

FOD + AG

Friends of the Downs Avon Gorge

Issue 24

Winter 2017



Chairman's Report 2017

2016 has come and gone, being a year of extremes. New lows were experienced with the loss of three key and very active committee members through a death, a very serious illness and a conflict of interest. We have yet to fully recover and it will take time. On the positive side we had a very successful AGM with wide membership involvement, along with two social events which again involved the membership.

Regular membership activities continue apace earning a well deserved and widely respected reputation throughout Bristol. The envy of many.

2017 is with us and we are planning a year of activities leading up to our tenth anniversary in a year's time. We start with a committee / membership evening provisionally planned for the 19th April.

In the immediate term we are endeavouring to come to terms with the cuts in potential funding, not only by the City Council, but also the other sectors. Already there are threats to the very existence of your Downs!

As a team let's make it a memorable year..

Jack Penrose

2016 FODAG Annual General Meeting

Draft Minutes of the 2016 AGM held at the Redland Bowling Club on Wednesday 16 November at 7.00 pm

The chair welcomed 50 people, and introduced the existing and prospective committee members.

Apologies. Jenny Weeks, Janice Marsh, Brenda Lalonde, Jane Roberts, Pat Milligan Ben Skuse.

Minutes. The Acting Secretary read out the minutes of the 2015 AGM which were adopted as correct.

Treasurer's Report. The Acting Treasurer, Robin Haward explained that the grave illness of the Treasurer, Roger Garrett, had forced his resignation, and as a result the books had not been checked by the examiner. He announced that there was a sum of £4931.82 in the bank account and £2058.22 in an investment account with the Skipton Building Society. He recommended that the Examiner David Powell be re-appointed. This report and recommendation were accepted nem con.

Chairman's Report. The Chairman then read the report of the activities of the previous year, and his thoughts about future plans looking at legacy structures on the Downs, and the idea of establishing a Users' Forum.

Committee Elections. The existing committee, and two new members, Bob Bell and Rachel Hemming-Bray were proposed by Susan Carter and seconded by Jill Penrose, and elected nem con.

Coffee interval. A lively interval followed in which the display of activities was examined and a variety of discussions held.

Speakers. The three speakers were then introduced; Tim Ross, Master of the Merchant Venturers, Councillor Clare Campion-Smith, and Jane Memmot, Director of the University Botanic Garden. Each spoke for about ten minutes about their involvement with the Downs. Themes that became apparent were the complexity of the compromises that the variety of uses of the Downs involved; the value of the space for health and education; the subtle balance between public money (£260k) and commercial use (£200k); the need for greater financial transparency.

Questions from the audience were then put to the panel. Concern was expressed about both the Pop Concert and the proposal for a burger van at Sea Walls, and it was made clear that the aim of the Friends was to help and influence the Downs Committee, and not to work to support or oppose particular schemes. Questions covered the scrub management plan, the support for tourism, the relations of pedestrians

2016 FODAG Annual General Meeting

and cyclists, the effectiveness of the by-laws, the work of the goats in the Gully and the possibility of pedestrian access along the foot of the gorge. Members of the audience added their understanding of areas such as litter collection, and Francis Greenacre stressed the significance of the city consultation which closes on January 5th. It is vital that members use a search engine such as Google to find Bristol city corporate strategy consultation and give their views on the city's plans.

The acting secretary gave a vote of thanks to the speakers and the meeting closed at 9.15pm.

Martin Collins, Richard Bland



Courtesy: Rachel Hemming-Bray

The Botanical Garden Experimental Hay Meadow

Members of the FODAG committee have monitored an experimental plot in the University Botanic Garden for the fifth year. The site began as a load of limestone chippings laid on a small plot that had been stripped of its topsoil. In 2011 seed was gathered from the Downs hay crop and sown in April 2012, and there was a second sowing in that September, which proved more successful. The plot has been monitored during the growing season since then at fortnightly intervals by identifying every species growing in the meadow, and by identifying the species in ten fixed quadrats. There has been virtually no attempt to manage the site by any gardening operations, such as watering, or weeding though two species, Clary and Cowslip, were introduced by plugs. Several common species have blown in from outside, but none of them have lasted for long. A total of 85 species have been recorded in the course of five years.

