

FOD + AG

Friends of the Downs + Avon Gorge

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Summer 2022



CHAIRMAN'S REPORT**AUGUST 2022**

You may recall from the Spring Newsletter that the Downs Committee was under sustained pressure to become more transparent in the way it conducted its business. Following the damaging court case brought by Downs for People and others the Committee commissioned a survey to explore possible alternative governance models that might be appropriate for the Downs. The conclusion of the survey indicated that there was no real appetite for major change but the way the Downs Committee conducted its affairs should be reviewed. The good news is that there seems to be a new spirit of determination within the Committee to bring about change.

Documents like financial reports are now available in greater detail and in future the public will have greater access to the Committee and have an opportunity to place questions. One of FOD+AG's key issues has been about continuity within the Committee with key positions currently changing every year so we are pleased to see that concern addressed at least for this year with previous Committee member and current Lord Mayor, Paula O'Rourke, now taking the chair and Councillor Steve Smith, the previous chair, remaining on the Committee. This could provide a platform for policies and procedures to be put in place and eventually brought to fruition. I am cautiously optimistic that there is a new and encouraging willingness within the Downs Committee to engage with others to bring about the one thing we all want, a well managed and welcoming public open space.

The long awaited decision to permit the development of a new cafe and toilet block at Seawalls has finally happened. FOD+AG, after much deliberation, took the view that supporting the proposal was the pragmatic option given that the net benefit of new toilets, an education hub and cafeteria outweighed the alternative of having the current toilets closed down anyway.

The previously mentioned court case has seriously dented the Downs finances. The *Bristol Post* in an article published at the end of June reported that last year's legal costs meant that the Committee's budget was seriously overspent by a staggering £207,295 and that this sum would need to be underwritten by city taxpayers. This is a

serious situation and in the current climate will require some creativity to bring about financial stability.

At the last meeting of the Downs Committee, I presented a statement that included a report of dangerous driving on the Downs picked up from Facebook and below is a message from a regular Downs user. Unfortunately, it highlights the disregard some people have for nature, the environment and community spaces. Downs Committee member Cllr. Steve Smith has promised to raise the matter with Avon & Somerset Crime Commissioner.

'So disappointed to see the grass totally shredded and littering everywhere this morning, plus at least one totally destroyed picnic bench. As a local resident I could hear cars tearing around last night for a couple of hours and did try and get hold of non-urgent police to report it, but without any luck. Such a shame. As a dog walker - I'm here at least once a day most days and it's sad to see a minority ruining this special place for the majority.'

The story was picked up by Alex Seabrook (Bristol Post) who after further research reported that the car meet was held on June 12th which saw drivers showing off souped-up cars drifting on the grassed areas of the Downs. Apparently this is the third time this has happened. FOD+AG understands that after further inquiries the police have issued seventeen Notices of Prosecution for driving on the Downs.

BCCMUK, understood to be the organisers of the meet, appear to arrange similar events across the region on a regular basis with locations withheld until the last minute. Social media posts after June 12th, and referring to BCCMUK, show cars driven dangerously across the Downs, with hundreds of spectators looking on.

Robert Westlake Chair



FOD+AG are considering covering the cost to replace the wrecked bench, shown here.

RECREATING PARKS:

Securing the Future of our Urban Green Spaces

Parks have been a vital public service throughout the UK's lockdown. But their financial plight and health benefits have not been fully recognised.

Key Points

- Parks have suffered funding cuts under austerity, whilst recent government policies have been ad hoc. Parks are kept afloat by volunteer labour, lottery funding, and controversial commercialisation projects.
- 'Natural capital valuations' can demonstrate the myriad benefits of parks, far beyond the value of their maintenance budgets. One estimate puts the wellbeing value of UK parks and green spaces at £32.4bn.

Policy Recommendations

- Park Districts – mirroring practices in some US cities, homeowners with properties in close proximity to parks could pay a small tax to directly fund local authority parks. In Seattle's King County, this rate is \$7.20 per month for the owner of a home worth \$500,000.
- Transferring control to non-profits – communities often plug the gap when local authorities cannot fully maintain parks. In light of a pilot in Newcastle, policymakers should explore whether charitable foundations and communities are better placed to provide urban green spaces.
- Involving business – taxpayer funds have been a vital lifeline for businesses during the COVID-19 crisis. Businesses can return the favour by investing locally in shared green spaces once the crisis recedes.
- A new role for the NHS – international evidence and NHS pilots have shown that using parks as a healthcare resource can improve outcomes for patients. Green prescribing could save NHS resources and see NHS England play a contributory role in urban green space provision.

