for information will be forwarded to the Information Commissioner's Office.

Local journalist Andrew Lynch called on Merchant Venturers who do not pay Council Tax in Bristol to resign from the Downs Committee. He said, 'No representation without taxation. The Venturer committee members who do not live in Bristol need to be replaced now'. Green Councillor Christine Townsend in an equally strongly worded statement demonstrated where she believed the Downs Committee failed to meet all seven of the Nolan principles. (*Reports of Downs Committee business can be found on the City Council's website.*)

The Lord Mayor as chair of the Downs Committee was generous in his praise for the work carried out by the Friends of the Downs & Avon Gorge.

QUEENS GREEN CANOPY

As part of the celebrations to mark the Queen's Platinum Jubilee the Lord Lieutenant Chris Curling has approached the Downs Committee for approval to plant trees. Locations and a budget have been approved. One single oak tree is earmarked for a spot near Merchants Hall and five further specimens to be planted at a location off Ladies Mile. To support the initiative FODAG has offered a generous financial contribution.



NEW CHAIR FOR DOWNS COMMITTEE.

The Downs Act [1861] dictates that the Lord Mayor of Bristol will chair the Downs Committee and as Bristol changes its Lord Mayor every May the Downs Committee will have a new chair for 2022/23. This year we welcome Green Councillor Paula O'Rourke to take up the challenge of stewarding the Downs through what may be the most turbulent year in its history. The Downs Committee has committed to review how it manages the Downs and to respond to recent criticism from various sources.

Before FOD+AG formally welcomes Paula to her new role we must thank the outgoing Lord Mayor Cllr. Steve Smith. As chair Steve has dealt with some of the most difficult challenges for the Downs during his tenure but has laid down some important principles that should put the Downs on a sound footing in the future.

We do not underestimate the degree of difficulty that will need to be overcome if the Downs is to flourish. The coming year could be very important in the evolution of the Downs, some difficult decisions will need to be made and demanding challenges faced. FOD+AG has committed to support the Downs Committee to achieve success.



Photo: ??

FOD+AG congratulates Cllr. O'Rourke on her well-deserved appointment as Lord Mayor and first citizen and looks forward to working with her and the Downs Committee.

Paula, a Clifton councillor has a distinct advantage as she has served as a Downs Committee member for some years, is knowledgeable, determined, well respected and well positioned to get a flying start.

ST CHRISTOPHER'S DEVELOPMENT

The date for commenting on the planning application submitted is now past and members were sent a link to this in the April monthly email bulletin. There was no room for a fuller outline of the plans so to recap, the plans were to refurbish the 5 lodges along Westbury Park to create apartments and on the garden space behind, build 4 new multi storey blocks of 3-6 storeys, plus 3 blocks of cottages. There was no response by the developer to FOD+AG's request for 3D views to alleviate concerns over the visual impact of the multi storey buildings on the Downs scenery, however there are images on the St Christopher's Action Network (SCAN) website www.scanbristol.org/ which give an idea of the size of the new buildings compared with the surroundings. The website images show how the buildings dwarf the current lodges, and show how much of the currently green site will be developed. This is no surprise to the developers as it states in the Townscape and visual impact assessment that the visual effects for some people are between 'slight to moderate and substantial adverse'. Review of the 127 documents submitted to the council website has identified further main items that we think are a threat to maintaining the character of the Downs and FOD+AG members;

- 58 trees of the total of 121 trees on the site, would be removed as part of the development including a 2.8 metre girth Lime and 2.2 metre girth Sycamore. The developer will fund replacement trees but they will be placed elsewhere in Bristol where space available.
- There is in the 'Transport statement' a new 3.6 metre wide path across the Granny downs from the central site entrance, linking up with the current diagonal path (2.1m wide), which would require the removal, or seriously compromise the root system, of one of the Horse Chestnut trees that lines Westbury Park road.
- There is in the design and access statement, a sketch of a new ironwork arch carrying the St Christopher's name, positioned over the pedestrian entrance gateway, which has no visual precedent in the Downs conservation area.

The developers seem to be more focussed on achieving high density accommodation than maintaining the character of the area.

