

# FOD Avon Gorge + AG

**Friends of the Downs**

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**Issue 37**

**Summer 2020**



## **Chairman's Report July 2020**

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The Covid-19 virus continues to have a significant impact on how we all conduct our daily activities. For FOD+AG it has meant that many of our planned events, activities and maintenance tasks remain cancelled or deferred. Your committee has not been able to meet formally since March but we continue to conduct our business electronically or with the occasional socially distanced outdoor meetings.

The City council are slowly further easing the restrictions on volunteer activity, particularly for the over seventies, but we do have some limited activity still going on. Members have been able to carry on with individual litter picking, goat monitoring, shrub bed maintenance and butterfly monitoring.

Visitors to the Downs will be relieved to see that the Downs toilets have now reopened. However, the urinal at the top of Whiteladies Road remains closed for operational reasons.

Members may well be aware of the debate still going on about the Downs Committee permitting Bristol Zoo to park additional cars on Ladies Mile. The committee has agreed an extension for a further twenty years. This despite a commitment to eradicate the practice. FOD+AG has registered its own disappointment at this decision and supports The Downs for People group in their effort to get this decision reviewed.

At the end of May and early June the Downs saw unprecedented numbers of visitors. With lockdown eased the sun shone and temperatures soared. Thousands descended on our precious green space and they certainly left their mark. The bye-laws prohibiting open fires, portable barbecues, driving on the Downs and littering were flagrantly ignored. The Downs maintenance team committed many additional work hours to clearing up after them and did a fantastic job. From the FODAG chair the Downs committee were made aware that many unacceptable practices were prevalent and asked what was being done about enforcement of the bye-laws.

The sheer volume of visitors clearly indicates the value our citizens place on our public open spaces for their physical and mental wellbeing. But do not take this as a God given right. As a non-statutory service all our green spaces remain under serious threat as the Council struggles to balance the books post-Covid.

## **Chairman's Report July 2020**

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Once again, this summer the travelling community turned up for their regular and predictable visits to the Downs. In mid-June a group settled on to the Ladies Mile site but this time the City Council acted with great alacrity and managed to obtain a High Court Writ allowing them to swiftly evict the travellers from site. This is a significant move in better management of the situation and may in future discourage further incursions on to the Downs.

The van dwellers located on and around Parry's Lane have returned in force with all the attendant problems discussed in previous issues of the Newsletter.

As an organisation we support the Respect the Downs group <https://www.respectthedowns.co.uk/> in urging the Council to use the powers available to them and bring this unacceptable misuse of the Downs to an end.

The Downs Committee met via Zoom at the end of June. One item of interest on the agenda was from the new Head of Service for Parks, Jon James. Mr James indicated that Parks were currently involved in looking at new and innovative ways of managing all our parks in the future and asked the Downs Committee if they wished to be considered as part of the new order or if they wished to retain their independence from the Parks service. Committee asked for more detail before making a decision. Whatever decision is made there are significant implications for the Downs and we will be making our own representations to Mr James.

Downs Committee received a report from the BCC Events officer that all organised mass public gatherings/events have either been cancelled or deferred.

To keep members up to speed with the latest developments on the Downs your committee propose to offer,, in addition to the quarterly Newsletter, a monthly news ebulletin. This will give members an opportunity to comment on issues of immediate and current interest.

By the time you read this I am hoping that the virus is at least under control and we are able to get out and about and enjoy all the activities previously held dear.

Stay Safe & Well

**Robert Westlake, Chair**

# **Butterfly Monitoring: Clifton-Durdham Down**

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As with so many routine aspects of our lives, butterfly monitoring has been a casualty of the Covid-19 pandemic. By April 1st (the traditional start of the UK Butterfly Monitoring Survey season) we had been advised by them and by Bristol City Council that in the interests of public health we should suspend formal monitoring in our two regular transects. It was decided by the members of our teams that if any individuals were prepared to use their legally sanctioned outdoor exercise in the area of their transect, then I as coordinator of FOD+AGs records would be pleased to receive any resulting butterfly observations as what are referred to in the jargon as anecdotal reports.

This situation continued until the start of May, when UKBMS changed its policy, so restoring its insurance cover for monitors to any volunteers who wished to return to formal monitoring to do so. The Downs supervisor representing BCC was happy for us to belatedly begin, subject to government guidelines involving social distancing. Hence, since Week 5 of our 11th consecutive year of butterfly monitoring data has been accumulating. My thanks to all team members for their renewed dedication of time, energy and patience to this national conservation effort,,and a welcome to newcomer Jenny Field to our number.