Source Social Marketing Foundation

RJW

WILDFLOWER WALK/TALK WITH NEILL TALBOT

June 19th

Nine enthusiasts enjoyed Neill's superb walk/talk in lovely weather. Assisted by his wife Kay, he really made us take notice by outlining some crucial points about the Daisy family (massive) before we left the meeting point ... and in typical botanist manner he found several good examples for us before we had gone more than a few yards. The eyes of the group members seemed to get sharper as time went on: that shriek did not require first aid but was because something really good had been spotted. Lenses and magnifying glasses were put to good use. Oh ... the orchids: green winged, bee, common spotted, marsh and hybrids. Clearly the efforts made by Mandy Leivers of the Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife project and FOD+AG to protect the wildflower meadow have been to some extent successful.

My favourite plant of the day? Corky water dropwort - see right.

Many thanks to Neill and Kay for a remarkable morning.

Robin Haward



Photos: Robin Haward

DOWNS CAFÉ LATEST

After a protracted and at times fraught planning process the City Council's Development Control B Planning committee finally accepted the Downs Committee proposal to demolish the old Seawalls toilet block and replace it with a brand-new facility; comprising a cafe, new publicly available toilets and a small education hub. The proposal also includes reinstating a nearby listed drinking fountain.

The background is that the current over seventy-year-old toilet block is no longer fit for purpose and continual funding for repeated repairs and cleaning is no longer a sustainable option. The Downs Committee's financial standing is such that they are not in a position to continue paying for the toilets or have the financial wherewithal to finance a new facility. The proposal is that the revenue from the cafe will finance the cleaning and maintenance and contribute to the Downs finances.

It was against this background that your FOD+AG committee after much debate agreed to support the proposal. We indeed had concerns that this could open the door to further commercial development, we had concerns about the impact on this iconic location and its wildlife, even concerns about the proposed design and under normal circumstances we would resist ceding even an inch of Downs green space for any such development.

The FOD+AG committee felt that on balance the proposal offered more by way of net benefit to Downs users than the obvious downside of no facility whatsoever. Our principal justification for support was the toilet facility. So many citizens are restricted in their daily lives by how far they dare go from a toilet that we considered to not support the proposal as almost discriminatory. The small education hub will permit the important work of the Downs & Avon Gorge Wildlife Project to proceed with an element of protection from the elements and the cafe, as stated, will provide the funding, plus an opportunity to take refreshments at this evocative location.

The decision to support was not taken lightly and FOD+AG were pleased to be involved in the democratic process that got us to this point.

Robert Westlake. (Chair)

ST CHRISTOPHER'S DEVELOPMENT

In May the Bristol Post reported that the former St Christopher's School in Westbury Park is to open its five-acre grounds and old school hall to the community for a year.

The move will see charities, community groups and arts organisations have free use of its indoor and outdoor spaces on a daily basis for the next 12 months. Luke Martin, senior project manager at Socius, which is redeveloping the school, said: 'The site has been closed to the public and hidden behind a wall for many years. We have already started to open up the site and make it part of the wider community. We want to continue this.'

Currently, the site is providing temporary affordable accommodation for 90 people living as guardians and is home to a Covid vaccination centre for Whiteladies Medical Centre. The old school hall can hold up to 80 people seated and has a stage and bathroom facilities. Outside there are a number of areas suitable for small or large groups, with access to facilities.



Above: Aerial view of the site at present.

Right: St Christopher's Action Network visualisation of the proposed blocks of flats

PLANS FOR THE PORTWAY

Transport Improvements to the A4 Portway route - early engagement
This from the City Council:

Over the past decade changes have been made to the road network in Bristol to improve bus journey times and encourage walking and cycling. However, the transport network in Bristol still faces challenges, including growth in housing and employment areas, unreliable journey times, and high levels of congestion and air pollution. To address these challenges, and help Bristol reach its 2030 carbon neutral target, radical changes to Bristol's road network are required. These changes will need to make a transformational difference to bus travel, and act as an enabler for cycling and walking. Over the next 10 to 15 years Bristol and the West of England Combined Authority have committed to developing and improving bus services as a priority for the region, in collaboration with bus operators.

Project ambition

The focus of A4 Portway project is to develop and improve bus services and the walking and cycling environment running along the north western section of the A4.

Buses are an essential service connecting people to education, employment, sport and leisure activities, and are integral in connecting communities. Through infrastructure changes, the aim is to achieve greater bus reliability, improved bus punctuality, growth in people travelling by bus, and a step change in the quality of bus services along the A4. While the focus is on the bus services, there is scope to consider improvements to active travel infrastructure.