In 2016 the total number of species present was 55, 47 of which flowered, up from 51 in 2015. Two rare new species, Ploughman's Spikenard and Centaury, appeared this year for the first time. Total plant cover of the chippings increased to just over 90%. Every year there are changes in the structure of the species as some are more successful than others. This year Wild Carrot, Common Knapweed, Catsear, and Red Clover were increasingly dominant, while Goatsbeard, Yellow Rattle, Rough Hawkbit and Ribwort Plantain decreased. Kidney Vetch also had a very good year, but by chance only appeared in one of the quadrats. Black Medick and Nipplewort, both very common wild plants, but not specifically limestone grassland plants, also did well.

The result after five years looks very different from the Downs turf, and there are several reasons for this. The Downs soil has had a thousand years or more being grazed by sheep and other animals to build itself up, and is very different from a pile of chippings. The plot is very free draining, so that plants that can get their roots down into the soil below are bound to do better than shallow rooted plants, including grasses. Secondly the plot is very infertile, so that leguminous plants that can create their own nitrate have a big advantage over plants that can't. Thirdly mowing or grazing has a huge impact on the type of plants that can survive, favouring small plants that have a low tough rosette of leaves over those that create a tall flowering head. As the plot is only cut like a hay meadow, once a year, the small plants get smothered.

The Botanical Garden Experimental Hay Meadow



Dead Hedges Protect the Wildflower Meadow
(Rachel Hemming-Bray)

Ecology of the Black Rock Gully

A Remarkable Gully: an introduction to the historical plant ecology of Black Rock Gully. In the third article in this series, a historical perspective of the plant ecology in the Gully is given to us by another local specialist, Clive Lovatt, who is the national expert on the subject of the plants of the Avon Gorge.



Aquatint of the Black Rock Gully, Clark & Duberg 1809

“Beyond the Great Quarry is the Engine House, and a remarkable gully, at right angles to the Avon Valley. Still further westward is the Black Rock, surmounted by the sea-wall, where there was formerly a signal staff ...it was near this staff that Mr Stephens made his discovery of the *Allium sphaerocephalum* [Round-headed Leek or Bristol Onion]; and Dr Dyer found the *Arabis stricta* [Bristol Rock-cross] in such abundance.” So wrote Dr Horace Swete in the introduction to his *Flora Bristolensis* of 1854. The Gully is a dry valley in the Carboniferous limestone which broadens out as it steeply descends some 300 feet from the Downs to the river in a south-westerly direction. Accordingly the northern slopes are south-facing and where still open can be dry and very warm; in contrast the southern slopes face north-west and are only sunny during spring and summer afternoons. Cliffs and screes add to the variation in topography and microclimate.

On the northern slopes trees would have been rare, and grazing sheep (and goats if the old prints are to be believed) would have kept it so. However, when I took him there, Oliver Rackham felt that some of the Hazel deep in the Gully on the south side had been coppiced and might therefore have been an ancient feature. The presence here of a rare sedge of wood margins supports this view. The yews around the top edges of the Gully on this side are also undoubtedly old – the alternate site name Walcombe Slade probably translates from Anglo-Saxon as the Valley of the Yews.

Planting of Austrian Pines (in the 1870s) and the invasion of scrub following cessa-

Ecology of the Black Rock Gully (Cont'd)

tion of sheep (1920s) and rabbit grazing (1950s) allowed the development of a closed canopy over the Dwarf Sedge grassland which dominated the northern slopes. Most of the rare plants in the Gully grow with this plant, although of this plant association, only the Dwarf Sedge can survive in partial shade and on the open southern slopes at the mouth of the Gully.