CLIFTON SUSPENSION BRIDGE

Last month FOD+AG representatives accepted an invitation from The Clifton Bridge master to hear plans for the next phase of works to the Bridge. The Trust has scheduled a major programme of maintenance in 2023, as part of the ongoing conservation and repair of the Grade 1 listed structure. This includes the removal of the existing lights to allow the repainting of the chains and hangers. and presents an opportunity to upgrade and relight the Clifton Suspension Bridge while continuing to be sympathetic to the listed structure and preserve its status as an iconic landmark for the South-West.

A brief history

Lighting has been an integral part of the bridge throughout its history. After its opening, the bridge was lit by gas lamps. Until the mid-20th century the whole of the bridge was 'lit' for special occasions. Post 1966 work began towards installing more permanent lighting. This was costly to maintain and suffered from frequent vandalism and heavy weathering. In 2005/6 the system was replaced by the current system using the latest LED technology. The lighting was designed to enhance the architectural form of the bridge and emphasise the structure and texture of the stone towers while subtly connecting the bridge to the Gorge

This is an exciting opportunity to relight the Clifton Suspension Bridge and accentuate the iconic features. There will be environmental benefits in terms of more sustainable lighting and improvement to local ecology. The improved lighting will ensure safety and help those with impaired mobility and will make a significant contribution towards the maintenance and conservation of the Bridge. The Trust is looking to submit applications in the summer of 2022 with work to start on site in 2023.

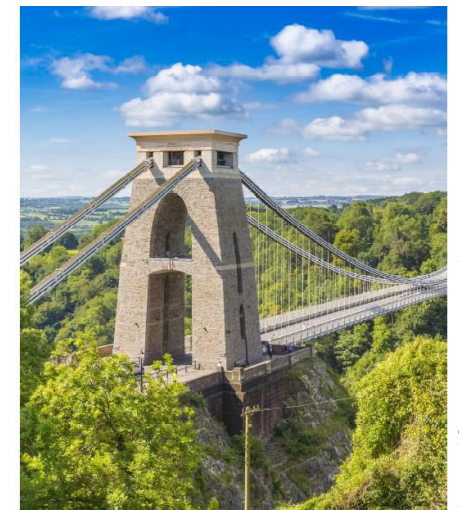


Photo: Clifton Suspension Bridge Trust

CLIFTON BRIDGE GARDEN VOLUNTEER REQUIRED.



Photo: ??

Have you ever noticed the small garden at the Clifton end of the suspension bridge? It has previously been maintained by Zoo staff but as a result of Bristol Zoo leaving Clifton the gardeners will no longer be able to look after the site. The garden requires only minimal maintenance and could be achieved with just a few hours a month. If this is something you would like to consider taking on or require more information about, please contact us.

The garden is interesting and was created by Bristol Zoo Gardens, the Clifton Suspension Bridge Trust and Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife Project and aims to highlight wild plants with an important historical and conservation association to the city of Bristol. These include the Bristol onion shown right, Bristol rock cress, and the autumn squill. The Avon Gorge is the Bristol Onion's only UK site. The Gorge is famous for its rare plants. Many

grow high up on the Gorge's rocky ledges so not always easily seen. They are rare and a national wildlife treasure.

If you think you can help, please get in touch by emailing robertjwestlake@gmail.com



Photo: ??

FUNDING THE DOWNS

Given the current discussions about how to fund the Downs, and what activities might be permitted it seemed a good time to review some of the other activities that have taken place on the Downs since the 1861 Act. Not all of these activities made a significant (or indeed any) contribution to the funds of the Downs, and many of them actively drained funds.

Carpet Beating This now departed activity, most notably took place by the Pound where Northcote and Bridge Valley Road meet. Beating was a necessity in the dusty days of coal and untarmacked roads, and the absence of vacuum cleaners. This activity was clearly sanctioned, as the Downs Committee paid for the erection and repair of 4 beating posts. This must at times have been quite a large affair, as there were complaints about the spreading and cleaning of mattresses as well. By the 1890s tolerance had worn thin as byelaws were enacted and signs erected banning this practice. The sanctions were hardly punitive however, only a fifth of those for riding a bike on the Downs, perhaps echoing a modern controversy.

