

# FOD Avon Gorge + AG

**Friends of the Downs**

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Issue 37

Summer 2021



# Chair's Report Summer 2021

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Dear members. Welcome to the summer edition of the Newsletter.

I hope that you and all your families are well and in good spirits notwithstanding the trying times imposed by the Covid -19 Pandemic.

Despite the depressingly high numbers of infections, it seems that the vaccination programme is beginning to take effect and appears to be breaking the link between infection and hospitalisation.

Your FOD+AG committee met towards the end of May and we are planning to meet again very soon. Two important items from our agenda included agreeing a strategy to get all of our many events and activities up and running again and agreeing FOD+AG's position and the possible implications regarding future actions related to the Downs for People legal action. {Please see separate item on Downs committee business}

The Downs supervisor continues to report large numbers of visitors to the Downs and has raised concerns about [a] The vast amount of litter and rubbish left behind and the fact that it goes directly to landfill. A rethink on how Down's waste is managed sustainably is urgently required.

You will have seen from the monthly news bulletin that FOD+AG submitted a statement to the Downs committee. The statement as usual was noted without comment. However, during the course of the meeting, I was pleased to hear the Downs supervisor and several Downs committee members mention favourably the valuable contribution made by FOD+AG.

## **Final paragraph of our statement submitted to Downs committee**

*FOD+AG are pleased that the dispute with the Downs for People group has finally been resolved but remain disappointed that it needed a costly court case to bring it about. Time will tell if the financial burden resulting from defending the action brought by Downs for People will impact negatively on the Downs.*

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*The Friends group would urge the Downs committee and the City Council to take a more holistic approach in the way that the Downs and Avon Gorge are managed going forward. Finance and income generation will be critical and it is our belief that the Downs and Gorge are eminently 'marketable' and perfectly able to sustain itself and even make a contribution to all our public open spaces.*

Large events are plainly a part of the strategy but alternative visionary initiatives should be considered. Much could be achieved without compromising the conservation status of the Downs and Gorge.

I hope you are all finding the monthly bulletin useful. It's a way of us keeping you updated between the quarterly Newsletters. In the coming months there may be much going on and around the Downs and it is important that you the members have as much current information as we can provide.

If for some technical reason you are not receiving the bulletin or would prefer not to receive it at all please let us know and we will do our best to rectify.

I hope that the lifting of many of the Covid restrictions will allow us all to enjoy what remains of the summer.

Stay Safe & Well

**Robert Westlake**  
**Chair**

# Summary of The Downs Committee Business

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The Downs committee met remotely on the 5th July here are some of the key items from the agenda.

The committee discussed a new framework to aid the decision-making process in the governance of the Downs.

Three public forum statements were noted including an item from the Downs for People group calling for the Downs committee to be reviewed as it was 'not fit for purpose' and did not operate in a transparent manner and failed to meet standards acceptable in public life.

Committee agreed to consider revised terms of reference for the good governance of the Downs going forward, including income generation and consideration of improved representation for local groups.

Chair confirmed that the process will be as open as possible.

Cllr. O'Rourke asked for a report on how the legal case brought by Downs for People was managed.

Cllr. Gollop raised concerns about how Downs waste disposal was managed/ recycled and asked about the cost. Chair to discuss possible solutions with Bristol Waste.

The Downs supervisor outlined for committee current workload, highlighting rubbish disposal as a concern. Committee discussed alternative methods, eg more bins, no bins at all, signage. Head of Parks Jon James confirmed that across the City Parks had been on average 40% busier. Peter Rilett suggested that with lock down easing things may improve.



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Chair confirmed that talks with BCC legal regarding byelaw enforcement had taken place.

The Avon Gorge & Downs Biodiversity Education Manager Mandy Leivers gave a comprehensive report to committee detailing planned work for the remainder of the year.

Mandy confirmed that she had been furloughed for much of the pandemic but was striving to get numerous projects up and running again.

BCC Events officer confirmed remaining events booked for the Downs.

Finance officer confirmed current financial status of the Downs budget and reported on significant loss of events income. Next year could be particularly difficult as current reserves would not be adequate to cover predicted deficit.