The Holm Oak is a particularly pernicious invasive alien tree, being evergreen and shooting from an untreated cut stump. Hence the installation of goats to try to restore the site in a way that manual clearance could never achieve. Whitebeams, including the Avon Gorge endemics, have also invaded the Dwarf Sedge grassland: that is why there are (theoretically) goat-proof enclosures and name labels to protect these special trees.

Trawling through the botanical record one can find references to plants growing in the Gully and see if they are still there. Collecting those records together can begin to allow a reconstruction of the historical vegetation.

For instance Swete's Flora reports that Miss Atwood found Small-flowered Sweetbriar and Tor-grass behind the Engine House, a pumping station of the 1850s below the cliffs at the bottom of the Gully. In White's *Flora of Bristol* (1912) he reported Bloody Crane's-bill "rather sparingly among bushes in one spot". They are all still there, but Flea Sedge ("still abundant...on the upper slopes of the Gully") and Carnation Sedge ("plentiful in the Black Rock Gully") have not been seen here since 1931. Nowadays near Bristol you would need to look for them together in the Gordano Valley, on peat.

Such plants, along with the heaths with which they grew on the Downs, gradually retreated to "ledges, banks and bushy spots for which the golfer and the footballer have no use". In a Wild Flower Society diary for 1914 we find Bell Heather on "slopes above the Gully" and in 1940 a local University undergraduate thesis maps a strip of heathy vegetation (Callunetum) at the top of the south side of the Gully. Remarkably, Bell Heather and Western (Autumn-flowering) Gorse are still there, together with Slender St John's-wort, Betony and Brown Bent-grass. All suggest slightly acidic soil which here probably derives from the Clifton Down Mudstone, rather than leached limestone soil, perhaps supplemented by wind-blown silt (loess) from the edges of the once nearby glaciers.

Clive Lovatt

January Deep Litter Clearance & Correspondence

One of FODAGs longest-lived and useful contributions to conserving the Downs for both people and wildlife is our monthly Deep Litter Clearances, indeed nearly 100 members –past and present - have volunteered at least once to take part. The event normally takes place on the last Saturday morning of the month, and this time nearly 20 volunteers turned out, and their efforts were rewarded as the rain and wind eased off to leave a crisp winter morning. The event also generated some interesting correspondence from organisers and participants.



FOD+AG Litter Clearers modelling the new FOD+AG branded Hi-Viz jackets

“Dear all, as always, thank you for turning out this morning and completing the task with such characteristic good humour and efficiency, that we finished ahead of schedule. It was good to hear from some of you that you were a little surprised at what relatively small amounts of litter you found individually. Good, because first it indicates the success we have had in reducing the problem by regular clearances; second because part of the reduction can probably be put down to the partial scrub clearance which is the first stage of the structured Downs Management Plan to be implemented; and third because it highlights the value of having a team of volunteers working together. Collectively our haul, albeit smaller than on previous DLCs, still speaks of too many anti-social individuals despoiling a resource for both people and wildlife which FOD+AG is committed to protecting, conserving and enhancing.”

Kind regards, Martin

January Deep Litter Clearance & Correspondence

Dear Martin

Thanks for this - what you say about Council responsibility makes great sense - & a VG idea to do leafleting & calling for more litter bins as you suggest - thank you.

Best wishes - & if it helps to quote any of this in the Newsletter - please do.

“Yes - except there did seem huge amounts of litter in the road we met/ parked in - where coaches etc park. Is that 'our' responsibility? I wished I'd seen it earlier! - only noticed at the end...”

Janet Dixon

“Hi Janet,

Thanks for your thoughts. At present, because the road litter is accessible to mechanical clearance by the Downs Ranger's team, whereas our targets are found in the inaccessible litter trapped within patches of vegetation. This is because part of our ambition is to make these habitats safer for wildlife as well as to remove human hazards and eyesores.