The A4 Portway route

The A4 in Bristol links two of the city's park and ride sites: one at Portway and one at Brislington. This early engagement will focus on the north western section, starting on the A4 Portway (near the M5 flyover) running south along the Portway to Hotwell Road. It will then continue for a short section of the A4 Anchor Road, up to the junction with Explore Lane.

For a paper version of the survey or to ask for it in another format,

email transport.engagement@bristol.gov.uk, phone 0117 903 6449 and leave a message on the answerphone, or write to A4 Portway, Transport Engagement Team, PO BOX 3399, 100 Temple Street, Bristol, BS1 9NE.



FOD+AG FANTASTIC

The Friends of Downs and Avon Gorge have been awarded the prestigious Pick Me Up, community clean-up award in this year's Growing a Better Future. The award is sponsored by the Conservation Foundation and to succeed we managed to beat off strong entries from cities like Birmingham and Chelmsford.

Project Director Alison Willis said *'We had some fantastic projects entered in all three categories so you did well to fight off the competition.'*

The award comes with £1000 in prize money which we will be using for a Downs related project.

Congratulations to long serving committee member and team leader Martin Collins and his intrepid band of litter operatives for bringing this award to the Downs.

RJW

Right: A recent haul from the Portway!



Photo: Martin Collins

BRISTOL ZOO GARDENS

In June Bristol Zoological Society submitted a planning application for its Clifton site. If approved the proposal will transform the site. The zoo will close in September and move to the Wild Place Project in South Gloucestershire. The plans show that the gardens would be freely accessible to the public and remain largely unchanged, although a new play area will be created.

The iconic main entrance will be retained and a new café, exhibition space, and cultural educational hub will be created. Space for community events will also be available.

The plans include the creation of around 200 new dwellings located mainly where structures already exist and around the perimeter walls and will range from two to six storeys high with 20% affordable.

The Society wants to sell the site, but says that it has led the planning application to protect the legacy of the gardens. Dr Justin Morris, chief executive of the society, said: 'This is an important milestone and an exciting step forward for the future of Bristol Zoological Society'.

Plans also indicate that the famous Monkey Temple and the old Bear Pit will be preserved.

Bristol Zoological Society plans to sell the 12-acre site, but says that it has led the planning application to ensure that it protects the legacy of the gardens, and to secure the future of the charity. RJW



THE SHEEP GRAZING 2022

May 18th saw a lovely history moment on the Downs by St. Monica's. Yes, the sheep grazing which happens every few years to secure the ancient right of the Downs commoners to graze their sheep on the Downs. Since about 1926 the Downs has been bleat free when the grazing of sometimes 2,000 sheep stopped. This event keeps the right going. Organised by the Merchant Venturers with the Downs supervisor, Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife project, Theological College, the University Botanic garden and FOD+AG the event provided an opportunity to meet the sheep and see a bit of history in action. Mandy Leivers from the Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife Project led education sessions for children from the three schools who came and Melanie Baker talked about her lovely black Welsh mountain sheep provided for the event, and in my book she wins the title 'most enthusiastic shepherdess of the year'. The children loved seeing and stroking the sheep and seeing how wool was spun on a real old spinning wheel with Sarah Harris.

The great and good attended - the Deputy Lord Mayor and Peaches Golding (Her Majesty's Lord Lieutenant for Bristol) as well as the Chair of St. Monica's Trust and the master of the Merchant Venturers.

But... the real stars of the event were the children and the sheep!

Many thanks to Robert, Tim, manning the FOD+AG stall.

Terry and Dave for Robin Haward



“IT WAS TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.....”

Actually, it's been longer than that, I have an email from Gordon Millward, the Downs Ranger in 1997, who expressed his likeness for the plan ... and the plan was/is still ... to close Ladies Mile on the occasional Sunday during the Summer to provide a safe area where everybody can go to walk, cycle, skateboard without the danger of being run over.

I am not anti-car, I have a car and I use it, I just think that it would be nice occasionally to have an area clear of them.

My campaign started in 2002 (the article shows me then). I wrote emails, newspaper articles, letters to my MP and local councillors, I was on Radio Bristol and Points West - you name it I did it. The response was very positive, John Roy the manager with the council's traffic department said:

'The closure would put an end to traffic speeding problems. It's feasible to close Ladies Mile for most of its length without restricting general access to the Downs by motor vehicles. Access for pedestrians, cyclists, and disabled people is likely to be easier and safer.'

The Police and Fire Department were happy with the plan.