Donkey Rides Complaints about 'donkey boys' causing a nuisance and also of donkeys being let loose on the Downs overnight date almost to the formation of the Downs Committee. There were 2 donkey stands on the Downs in the late Victorian period, one near St. Johns School, and the other at the top of Blackboy Hill. During the Edwardian period the trade was regulated with donkeys only to be ridden between 11:00am and 7:00pm, with a very civilised 1-hour lunch break.

Unfortunately, this does not seem to have been reflected in their other working conditions as the RSPCA campaigned against their use after the First World War, and the trade ceased in the late 1920s.

Golf The Clifton Downs golf course is believed to have had 9 holes and probably covered an area north of the Zoo Banks either side of Ladies Mile. The course existed in the 1890s but prior to that masters at Clifton College had been informally digging their own holes. Over time hours were restricted so there was no play after 2pm, or on Sundays. When all or part of the course was unavailable due to shows, they were even allowed to cut holes elsewhere. The course was

probably fairly unobtrusive, with only narrow fairways and very long rough – which allowed locals to earn pin money finding lost balls. After the area of the course was requisitioned by the army in 1941, there was no effort to re-establish it.

Bonfire Displays Bonfire Displays commenced in the 1930s and many readers will remember the bonfires displays held by the Water Tower, until well into the 21st century. Historically, the Downs Ranger was actively in favour of them on the grounds that they would decrease the likelihood of fires being lit elsewhere. Interestingly on more than one occasion the fires were fuelled by large quantities of old pianos donated by Mickelburghs.

Horse Racing Horse races took place on the Downs during the 1900s, although a report in the Bristol Journal noted that 'though the quality of animals was indifferent, the affair attracted a great attendance.' There is a painting of the races in the Bristol Museum by Rolinda Sharples.



Agricultural shows These were very substantial affairs beginning with the 1886 Bath and West show with an attendance of 90,000 over 5 days, and were followed by the Royal Agricultural Show. For the 1921 Bath and West, special trains were laid on, a green approach that we would envy today.

With thanks to the Bristol Records Society

Luke Hudson

FRAUD SAFETY WEBINARS

Fraud safety webinars for those seeking to gain knowledge and stay safe from frauds are being hosted by the South West Regional Organised Crime Unit in May, June and July.

The 45-minute session will cover the current dangers caused by fraud in the UK and will discuss the most common frauds encountered at the present time, before rounding-off with the 'Golden Rules' to avoid fraud in daily life. The session has been created for anyone who may seek to raise their general awareness of the current fraud landscape, while enhancing their understanding of the way many frauds work to help them avoid fraud in the future. For more details visit the event page on Eventbrite to book or ??.

BRISTOL COMEDY GARDEN RETURNS TO THE DOWNS.

A treat for all comedy fans is planned for the Downs this year with the return of the Bristol Comedy Garden.

15-19 June will see a host of top acts grace the Downs for this much vaunted summer favourite. Comedy stars James Acaster (below), Alan Davies, Aisling Bea, Nish Kumar. Rose Matafeo, Ardal O'Hanlon, Phil Wang and many more will be there to impress fans.

Since 2011 Bristol Comedy Garden has been hosted in Queen Square, but last year moved to the Downs. And while shows have previously taken place in a large marquee, last year saw the comedians take to an open-air stage with the audience sat on chairs spread out on the green space, in line with Covid social distancing guidelines.

Although restrictions have been lifted for 2022 this year the show will still take shape as an open-air event on the Clifton Downs and will be extra special as the festival is celebrating its tenth anniversary.

To compliment the performances there will be bars and refreshments supplied from local street food favourites.



COMMITTEE:

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

SECRETARY: Jac Solomons

KEY CONTACTS:

Membership: mail@gubbin.co.uk

Please Note: Deadline for submissions for the Summer edition is 20th July 2022. Articles and photographs to:

fodagcontent@gmail.com

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.

SOCIAL MEDIA:

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

Instagram: Friends_of_the_Downs.

Downs App: This is now working again, with grateful thanks to Emily Smithson.

FOD+AG EVENTS:

Book a walk/talk with Neill Talbot on J June 19th at 11.30am to learn more about our wildflowers.

Free to members, non members £10.

To sign up contact robertjwestlake@gmail.com.