BCC employees are responsible, and make an excellent job of clearing the open meadow areas, but as local government cuts eat further into their number and time, it might well be that we are asked to increase our self-selected brief.

What I can do, with the approval of the FODAG Committee, is

- to propose the leafletting of coaches and HGVs using the site you refer to about the increase and asking them to draw attention of those who use them, especially coach passengers, to the problem and
- to suggest that more litter bins are provided at the site.

If you have any further ideas, please let us know.....and thanks again for your involvement in our Deep Litter Collections (on the final Saturday morning of each month from September to March from 10.00am until noon) so avoiding the period of the relatively high level of wildlife activity especially amongst birds, small mammals and invertebrates as well as wildflowers, during the spring and summer months.”

Kind regards, Martin

If you have any further ideas about what action FODAG can take to address the issue of littering please do email luke.hudson@hotmail.com or write to the FODAG central address.

Have Your Say: The 2016 Pop Concert on the Downs

“Dear Mr Haward,

I wish to comment on Richard Bland's article 'Some reflections on a busy summer', in particular the paragraph on 'The Pop Concert'.

I agree with Richard that the site was left in reasonable order and that the organisers' promises and actions with regard to traffic management in the area were successful. There were no problems in that respect, so far as I am aware. However, I live in a block of flats within 100 yards of the back of the stage and not down a hill, so unfortunately our experience was not so good as Richard's. Our windows vibrated, as did the whole building at one point (this was particularly scary) and the constant bass beat was extremely unpleasant. The sound levels may have been monitored, but I am sure that they exceeded the permitted level on at least one occasion.

I am also concerned that a large popular section of the Downs, including the iconic Seawalls viewpoint of the Suspension Bridge was to all intents and purposes unavailable to the general public for two whole weeks. This period included the August Bank Holiday weekend, which anyone who knows the Downs well, must be aware is a time when many families and others use that particular area for picnicking and other pastimes. In addition the enclosure was extremely ugly and forbidding in appearance.

Finally I wonder at the effect the noise during the Concert had on surrounding wildlife. I wondered if the goats were moved to a quieter situation? I think Richard's report gives rather too positive a view of the event, which many local residents hope will not be repeated at that particular venue.”

Yours sincerely,

Anne Lawrence

Robin Haward was asked about the current FODAG position on such events:-

“FODAG’s position is quite clear on this. The Downs are for everybody and concerts of this nature tie in completely with the people’s use of the Downs over the years. Therefore FODAG’S position is not to oppose events of this sort – but rather to insist on a high level of control and organisation. For example clearing up must be done scrupulously, traffic must be controlled and sound levels monitored in accordance with the terms of the licence from Bristol City Council. Closing off parts of the Downs for long periods should be avoided. As last time there should be no lasting damage to the Downs / plant life/ wildlife. The goats don’t seem to mind or even notice. Very local residents will have noticed that joy riders on the grass near Sea Walls cause far more damage.

There is another factor that some members and local residents will not like at all: the event raises an enormous sum of money which goes towards the upkeep of the Downs and probably other parks in the City. This is a situation in which we have been placed by central government of all political hues. There are enormous implications for a parks system, including the Downs, which has to become cost neutral – i.e. which has to raise revenue to cover minimum maintenance costs. This is a development which members and residents will need to watch very carefully. FODAG’s focus is the well-being of the Downs and Gorge and as long as that is not put at risk by the Downs Committee’s granting of permission for another concert in 2017 we shall be happy.

I have tried to present your committee’s position on this question clearly and fairly.”

Robin Haward

Sea Walls, October 1944

Nicholas Langran

Rust corroded, cruel fanged, the wire writhes, an evil hedge
Across the road to the Downs.

And where the prams and cars and couples thronged

In the distant days of peace,

Massive and cold the Nissen sheds

Sprawl, black whales astride the grass.