So far so good. I'd seen the *Sunday Car Free Days* work in New York's Central Park, Sydney's Centennial Park and I was told that it works in the Bois de Boulogne in Paris and the whole of the centre of Bordeaux (our twin city) that is closed on one Sunday a month.

I had hundreds of letters of support from families and cyclists including my then MP Valerie Davey. Following extensive surveys and a feasibility study's carried out by Bristol City Council it was decided that it was a good idea - and that it should go ahead.

So what happened? Don't forget this is Bristol and things don't happen very quickly, if at all. Then I received an email from the local councillor and Downs Committee member who wrote to me saying: 'Closing the road will cause problems for my constituents who are opposed to the suggestion'. And as he was on the Downs Committee, it never happened, all that time and effort came to nothing.

I am wondering, now that there is a review of the Downs management going on, should I try again? Would an email to the new Lord Mayor and Downs Committee chair Cllr. Paula O'Rourke make a difference? Will it – could it -ever happen?

So that's the end of my story.

'Twenty years ago today...' It's the first line from *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club band*, in case you're wondering! Derek Catterall



ASH TREES ON THE DOWNS AND ASH DIE BACK

The Ash tree (*Fraxinus excelsior*) is one of a relatively few native trees of Britain and is quite a feature on the Bristol Downs, particularly north of Circular Road and Zoo banks. The canopy of an Ash tree casts a light shade which is ideal for us to be outdoors without overheating on the hottest days of the year.

Many will have heard of the disease 'Ash dieback' which might sound like a mild impairment, it is however likely to be fatal for up to 90% of our Ash trees. The Latin name for the disease is (*Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*), previously called *Chalara fraxineus*. The disease is transmitted by a fungal spore which blows many miles on the wind and arrived on the Downs 3 or 4 years ago. The term dieback describes the most visible characteristic of the disease, which is for the ends of the branches to lose their leaves.

The disease has the effect of cutting off the supply of water from the roots so downstream branches die and this progresses towards the stem of the tree. The process can take a number of years though in some cases the tree can show recovery during this time.



Picture shows the leaf pattern and how it presents a light shade.

Photo: Nature and Garden

When the die back has become advanced, there is no alternative but to fell the tree, and you may notice Ash trees getting this treatment.

An infected Ash tree canopy with bare leafless ends to branches, a very visible indication of the disease.



Photo: Lancaster City council

TREES FOR STREETS

This tree sponsoring site can be accessed from the Bristol gov site with the following steps: For residents> Museums, parks, sports and culture> Parks and open spaces>Trees and meadows>treesforstreets Or directly on the treesforstreets web site page for Bristol <https://sponsor.treesforstreets.org/provider/bristol-city-council> There are two options here, sponsor a 'street tree', or sponsor a tree in a 'Bristol park'. If you click on the 'Bristol park' option, the map is populated with predetermined tree planting sites, there are currently 17 showing around the Granny Downs and the upper Parrys Lane. The trees species that have been selected for these sites are Hungarian Oak or Indian Horse Chestnut seen here. The Indian horse chestnut is chosen for resistance to leaf miners, which makes the leaves go brown in July on the traditional horse chestnut. There are already a number of Indian Horse chestnut, slightly darker leaf and flowers in June/July instead of April/May. The Hungarian Oak may be a climate change choice as it can cope with 'drought' conditions.



If you click on the 'street tree' option, there are two further options, select a 'pre-approved location' or 'choose your own location'. The pre-approved location will take you to a map where pre-approved street trees can be clicked on. The 'choose your own location' option allows you to select on a map a location anywhere in Bristol, street or park. It does say 'the council will need to approve your location'. After going through a simple menu that determines the suitability of the chosen site it allows you to enter payment details in order to sponsor the planting of a tree at that site.

A couple of the pre-selected sites for planting trees on the Granny Downs is where a current tree has yet to be felled. Dave Jones

THE GRANNY DOWNS DIARY

Travelling hopefully into spring 2022 - my goodness, such a long-awaited spring.

January 2nd - a cloud of silent blackbirds over the Granny Downs. The sun is low and the alchemist wind turns fallen leaves into birds, and birds into leaves.

January 9th - the first woodpigeon cooing of the year and there's a nuthatch above a robin in this Turkey Oak.

January 14th - a magnificent seven of squirrels scurrying in line along this fence, and a goldcrest in the Yew. The song thrush sounds more enthusiastic this morning.

January 17th - heart-stoppingly beautiful opera of song thrush sung from low in the bush. As the season progresses, they sing from higher and higher perches.

January 19th - now it's the turn of the blackbird to sing; thick frost, ice, early morning.