Cllr. Gollop asked for clarification about whether funding from central government could be available.

The chair reported that a dialogue with the mayor's office had taken place about the issue of vehicle dwellers on the Downs. Options to review parking restrictions and/or close off Parry's Lane and regreen it are to be considered.

**RW**

*The full meeting is available to view on YouTube, just add Downs committee, July 2021 into the search box*

# Planned Events 2021

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The following events are planned for the Downs in 2021:

- Breaking Bread** - April – September, Water Tower site.
- Adventure Cinema** - August Parry's Lane site
- Foodies Festival** - September Parry's Lane site
- Love Saves the Day** - September Circular Road site
- Circus** -September/October Showground site
- Student Union event**- September Parry's Lane site
- Race for Life** -will not be held at its usual slot in June and is looking to postpone until the autumn.
- Pride** - discussions are ongoing on whether to go ahead with this in July as usual or postpone until later in the year.

The events programme has been carefully planned to ensure that different sites on the Downs are utilised and that sufficient time is left between events to allow the site to be reinstated if necessary.

It should be noted that events will only go ahead if organisers can demonstrate to the Safety Advisory Group that their event complies with any Covid restrictions and guidelines that may be required at the time.

Resident consultation on events.

Organisers of long running and high impact events e.g. Breaking Bread are required to consult with residents as part of the planning process for their events.

Dear Editor,

I have an idea re disposable barbecue issues.

Why not find a small but particularly badly scorched area in the region opposite the water tower. Put a 1m high fence round it with as notice saying something like:

“This is the damage caused by disposable barbecues. Please do not ruin our beautiful Downs. Use the designated barbecue area (to the left of Ladies Mile travelling towards Clifton) or use a heat resistant stand.”

If the fence is high enough and the notice large enough people should be inquisitive enough to go up to see what's going on.

**Maria Priest**

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## Walktalks with Neil Talbot



Members who signed up for these had a wonderful time. Grasses and Wild Flowers this year on June 20th and July 11th A great deal was learned by members separating in a sensible way and a great deal is now ready for revision! Neill also provided book references for those keen to follow up. We did see a lot of grasses (It's not just grass!) and a good number of wild flowers. Many thanks to Neill for such a good pair of walktalks.

**Robin Haward**

## Visitors urged to give new Avon Gorge goats time to settle in

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Visitors to Avon Gorge are being urged to give four young Kashmir goats that have joined an existing herd time and space to settle in.

The new billy goats have been brought into an area called the Gully to bolster the herd which plays an important role in eating invasive scrub and bramble as part of a conservation project to save the site's rare plants and habitats.

The effort is part of an initiative to restore wildflower-rich grasslands in the Avon Gorge, run by the Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife Project - a partnership of organisations including Bristol City Council, Bristol Zoological Society, Natural England, University of Bristol, the Society of Merchant Venturers, the Downs Committee, the National Trust and Forestry England.

People going to the Gorge are being encouraged to stay on the main paths, keep dogs on leads and not attempt to feed the goats. It is particularly important that people keep their distance from the goats while they get used to their new home.

The four arrivals join two original Kashmirs who have lived in the Avon Gorge since 2011 and four Bagot goats who arrived in March this year.

Bristol City Council's Downs supervisor, Ben Skuse, said: "The new goats have settled in well with the existing herd and are already doing a fantastic job of eating the invasive scrub.

"We understand that there's a lot of interest in the new goats but they have a vital conservation job to do, so please don't approach them or feed them. They have plenty of natural food and if you feed them they may become sick.

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"The more scrub and bramble they eat, the more space they make for rare plants like the Bristol onion and Bristol rock-cress to flourish, so we are asking any visitors to stay on the main paths throughout the Gully and not to stray up and down the steep slopes, which causes erosion and will disturb the goats and other wildlife.

"It is also important to please keep dogs on leads or preferably don't take dogs into the enclosure at all."

The goats have come from the Great Orme in North Wales and have been donated by Conwy County Council, which manages the Great Orme.

Bristol Zoological Society staff vet, Richard Saunders, checked the new goats on arrival. He said: "The goats had a long journey but were bright-eyed and healthy.