The dead leaves fall on the brooding

Machines that wait in serried rows their call.

Dukws, tanks, amphibians – all the devilry

Of a knackers yard is theirs, designed

To tear the sinews of the waiting cattle.

One moves with terrifying snarl and sudden

Flaying of earth under tracks. A Khaki girl

Red-nailed, turreted, paints her lips

Unheeding the steel's grim work.

The tank moves on, its shuddering strength

Still beats the air as the engine's note withdraws

And overhead the daws wheel to land....

In the grey October light

The Sea Walls, derelict, forbidden

Wait for the lads to walk their paths again.

Across the gorge the dark inhibitive green of the firs

Masse secret and sullen amid the autumn tints.

No sound or sign of the city below

Only the gulls and the tanks and away
To the west the smoke of Avonmouth and the Denny's hump
Mingle in the unreal light.
There's a shiver of wind, the leaves fall
Melancholy, unceasing,
And over the Downs a sigh..... and a waiting
For the day these alien shapes are gone,
Never to return in a world of sanity.

The poem was taken from '600 years of Bristol Poetry', Ed E Martin and B Pickard, published in 1973.

This poem was also printed in a pamphlet published in June 1985 by B Williamson called 'Downs Glorious Downs'. The pamphlet consists of 16 photographs, mostly from the turn of the century, two maps, and 2 pages of memories from Mrs E Collingwood of Westbury Park.

2017 Summer Walks Programme

Friends of the Downs

Summer walks 2017

All walks are intended to last no more than two hours. Please dress appropriately for the weather.

Walks marked ** may also be advertised by the Bristol Walking Festival.

Walk 1 Saturday April 8th: Meet 10.00am at the Peregrine Watch Point. We will examine the trees of Ladies Mile and the area around, and talk about toll roads. The terrain is flat but the grass may be wet.

Walk 2 Saturday April 29th: Meet 10.00am at the Suspension Bridge. We will look at some of the rare plants for which the Gorge is famous. Part of the walk includes a scramble up the rock slide. We will talk about Clifton Camp and the Observatory

Walk 3 Bank Holiday Monday 1 May: **Meet 10.00 am at Sea Walls for a walk down, and back up, the Tramway. This precious relic of industrial archaeology was used to fill the quarries on the Downs in the late 1860s. We may look in on the goats too, and examine ancient Hawthorns. The terrain is steeper on return than it feels on the way down, and the surface is mainly ivy covered.

Walk 4 Thursday 4 May:** Meet 10.00 am at the Café by the water tower. We will walk along the roman road (Via Julia), the M4 of its day, and back via first an abandoned toll road and then an actual toll road (now called Ladies Mile). We will look at avenue trees, and a few veterans. The terrain is flat, the grass may be wet.

Walk 5 Saturday 6 May: ** Meet at 10.00am on the Promenade at the end of Percival Road. We will walk down the Mousehole to the Port and Pier Railway, and then back up Bridge Valley Road (1822) We will talk about scrub and succession. The terrain is steep, ending in a steep flight of steps, the surface down can be muddy and rough. Not suitable for buggies.

Walk 6 Saturday 27 May:** Meet at 10.00 am at Sea Walls We will walk down the Gully, talk about the hard work the goats have done, identify the plants in flower and examine the Northern Stormwater Interceptor. We will return the way we came.

Summer Walks Programme

The terrain is steep in rough in parts. Not suitable for buggies

Walk 7 Saturday 24 June: Meet at 10.00am at the Peregrine Watch Point. We will walk through the meadows, identifying the plants both common and rare that we can find. We will talk about dead hedges and running tracks, and might see a Peregrine. The terrain is flat, the grass will be long and may be wet.

Walk 8 Saturday 8 July: Meet at 10.00am at Proctors Fountain. We will examine the trees, among them one of the rarest in Britain, and look at the potential site of the proposed footbridge We will talk about the old toll house.