January 20th - it's that song thrush again and he's attracted an audience of goldfinches, two wood pigeons and a jay. Birds listen rather than compete until the dawn chorus.

January 25th - first celandine in flower! This is exciting. Also I am wondering if robins sing differently in the starlight. Discover that yes they do, the pauses between verses are longer.

February 2nd - little lake of aconites. Very welcome and always remind me of the *Flower Fairies*.

February 3rd - impossible, the drumming of the great spotted woodpecker, one of the most exciting sounds in the world. I once heard four of these drumming from different points in a wood in Ashton Court Park.

February 7th - out for a walk with son Peter, redwings, a jay, a blackbird and A CHAFFINCH. Once the most common of the birds, the chaffinch is now a celebrity on the Granny Downs.

February 15th - so much rain and the Granny Downs is the Lake District with gulls swimming in the water under the birch.

February 18th - BIG STORM and I long to go out to the Granny Downs

but all these weather warnings. All my life I have hated being sensible.

February 19th - good heavens, a blackbird with a white spotted head! It was on the Granny Downs that I befriended the bald blackbird many years ago! This one is not bald but has white spots and I know that from this day on I shall be looking out for him.

February 20th - here's a gull near the Granny Downs lake, paddling up and down in a little dance. This is aimed at making worms think its raining and coming up to the surface. It works.

February 24th - dunnocks are playing kiss chase in this bush. Where is the spotted blackbird?

February 26th - I have a soft spot for celandines that nestle at the bottom of the limes, like here ...

March 1st - I encounter the pied blackbird with a long twig in his mouth. He sees me watching and tosses the twig away, flies off aghast and protesting. Was he trying to help his mate with nest building? Angry birds do protest, I remember seeing the local ravens pulling up grass in anger when they were disturbed on the turf.

March 8th - oh the wonderful, casual drumming of the great spotted woodpecker. This drumming gets less casual as spring progresses. Today it sounds tentative.

March 11th - more celandines yearning to the sun.

March 12th - heads down, horrible wet morning but I am hearing an avian orchestra. Sounds like redwings but no, there are hundreds of starlings at the top of a horse chestnut, fluffing their wings and showering in the rain. What a sight! And today, white violets, primroses, alkanet, forget me nots and periwinkle. Especially pleased to see the white violets. When I was first in Bristol there were more white sweet violets than purple. And it is only in recent years that I have found red sweet violets, in Fairyland. There is a hillside of red violets at Ashton Court.

March 16th - it isn't! It can't be! But it is – a swallow over the horse chestnut ride.

March 18th - horse chestnut buds at the end of branches offering

themselves to the sun. Two collared doves and a jubilant nuthatch.

What a morning! I shall sing!

March 19th - goldfinches playing kiss chase this morning, and here is a celandine pretending to be a buttercup. When there are so many of a flower, there are bound to be size, shape and (less often) colour exceptions. Petals have fused in this celandine and the petals have become round.

March 20th - patch of white violets larger and some have purple stripes. Every one of these petals is a work of art.

March 22nd - I am now spending much of my time looking up and of course, this puzzles passers-by. I also trip over! And here's a long-tailed tit. Just the one. This is an indication of nesting time, otherwise just the one would be impossible. I am still working on the greatest mystery in birdwatching, how come more long-tailed tits fly out of a bush than flew into it. By the way, the collective name for long-tailed tits is a volary ... related to the expression in the song, volare, meaning I will fly.

March 25th - music of starlings bursts over my head! And they fly in all directions. Blackbirds the dominant singers and as usual, the pigeons are in the audience. And I hear a chaffinch. Delighted by this. Crows flying hither and thither with twigs in mouths, there's no hanging about now. Things to do ... nests to build ...

March 30th - every Dunnock has his day and today he is the dominant singer. Also it's a five daisy day, can put my hand on five daisies at once, a definition of spring.

April 2nd - this is outrageous! It's snowing and the trees are thin and wintry again. This is a robin snow, a beautiful expression first encountered in the 19th century. It means a light snowfall in late spring, a snow which does not drive off the robins. A snow said to draw the last frost from the ground and bring earthworms to the surface.

April 5th - the seed-leaves of the lime tree are like little hands prising through the earth. Next to the perhaps more mundane sycamore wings. The first true leaves will be next. There's a fluffy and rather

sweet magpie courtship happening on the turf under this horse chestnut. Magpies certainly make cherry blossom look more beautiful.

April 9th - who would have thought there were so many shades of green in one small place!