"We checked them over and treated them for any internal and external parasites they might be carrying before they were released into a new environment."

The herd is monitored and cared for every day by Bristol City Council's Downs team, and at weekends by volunteers from the Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge, with Bristol Zoo Gardens also offering additional veterinary advice and care if required.

Becky Belfin, Bristol City Council Nature Conservation Officer, said: "The Avon Gorge is an internationally-important Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Special Area of Conservation (SAC). In fact, it's one of the top three botanical sites in England -- home to over 30 kinds of nationally rare and scarce plants, and rare animals that depend on them.

"Most of the rare plants grow together, in a habitat known as limestone grassland. Over hundreds of years these grasslands were grazed, keeping them open and largely free from trees.

"Grazing stopped in the 1920s and, without nibbling mouths, trees and scrub began to grow, shading out most of the grassland and killing off the majority of the rare plants and the goats are playing an important role in Bristol's commitment to tackling the ecological emergency, making a vital contribution to the Gorge's ecosystem."

Dave Collingbourne, from Natural England, said: "The browsing of these primitive, feral goats has helped open the area up, giving rare plants a chance to thrive and spread once again.

"Unfortunately, in recent years we lost two of our original goats due to dog attacks and two to old age. So have been looking for more animals to help with progressing the good habitat restoration work and this is where our new goats come in."

Later in the year, the Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife Project will be running guided walks so that people can find out more about the goats and the special wildlife that they are helping to protect. Details will be published on [www.avongorge.org.uk](http://www.avongorge.org.uk) and [www.facebook.com/avongorge](https://www.facebook.com/avongorge)

**Official press release 21/7/21**

# A butterfly effect

A proportion of our readers will remember the invention of my chosen title by meteorologist, Edward Lorenz in the 1960s. It was applied to his discovery that the wing beat of a single butterfly somewhere on the planet could, in theory, have profound effects on weather events thousands of miles away. As a nascent environmentalist at that time, I was fascinated and charmed by this concept as it became a central plank in Chaos Theory.

Significantly more prosaic, my “butterfly effect” is of a different order, but on a human scale and in the context of the human psyche, I believe it to be equally profound.

Does the sight of a butterfly raise your spirits? For most of you, being members of FOD+AG, and for me too, I suspect the answer to that question will be ‘yes’. That particular effect is hard to quantify, impossible to measure but is nonetheless real. The frequent anecdotal claims of many acquaintances as well as of professional commentators suggesting a relative dearth of butterflies this spring led me to take a comparative snapshot of FOD+AG’s monitoring data for the last 3 seasons. Now as we have reached the halfway point in the current season, seems an opportune time to do so. What emerges in Figures 1 – 4 below is displayed for the first half of the butterfly seasons in our 2 transects The Downs (C-DD) and the Gully (G&WS) for butterfly numbers, and species diversity covering the seasons 2019, 2020, and 2021.

The data are presented for your interest and we would welcome your thoughts, theories and speculations as to what is going on. Accepting that the data is limited and that the last 3 years have, at least for people, been peculiar, some evidence exists in each year of the regular underlying patterns we expect in our butterfly communities both in terms of size and diversity. What has changed this year is the relative scarcity of butterflies. Our observations appear to be in line with those in other UK locations.