ZOO PARKING—PLANNING UPDATE

Planning permission for the Zoo to use land off Ladies Mile for parking for 40 days

The Zoo's application can be found at **16/06311/X** on the Bristol City Council planning page.

FODAG has put in a formal objection making the following points.

- 1) We believe that this "temporary permission" must cease in the foreseeable future.
- 2) The Zoo's use coincides with the times of maximum use of the Downs by the public.
- 3) The parking does not improve and enhance the conservation area, it blights it visually.
- 4) The path down to the road crossing is an eyesore at all times of the year.
- 5) The use of this site creates substantial traffic problems on the roads around it at key times.

Since this objection was lodged the situation has changed. In December it was announced at the Downs Committee that by 2020 the Downs would have to be self-financing. This means that some £450,000 will have to be found from Downs users. At present the Zoo leases the land called the North Car Park, and, for 40 days, the land off Ladies Mile. It charges £3 a head, less than the standard metred charge of £1 an hour available on the streets round the Zoo, and keeps all the money itself.

FODAG is not anti-zoo, it simply believes that it is wrong that the Zoo uses public land for private gain, and that the zoo will never take appropriate action while it can use the Ladies Mile land to solve its problems.

There is as yet no set date for the planning committee meeting. The issue is a matter of public controversy, and if you wish to make a public comment it is easy to do so on the planning website, or by writing to the local papers.

Richard Bland

FLY TIPPING ON THE DOWNS

Recently on the Downs we have seen an increase in fly tipping.

Last month I reported to the Police a whole lorry load of builder's rubble, including doors and a fridge, that had been dumped on the Downs near Ivywell Road.

This is obviously a quick way of making money for some people. They are paid by someone to take this rubbish away and they then proceed to unload it illegally, usually at night.

If you see someone fly-tipping, please report it to the police giving the following information:

- what was tipped,
- the day, date and time you saw the tipping,
- what you saw e.g. how many people,
- what they looked like: registration, make and model of any vehicle involved.

There is no need to challenge anyone – NEVER put yourself at risk!

Fly-tipping is a criminal offence punishable by a fine of up to £50,000 or up to five years' imprisonment. From May 2016, councils in England were given the power to issue fixed penalty notices between £150 and £400 for "small-scale" offence. However, fining people requires them to be caught first.

Despite the threat of fines, fly-tipping has been getting worse, having previously been in steady decline. Statistics from Defra showed that there were 900,000 cases of fly-tipping handled by local authorities in England in 2014-15, a 5.6% rise on the year before. Littering also costs the taxpayer between £717m and £850m a year to tidy up.

Derek Catterall

FODAG now has a Facebook page so if you have a Facebook account please visit and 'like' our page so we can spread the word about the group and get more people involved. Just put in @fodagbristol in the search section of Facebook and our page will come up.

We also want photos for the page so if you have been up on the Downs and taken photos that you would like to share please post them.

Committee:

Jack Penrose (Chair), Martin Collins, Stephanie Wooster, Kay Snowdon, Derek Catterall, Richard Bland, Robert Westlake, Terry Hannan, Robin Haward, Roger Garrett, Bob Bell & Rachel Hemming-Bray.

Contacts:

Deep Litter/Butterflies/Goats—Martin Collins.

History/Birds/Trees— Richard Bland.

Projects—Robert Westlake.

Working Parties (e.g. dead heading)—Robin Haward.

Website—Stephanie Wooster

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Communication: if you have an email address but have not told us....please do!



@fodagbristol

Events:

Members' Meeting: The next Members Social is also an opportunity to meet the FODAG Committee. 19th April 7pm -9pm at the Avon Gorge Hotel in Clifton. There is a parking space at the back of the hotel or pay parking outside. Alternatively Clifton is served by the No.8 & No. 9 buses from town or the 505 from Long Ashton to Southmead.

CREDITS THIS EDITION: PHOTOS - Martin Collins, Robin Haward