In broad brushstrokes, and not separating information from the two transects at present, I can therefore report what has been happening to our local butterfly communities whilst we have been restricted by the Covid-19 lockdown. It's also a good excuse to brighten the gloom which the pandemic has cast with some beautiful images on pages 6-7 captured by some of our monitors – especially Mary and Timothy Dowling. Enjoy!

During April, with temperatures averaging around 20°C all 5 UK species which overwinter as adults (Brimstone, Comma, Peacock, Red Admiral and Small Tortoiseshell) were all in evidence together with a significant number of Orange Tips and a few Holly Blues and Small and Large Whites. In addition there was one sighting of a Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary. Unusually, especially following such a mild winter, no Speckled Woods were reported.

In May, with more formal monitoring, data of note include:

Numbers of butterflies in general experienced the usual decline with the disappearance of adult overwinterers.

## **Gully & Walcombe Slade**

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- Speckled Woods put in an appearance.
- A small number of Common Blues were seen surprisingly early for this traditionally early summer species in this part of the UK.
- The welcome reappearance after their apparent absence from the Gully area for the last 3 years of the Green Hairstreak.

By June, when we would normally expect gradually increasing numbers of butterflies and of diversity of species, both have been slow to change in spite of warm temperatures and open skies during the early parts of the month. The protracted length of the post spring decline is puzzling. However an upward trend began in late June and has continued into early July. Of note during this period have been:

- An explosion of Marbled Whites although this year's adults have been comparatively small in size.
- A similar marked increase in numbers of Ringlets.
- Welcome appearances of Small Coppers and of the Brown Hairstreak and the first Silver Washed Fritillary of the year.
- Most recently Small, Large and Essex Skippers have burgeoned.
- With the coming of have signaled Meadow Browns and Gatekeepers, meadow species a somewhat late flourishing, so we hope that the rather scattered sightings of Common Blues are the tip of an iceberg.

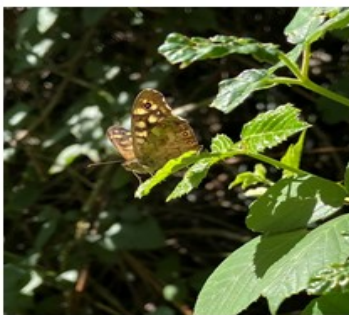
For those of you who might want to keep your eye in, the butterfly images overleaf are numbered but not identified. Those illustrated all appear in the text so why not have a go at matching them up. A numbered list appears on the back page of the issue.

# Butterfly Quiz

1.



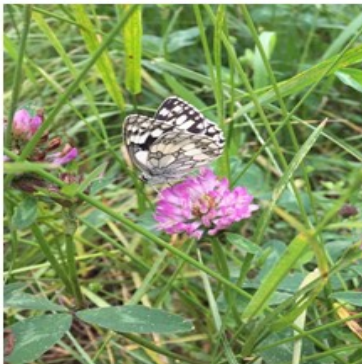
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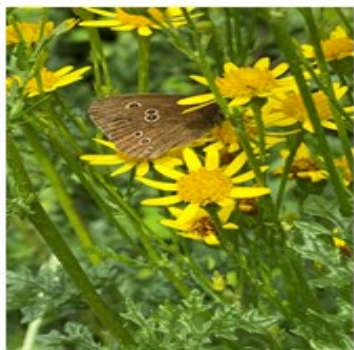
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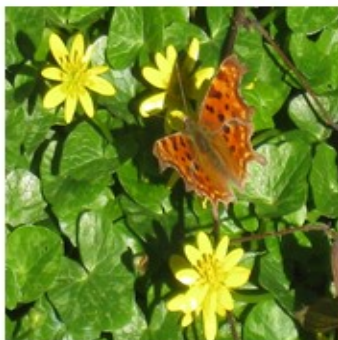
*With thanks for the photographs to Mary Dowling, Timothy Dowling and Martin*

## Butterfly Quiz

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8.



9.



10.



11.



12.



For answers see back page



# **Call for New Downs Playground**

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'There is no play equipment within reasonable walking distance for most families living in Clifton Down'

Parents living around Clifton and Durdham Downs have called for the authorities that run the famous open space to give over some land for a children's playground.