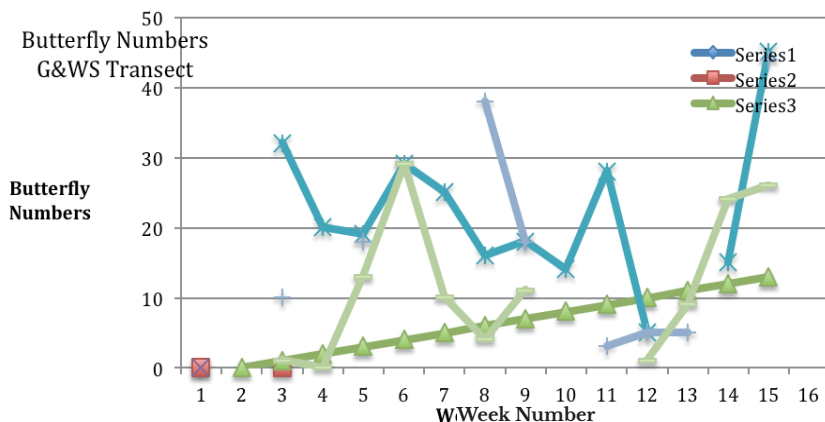


Figure 1

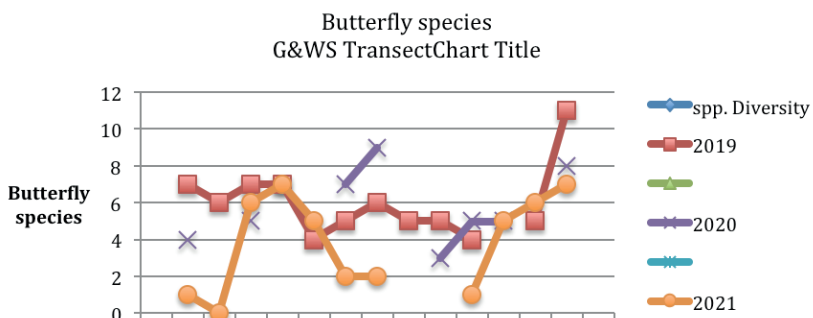


Figure 2

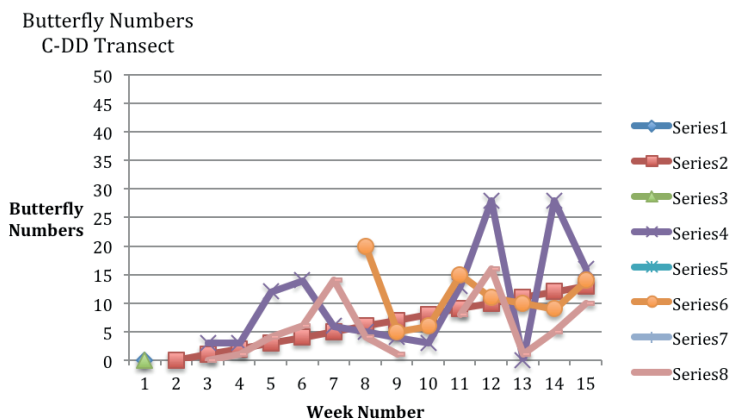


Figure 3

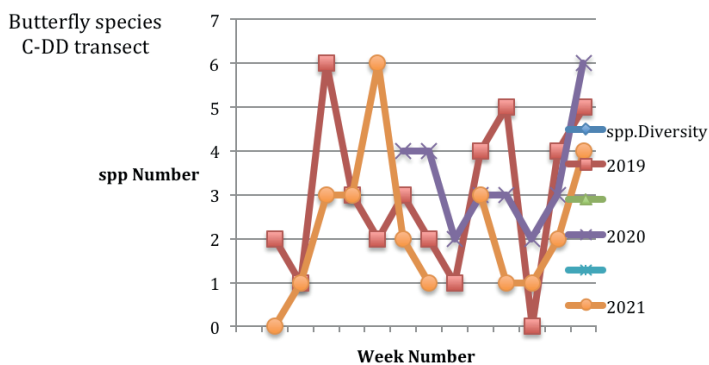


Figure 4



# A Clifton Trilogy: three plaque-themed walks

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Since 2016, I have led more than 3000 visitors on tours of the Clifton Suspension Bridge. No doubt some of you will have joined me, and marvelled at the bridge's breathtaking geometry and its dramatic hidden vaults beneath the Leigh Woods tour. My last tour was on 10 March 2020 and it has yet to be decided when the tours will resume.

So, in the meantime, I need to keep myself occupied. What better than to devise tours of Betjeman's "handsomest suburb of Europe"? Clifton, its facades flecked with commemorative plaques, offered itself as fertile territory. It would be a worthy project during these plague-ridden times, and keep me occupied and off the streets (or rather, on them . . .).

Three walks, embracing more than fifty plaques in total, each with an inspirational story to tell. And since there is limited space for biographical details on a plaque, I have delved deeply to uncover fascinating background details, amusing anecdotes and a smidgen of salacious gossip.