April 11th - bluebells along this low wall. These are true bluebells, bending to a fluid arc. There's a lot of anger directed at the threat of the Spanish bluebells. A bit like the anger that used to be directed at sycamores. Hunting parties used to go into woods to trample baby sycamores and pull up the Spanish bluebells. I'm just grateful for anything beautiful now.

April 18th - holly blue butterfly, a little bluebell in flight. And cuckoo flower. Several years ago, I found a fairy ring of cuckoo flower, here on the beloved Granny Downs.

April 25th - today the word is shimmer, the new birch leaves are shimmering in the sun and the horse chestnut walk is a glory beyond words. The thousands of white spires offered to heaven show the immensity of these trees ... back on earth, here's cowparsley and a ladybird on one of the flower heads. Oh! the lovely seductive melody of blackcaps! Sometimes people tell me they have heard the nightingale on the Granny Downs. Why not? Why puncture a dream. And after all blackcaps are called northern nightingales. On the other hand, if they tell me they have heard a cuckoo here, I might point them in the direction of a wood pigeon.

Spring into summer

April 27th - it begins, the hawthorn blossom. I've just accompanied a group of ladies around the Granny Downs. Their leader wanted to do Richard Bland's tree trail and they had asked me along as the wildlife person. I felt proud of this beloved arboretum, so much to see and talk about, from the blossom of the trees to the birdsong and cuckoo flower. It was a real show off tour. My thanks to the late, great Richard who once took me to a beech along the Promenade that was covered with snails, just that one tree, he said, always that one. I don't think we ever resolved the snail tree mystery ... but this does relate to a snail mystery on the Granny Downs. Several years ago, in

the early morning, at about this time of year, I came across a hawthorn encircled on the grass by snails all moving towards the bush. There were over a hundred of them, moving quickly for snails. I've never seen this since and cannot think of any explanation. My son Peter is here and we watch a young jay having a good old preen.

May 4th - and cuckoo spit has arrived. I encounter children in school uniform drawing half a tree each. They explain that their art project is to choose a tree, draw half of it, and then they will come back in a month and draw the other half to show how it has changed.

May 6th - today I am face to face with a silver buttercup. Yellow on the outside, shining silver on the inside.

May 8th - the song of the wren is the definition of sweet this morning.

May 11th - where are the swifts?

May 13th - here are the swifts!

May 14th - some of the horse chestnut blossom is turning into little conker cases.

May 16th - two nuthatches on a fence and I can hear the blackcap. I walk under confetti of white petals and one of them is a feather.

May 20th - today the main event is the red hawthorn!

May 22nd - and now the beauty moves to the ground and the carpets of gold ... buttercup time! As gradually the leaves of the trees get darker ... Every tree I pass has a singing blackcap in it.

May 27th - starlings being chased by their demanding noisy young. And at last, the elder blossom! That signals the beginning of summer as the berries signify the end of it. The blackbird not only sings slower phrases but repeats them more often, a little like a song thrush. Yes, he is teaching the young their song.

May 31st - I can put a hand over 15 daisies. The green of the landscape is unrelieved by blossom apart from the dinner plates of the elderflowers. The dark mystery of summer begins. Tortoiseshell butterfly with a pretty hop skip and jump flight from flower to flower.

June 8th - wild roses, each petal a masterpiece.

June 9th - silence of the birds begins

June 12th - the wings of the linden blossom start to fall and go brown,

and soon folk will tell me autumn has come early!

June 14th - and linden blossom, the most exquisite tree fragrance on earth. Mating harlequin ladybirds on bramble. Ladybirds seem especially drawn to bramble.

June 19th - a baby conker in its case fell on my head!! They certainly are getting bigger!

June 24th - oh! the fragrance zone around the limes and the golden shadows of pollen under them. The pollen is so fragrant. There are some very long stemmed dandelions about. I may start measuring them.

June 28th - the tree leaves are getting even darker ... summer is a time of mystery and light.

July 1st - the month which one of my favourite poets, Pasternak, calls the meadow scented month. He describes linden blossom as having an unfathomable fragrance, which only bees can understand. In another of his poems, he quotes the proverb: life is not a walk across a field. Of course, but sometimes, for a while on Granny Downs, it is.

Geraldine@geraldinetaylor.co.uk

Laburnum flowering on Granny Downs mid May 2022



WHERE ARE ALL THE BUTTERFLIES GOING?

For a group of insects of relatively limited number and diversity, UK native butterflies attract a significant wealth of attention. I was tempted to substitute the word 'remarkable' here, but of course, it is their touch of the exotic which engages the interest of so many of us, so their popularity is anything but remarkable. It also helps to explain why they are so important to those of us with a concern over wildlife conservation. Their colours, patternings, sizes and behaviours all contribute to their iconic status – and with the general public and not just with specialist lepidopterists.