A campaign and petition has been set up to gather support for the idea, after the Downs Committee said they would consider it - but only if there was a groundswell of parents who said there was the demand for it.

There is a children's playground on the Downs - but right down on the southern end of the green space, near the Observatory and the Clifton Suspension Bridge.

That playground is more than a mile as the crow flies to the start of the Downs at the top of Blackboy Hill and Whiteladies Road.

Local councillor Carla Denyer (Green, Clifton Down) said that was too far to expect young children to walk, and asked parents living in the areas surrounding the Downs, like Clifton, Redland, Westbury Park, Sneyd Park and Stoke Bishop, to sign the petition to show a playground on The Downs is needed and would be used.

"There is no play equipment within reasonable walking distance for most families living in Clifton Down ward, the area around Whiteladies Road," she said.

"There is an excellent set of play equipment at the other end of the Downs, near the Suspension Bridge. However, this is a mile and a half from the top of Whiteladies Road, which is too far for most young children to walk," she added.

The Downs are managed by the Downs Committee, a group made up of a mixture of councillors and members of the Merchant Venturers, who are jointly responsible for maintaining and improving the Downs for the enjoyment of all the residents of Bristol.

Cllr Denyer (Green, Clifton Down) said that parents wrote to her to ask for a new playground, and she wrote to the Downs Committee to suggest it, and to ask for the Downs Committee to agree to 'yield the land' - set aside some



## **Call for New Downs Playground**

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of the land there for a project to build one.

They have said that they would consider it, but first they need to see that there is sufficient demand," Cllr Denyer said.

The proposal is for a new children's playground to be set up on the Downs, 'preferably near the Water Tower and cafe on Stoke Road'.

She said that the petition was started during the coronavirus lockdown, at a time when play equipment has been cordoned off by the council to reduce the risk of infection. She said that the idea is for a new playground to be installed and used when it is safe to do so.

Hundreds of parents have signed the petition in less than a week since it was set up by Cllr Denyer.

"I am really pleased that the petition has already got nearly 300 signatures and is still growing. I hope this will help show the Downs Committee that there is significant local demand," she said.

"Outdoor play is so valuable for children's development and wellbeing, and it's important to have it near where children live so they can reach it safely and easily," she added.

**Credit: Bristol Post Online**

**Please let us know your thoughts on this proposal by email:  
[fodagcontent@gmail.com](mailto:fodagcontent@gmail.com)**

## Downs News

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The importance of parks and green spaces has certainly been realised in the past few months. It's been a surreal time for us all but the health benefits both physical and psychological of having the Downs to walk on and unwind, has absolutely proved its worth.

It's been fabulous to witness the increased number of people, and especially young families, being together on the Downs and enjoying their time.

The absence of cars and consequently the cleaner air has been an added benefit.

Bristols parks and green spaces are being valued as never before.

This additional use of the Downs has raised a few issues which will need to be addressed.

- Cycling on the grass has badly worn many areas.
- Additional walkways and runways across the meadow area has flattened precious wildflowers.
- The many barbecues have left a trail of burnt patches which take a very long time to recover.
- Parking on the grass along Ladies Mile is now a common occurrence.
- And lastly litter, how do we encourage people to find a bin or take their litter home?

## Travellers

Bristol City Council has now employed the services of private bailiffs (Able Investigations & Enforcements) to quickly exercise possession orders.

This will remain valid for the next twelve months and should enable speedier removal of Travellers who decide to stop on any land on the Downs, without the Council having to apply for a possession order. This is the first of its nature for the Downs, and was the result of a significant effort by several City Council Officers who have been trying for some time to effect change.

**Respect the Downs** have been working hard to find a solution to the continued presence of camper vans overnight parking on upper Parry's Lane.

This is a statement from the mayor Marvin Rees.

“I appreciate the negative impact that the increasing number of lived-in vans is having on local communities and I am working with my Cabinet to find a solution that takes into account the needs of residents and vehicle-dwellers themselves. This is a complex situation and we need, as a city, to continue to find innovative and sustainable options to tackle the issue.

There is currently no approved policy for how the city council will deal with vehicle-dwelling encampments on the public highway, although there are clear policies as to how the city council will deal with serious instances of anti-social behaviour. “

**Respect the Downs** has been asking for the present parking restrictions that are in place to be enforced.

This issue has had a lot of media coverage recently. **Downs for People** is a group specifically set up to stop zoo parking on the Downs.