The walks begin and end at Christ Church, Clifton Green. They start at 11:00am and numbers are limited to 12.

## **Walk 1 Central Clifton & Pembroke Road** **Tue 10 Aug and Thu 26 Aug 1.5 miles, 90 min**

11 plaques and 7 mansions of enterprising 19th-century merchants. We head north towards Clifton College and return via Pembroke Road. En route, there are plaques honouring poets and painters, a scientist, a psychologist, writers, an art patron and more. And we'll consider seven mansions on Pembroke Road, each one formerly occupied by influential town council members who played a part in the nineteenth-century commercial life of our city: manufacturers, a grocer, a carriage builder, a surgeon and assorted merchants, dealing in tallow and hide, paint and timber.

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## **Walk 2 West Clifton and Hotwells**

### **Thu 19 Aug and Thu 31 Aug 2.5 miles, 2 hours**

23 plaques - It's a hilly one, taking in the western section of Clifton, towards the gorge and down to Dowry Square, Hotwells. We ascend by a little-known route to Royal York Crescent. There are 23 plaques on offer, commemorating notable individuals in the spheres of architecture, palaeontology, social reform and politics, and military heroes as well as scientists.

## **Walk 3 East Clifton**

### **Tue 24 Aug and Tue 7 Sep 1.6 miles, 90 min**

22 plaques - South-east towards Goldney Hall, returning by way of Victoria Square. Assyriology, ethnology, epidemiology - lots of 'ologies' on this walk. On the high ground above Constitution Hill, we can stand, turn and capture in our gaze on less than six plaques, with another three around the corner – a dizzying profusion of commendations. Northwards, two brave individuals – a balloonist and a suffragette. Then a grand square, three of its sides studded with plaques.

*Please note Walks I and III are pancake-flat; Walk II involves descending to Hotwells and climbing back up to Clifton.*

I have had more than 80 people attend the walks so far and they are proving popular. Do join me for an insight into the lives of notable people - and some of the tittle-tattle about them which didn't make the plaques . . .

**Gordan Young**

*These walks are free but booking is essential as numbers are limited.*

*To book contact Robin Haward: [robinhaward@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:robinhaward@blueyonder.co.uk)*

## Guided Walk

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Mandy, Vanessa and Robin led a well attended guided walk for the Long Ashton Horticultural Society on June 6th as part of the Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife project working with the Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge.

There was a lot to see – even though some of the plants had not really ‘started’ yet ..... those who attended seem to have enjoyed it enormously and thankfully Mandy survived taking that photograph in the gully.

**Robin Haward**







# Moths in the Gorge

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A rare moth was the focus of a survey carried out by conservationists over the summer months.

The silky wave moth was observed during its flight season, which takes place from June to early July, in the Avon Gorge – the only place in England they can be found.

The gorge, which runs for 1.5 miles along the River Avon, is home to an array of species – and the white-winged moths are said to be crucial to understanding the surrounding habitat.

A team of moth counters led by Dr Jen Nightingale of Bristol Zoological Society set out on specific mornings with walking sticks which they use to lightly tap the paths to get the moths to fly and then each one will be tallied.

First discovered in the area in 1851, moth numbers only began to be monitored on an ad hoc basis from 1992 until 2011 when the Bristol Zoological Society officially took over the annual monitoring of the site. Last year, the yearly search for the moths went ahead under Covid-19 restrictions, and 342 of the insects were recorded during the species' peak flight week.

Dr Jen Nightingale, the charity's UK conservation manager, said: "It is a little bit of a mystery why they are in this gorge and not in any others. "This is the tenth year we've been surveying on a rigorous basis for the silky wave and it's so important because how this species is faring tell us so much about how the other species and habitats in this very special, important, unique area are also doing. "We have a duty to ensure their survival into the future."