Once awakened, an interest in butterflies is quickly and richly rewarding due to their accessibility. In addition it also provides an opening into an understanding of ecology so vital to our successful response to the threats to biodiversity all over the world.

For me there is something hugely reassuring about the science of ecology – a word derived from the Greek '*oikos*' meaning 'home'. The latter, so simple a concept and yet so profound, lies at the heart of our experience at every level - from personal to planetary – and holds the key to most, if not all of our current global predicaments. Such is the pace and depth of scientific research in the modern world, that there is a real danger that the holistic approach of subjects like ecology can be overlooked in favour of the precise, detailed and necessarily narrow focus of *e.g.* biochemistry, electron microscopy and genetic sequencing and manipulation. Both of these broad branches of scientific study have a part to play in human progress, but I would argue that the special role of ecology is that of communicating with the general public and developing what has come to be known as 'citizen science'. So with that context in mind, four questions occur to me in relation to UK butterflies:

1. What has led to recent headlines such as 'Half of UK's butterfly species are now listed as vulnerable to extinction'?

Understandably each of our 59 native species has its own tale to tell and specialist web-sites should be consulted for detailed information. My aim here is to give a broad picture of the major threats our

butterflies have to contend with. Few will be surprised that their first challenges are posed by climate change in the form of global warming! All living creatures thrive best within a limited temperature range - butterflies are no different, but their fascinating life cycles add complications to this picture. The eggs and caterpillars are very sensitive to changes in microclimate and are dependent on certain plant species they support. This means that whilst the adults might survive, due to their more generalist diets, they might then fail to reproduce.

This illustrates the effect of habitat modification whether due to temperature change or *e.g.* human directed habitat loss. The UK has lost 80% of its chalk grasslands since 1945, one of the factors in the decline of the Large Blue butterfly (but see below for some better news) and loss of woodlands have had a similar effect on Large Tortoiseshell butterflies.

Rising temperatures have also been reported to change butterflies physically as their ranges move north to remain within their preferred climate - something which has happened to the Scotch Brown Argus. Pollution has affected the ability of butterflies to navigate towards flowers for nectar.



From left: Large Blue, Large Tortoiseshell, Scotch Brown Argus

2. Why does this matter?

As alluded to above, butterflies are important indicators of environmental health giving them a primary role in recognizing when our actions are threatening to wildlife as well as when we have been successful in restoring balance and biodiversity.

They act as pollinators of many wildflower species contributing to their survival and to biodiversity as well as being integral to many

food chains and webs - in particular, but not solely, at the larval or caterpillar stage of their life cycles during which many of our newly-hatched and newly-fledged birds have much to be thankful for as they feast on these dedicated protein factories.

To me, although academic ecologists might quarrel with its inclusion, butterflies are amongst the most inspirational species in the education of children and their development of a sense of wonder and in addition is it too fanciful to suggest that as adults we might share this fascination as a vital part of our search for mental stability and spiritual well-being in an often stressful and troubling world? As many butterfly enthusiasts will already know, the Greek word for butterflies 'psyche' means 'spirit'!

3 What is being done about it?

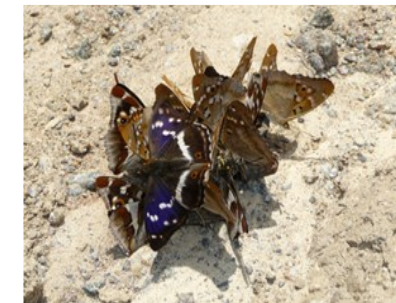
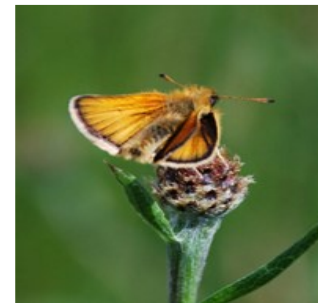
The nature of the threats which beset our native butterflies are, as you can see multi-faceted and some quite clearly are currently beyond immediate remedy. Climate Change is a global issue and one has to applaud those who are attempting against seemingly insurmountable odds to tap into the global conscience, but unless there is a *universal* treaty i.e. one to which there are no exceptions, temperatures and dangers will continue to rise.