Robert Westlake *Source County Times*

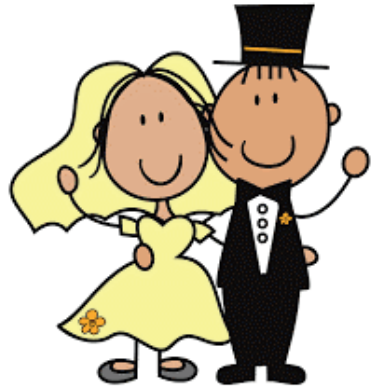


## Getting Hitched on the Downs

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There are innovative plans in the offing to turn Clifton Down into a prestigious wedding venue. The team behind Breaking Bread are adding to their already impressive range of events and activities.

In addition to its restaurant and pub garden the team behind Breaking Bread have introduced new spaces this year capable of hosting events with up to 500 people.



The Pergola, which features a stage complete with sound and lighting systems is ideal for live performances as well as meetings, conferences and presentations.

Breaking Bread is a partnership between Team Love and independent hospitality businesses The Pony & Trap, Bianchis Group, The Pipe & Slippers and The Love Inn.

Alongside the Pergola and Team Canteen, people can also hire out the Homegrown restaurant, which is housed in four neighbouring tipis, and the Pipe & Lovers beer garden, which has seating covered by stretch tents. Breaking Bread can host a range of independent events, meetings, conferences, team building, parties and yes even wedding celebrations.

Team Love have proved that even under Covid 19 restrictions local entrepreneurs have managed to thrive with their innovative business model. There are as always arguments about whether this is an appropriate use of the Downs but it should be remembered that Team Love contribute to the Downs coffers providing desperately needed income.

Robert Westlake

# In-Common Sites – Contribute to a research project on The Downs

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This week I discovered that back in the eighteenth-century parish of Clifton, between the years 1730 and 1735 to be precise, the parish paid for the destruction of ten foxes, a polecat, a kite and at least 109 hedgehogs. Wild animals that roamed the Down and neighbouring fields were considered plentiful and a nuisance to local farmers. So fair reward was offered to anyone who could snare one. From the number of exterminations, the hedgehog appears to have been a pretty troublesome pest. For it was a common belief at the time that these bristled rodents supped on the milk of cows as they lay on the ground in slumber. Today, such superstitions hold little sway and yet the existence of the hedgehog remains precarious. According to the State of Britain's Hedgehog 2018 report, our hog population has decreased by a third since the start of this century. Its decline sits within the 41 per cent of wildlife species that have shown a strong or moderate decrease in numbers since 1970 (State of Nature Report 2019). Reasons for the hedgehog's demise - habitat loss and fragmentation, the use of chemical pesticides and fertilisers, road and garden injuries (strimmers, netting) all point to their interrelation with humans. Yet surprisingly, it seems this popular wild mammal fares better in urban environments. Where hedgehogs are down by 50% in rural areas, the drop is reduced to 30% in urban areas. More significantly, hedgehog numbers are on the increase in some urban habitats where they are still present. Today then, our prickly friends might have a greater chance of thriving in The Downs, Bristol than in rural Somerset. The future for the hedgehog illustrates one of many reasons why urban green spaces play an important role in biodiversity preservation, as well as providing a resource for human leisure and recreation. But against the rise in the privatisation of public land, do urban communities need to think more about how these green spaces might be best protected and enhanced for the future?

My name is Dr Siobhan O'Neill, an artist-researcher at the Portsmouth School of Architecture. My journey into the historical and present-day fate of wildlife on The Downs is part of a research project called Wastes and Strays: the past, present and future of English urban commons. The project is carried out by the universities of Newcastle, Portsmouth, Exeter and Sheffield and is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. A team of architects, creative practitioners, and other specialists, including historians, archaeologists and legal experts, are studying the urban common's unique history, current legal status and value for future health, biodiversity and wellbeing. As an example of common land that survived urban development to continue into the present as public green space, The Downs in Bristol is one of our four case study commons. A vital part of



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my research on the project is to work in collaboration with people who visit or live close to The Downs to chart on the ground experiences of what it means to have access to open green space in the city. As a member of the FOD+AG you have unique local knowledge of The Downs, and I wanted to invite you to contribute your insights by joining our creative mapping project, In-Common Sites.

In-Common Sites invites you to observe, record and interact with The Downs using creative tools such as map-making, storytelling, sketching, creative writing, photography and field recording. The project takes place electronically so you can explore your urban common in your own time and continue to social distancing if desired. I email a guide outlining a creative fieldwork inquiry to participants every couple of weeks. Each inquiry is themed, drawing on the history, ecology or popular use of each case study common in turn as a prompt for playful investigation and commentary. So the past wildlife exterminations on The Downs acts as a starting point for us to look more closely at human and animal interrelations in the present and future. I invite participants to share a memory of an animal encounter on The Downs, photograph or audio record traces of animal inhabitation, and animate a short monologue voicing the future for a Downs creature. In this way, you can tell me something about the types of wildlife you encounter and your views on the future from a wildlife perspective. As the inquiry is an invitation, you may choose to do some or all of these activities as you wish. I provide step-by-step guides for each creative task and share examples from students' work at the Newcastle School of Architecture and my own practice. This week, I've animated a weasel cartoon drawn by my daughter. She has never seen a live hedgehog but spied a tiny weasel pop out of a hole in our neighbouring urban common this year. As this suggests, the creative inquiry tasks are suitable for you to do on your own or with family and friends. At the end of each inquiry, I ask you to send me your stories, observations, images and artworks so that I can collate them into a series of commons field guides for a Wastes and Strays exhibition.

The In-Common Sites project is up and running, and I would like to encourage members of the FOD+AG to join us in our investigation into urban commons. It is vital for our research that we have good representation from all our case study commons, and I am keen for local voices from Bristol to feature in the mix. If you would like to participate please email Siobhan at [urbancommonsutures@port.ac.uk](mailto:urbancommonsutures@port.ac.uk). I will then send you further details and a consent form to participate and use your creative explorations in our study. Your contributions will help our research build up an invaluable local

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picture of the multiple benefits of open green spaces in our cities and how to enhance these spaces for future generations.

I look forward to finding out if any hedgehogs have been seen on The Downs recently.

Siobhan O'Neill

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## Common Wall Lizard {Podarcis Muralis}

Earlier in the year the Bristol Post reported a sighting of the Common Wall Lizard in the Avon Gorge. Spotted basking in the sun this shy fast moving creature is part of what is thought to be a small breeding colony that either escaped or was released some years ago. FOD+AG members have reported their presence on several occasions.



The image depicts a typically bright green male

Wall lizards, as their name suggests are very much at home in the Gorge, favouring warm sunny escarpments with plenty of crevices for concealment.

*Podarcis muralis* can be found in a number of sites in Southern England and is common across Europe and is a European Protected Species.

Robert Westlake

## **COMMITTEE:**

Robert Westlake (Chair), Jac Solomons (Secretary)  
Bob Bell (Treasurer) Martin Collins, Derek Catterall, Joan Gubbin  
(Membership) Terry Hannan, Caroline Baker, Robin Haward,  
Tim Clarke, Luke Hudson, Barry Horton.

## **Key Contacts:**

Jac Solomons (Secretary)

Joan Gubbin (Membership)

Martin Collins (Butterfly Surveys and Goat Monitoring)

Robin Haward (Conservation working parties, dead hedging)

**Articles for the newsletter:** [fodagcontent@gmail.com](mailto:fodagcontent@gmail.com)

## **Subscriptions:**

£10.00 per individual or £19 per household per calendar year.  
Please ask for a standing order via the website or by post to The  
Membership Secretary, 3 Wallcroft, Durdham Park, BS6 6XJ.

# Noticeboard

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## EVENTS:

Please see separate article about Gordon Young's walks.

## SOCIAL MEDIA:

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

**Facebook:** do please join the group on facebook and like/share the page to spread the word @fodagbristol

**Instagram:** Friends\_of\_the\_Downs

Letters and articles or photographs for the newsletter are warmly welcomed: [fodagcontent@gmail.com](mailto:fodagcontent@gmail.com)

The Downs App is now working again.

Photo credits for this edition: Pat Millington, Charles Kinsey, Robin Haward, Mandy Leivers, Derek Catterall, Fraser Wilkinson





“Silver Washed Fritillaries mating with Ringlet watching”

Photo: Charles Kinsey.