On a national scale there are actions under way to address habitat loss. Many of these come under the broad heading of 'Rewilding' Projects. They are not without their opponents, but in spite of that there have been notable successes reported. At the Knepp Wildland in West Sussex, amongst many other species enjoying a resurgence, there has been an explosion of Purple Emperors from zero in 2008 (at the start in earnest of their rewilding programme) to become 'by far the largest breeding colony in the UK by July 2018'**

**from *Wilding* by Isabella Tree published in paperback by Picador in 2019, a book I can unreservedly recommend to anyone with a scintilla of interest in ecology and the natural world. 'It is a joyful, poignant memoir of exhausted land becoming a rich ecosystem again and in so doing forces us to rethink farming' to quote from *The Times* 'Books of the Year'.

Reintroductions of extinct or rapidly declining species is another strategy which is bearing some fruit, the best known example being a West Country project involving the Large Blue butterfly.

Butterflies have the capacity to spread – witness the fairly rapid migration of the Essex Skipper at least as far west as the our own Gully, but in order to do so connectivity between suitable habitats is required. This was once provided by hedgerows and field margins with their wildflowers. Restoration of such corridors by local authorities leaving verges mostly uncut until harvest time has been a welcome move. This has also been supplemented by the practice of some house-owners of giving over garden space to wildflowers and to selective planting of species which attract butterflies as has been suggested for bees. All have a positive impact, but it would be greater had increased car-ownership not led to car parking problems and the consequent increased tarmacking of many gardens to provide off-road parking. Such restoration efforts are supported by monitoring techniques by members of the public and genomic studies by qualified scientists - both play a part in tracking the health of butterfly communities to ensure that changes in populations alert us to any need for intervention. Once again we should recognize how valuable can be joint action by research, imaginative local government and 'citizen science'



Far left: Essex skipper
Left: Purple Emperor

4. What is the local situation in the areas where FOD+AG has monitored for 12 years?

Closer to home, our local butterfly communities showed signs of fluctuations in both numbers and diversity in recent years and although this might reflect some influence of difficulties with monitoring during the Covid19 pandemic, our records suggest an overall slight decline in both parameters in both of our transects as well as a convergence of the two communities almost certainly linked

to the project underway in the Gully to restore a calcareous meadow habitat there.***

With respect to butterfly species under threat, our major concern is for the disappearance over the last three seasons of the Chalkhill Blue from the Gully. Unlike the Small Blue, which still hangs on, albeit in very small numbers, we have until recently had a thriving colony of Chalkhills. I have to also admit to some concern over the relatively small numbers of Common Blues even in the rich wildflower meadow which forms a sector of the Downs transect. We cannot afford to lose these two iconic species – even though the equally beautiful Holly Blue does seem to be flourishing!



From left: Chalkhill Blue, Common Blue, Small Blue

In conclusion, it's important to note that changes in communities of living organisms are the stuff of evolution and as such we have to be prepared to accept them. What we should be less ready to accept is situations in which it is our careless stewardship has been the ultimate cause of such changes if the eventual outcome is extinction. Important too is a recognition that as species ranges move northwards we have already begun to see the establishment of breeding colonies of butterflies along our south coast for whom the crossing of the English Channel had previously been a wing-beat too far. Early reports suggest that a hybrid form of the Swallowtail has made this crossing. As our native Swallowtails have long been restricted to limited sites in East Anglia I am tempted to see this as a welcome change to our UK butterfly community? Martin Collins July 2022

***Interested readers will find summary posters of our transect records since 2010 on our website

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: position vacant - volunteer welcomed!

KEY CONTACT:

Membership: mail@gubbin.co.uk

Please Note: Deadline for submissions for the Winter edition is 20th October 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.

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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](https://www.facebook.com/fodagbristol).

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

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

FOD+AG AGM

7th December at 7pm at Redland Bowling Club
Refreshments, bar, guest speakers

DOWNS EVENTS

Forwards (formerly Downs Concerts) 2nd–4th September
Student Union event 23rd - 24th September
Circus 27th September – 16th October



YOUR DOWNS NEEDS YOU AS WELL

The Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge are committed to protect, preserve and enhance the Downs.

There is much going on at present. Changes may be imminent and it is important that you and your views are fully represented, be that with the Downs Committee or the City Council.

Your FODAG committee works tirelessly to meet all current and future challenges and we are active on many fronts.

As an organisation our reputation is second to none.

This is your chance to give something back to the Downs and come and join the FODAG committee. We are a small but friendly group of ardent volunteers who meet monthly in a convivial atmosphere.

New committee members would be most welcome

Help Us to Help the Downs.

If you are interested in becoming a committee member or just want more information, please contact the chair Robert Westlake directly at robertjwestlake@gmail.com