### Zoo Parking

A controversial 20-year deal allowing zoo visitors to park on The Downs has left the group responsible for the agreement divided over whether it was ‘democratically signed’

With Downs Committee permission, Bristol Zoo has been parking cars on the Downs, off Ladies Mile since the 1960s. Starting with a few cars on six days a year, the use grew so that the Ladies Mile site was its main car park on 81 days a year by the 1990s. The site has space for up to 700 cars, while the zoo’s two permanent car parks have spaces for only 340.

Campaigning groups protested about the increased use. In 1996, when the zoo sought a licence for 102 days, pointing out that planning permission was needed for activities on the Downs other than established recreational use. The City Council took enforcement action in 1997 against the Downs Committee and the zoo, requiring them to seek planning permission. Since then, seven temporary planning permissions have been granted. These have steadily reduced the number of days on which the site may be used, to 30 days last year (when the zoo used it for 22 days). When a planning committee gave a three-year permission in 2017, the zoo undertook not to

## Downs News

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make another planning application.

Councillors and Merchant Venturers have now agreed behind closed doors that Bristol Zoo can continue to park cars on the Downs until 2039. This is despite the requirement in an Act of Parliament to manage the Downs as an open space for the people of Bristol to enjoy. The decision was taken outside the public proceedings of the Downs Committee set up by the 1861 Downs Act. Amenity groups are calling for the decision to be reviewed.

The groups supporting the calls from **Downs for People** for review and reform include the Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge, the Respect the Downs Residents Group, Bristol Civic Society, the Bristol Walking Alliance, Cycle Sunday, the Redland and Cotham Amenity Society, and the national Open Spaces Society.

So quite a lot going on with the Downs at the moment. If you have any comments on the articles published in the Friends of the Downs magazine, Website or Facebook, please email us and let us know. We can then publish them in our letter section. We always welcome your views. FOD+AG would also be very grateful for any Downs related articles.

Please email [fodagcontent@gmail.com](mailto:fodagcontent@gmail.com)

**Derek Catterall**

## Leaflet Delivery

Friends Of The Downs and Avon Gorge have published a new leaflet in order to promote and increase our membership. We are looking for some help in delivering these to addresses that are close to the Downs and might attract new people to join us. The next area that we will be focusing on is Clifton. I

f you have some spare time and would like to help us deliver to about 8 or 10 streets then we would love to hear from you. Please email me at the address below and I will deliver the leaflets to you along with the names of the streets we would like you to deliver to. Many thanks,

**Derek Catterall**

[derekcatterall@hotmail.com](mailto:derekcatterall@hotmail.com)

## **FODAG Statement to Downs Committee**

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The Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge wish to express disappointment that the long running debate about permission for Bristol Zoo to use the Ladies Mile site for parking seems no closer to being resolved and that a new deal to extend the practice still further is being considered. The Friends group have consistently acknowledged the contribution that the Zoo makes to the life of the city as a premier visitor destination and supported the Downs committee in the good governance of the Downs. However, that acknowledgement and support was predicated on the notion that eventually the practice of parking on Downs green spaces would discontinue. It was our understanding that Bristol Zoo Gardens had committed to 'phasing out' parking at this location. One of FOD+AG's founding principles enshrined in our constitution is to; "Preserve, conserve and enhance the overall and several distinct environments within the Downs and Gorge for the benefit of all legitimate users." As an organisation we find ourselves at odds with our own constitution if we continue to support any further extension to the car parking arrangement. The Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge request that any final decision be deferred to allow public debate in an open forum.

**Robert Westlake**

## **Facebook**

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FOD+AG is pleased to welcome Barry Horton as our new Facebook administrator. Barry is well qualified for this important task. He is a keen naturalist, amateur meteorologist and environmentalist concerned with global and local issues.

Barry will replace our current administrator Kay Snowdon who has decided to step down. The Friends group would like to take this opportunity to thank Kay for her sterling work in raising our public profile. Chair. Friends Of The Downs and Avon Gorge have published a new leaflet in order to promote and increase our membership. We are looking for some help in delivering these to addresses that are close to the Downs and might attract new people to join us. The next area that we will be focusing on is Clifton. If you have some spare time and would like to help us deliver to about 8 or 10

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# The Thomas Memorial

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Due to the Covid-19 outbreak and a subsequent Council embargo on any volunteer activity our flagship project to return the redundant flower beds at the top of Whiteladies Road to their once former glory was temporarily put on hold. The project was a FOD+AG initiative with funding assistance from the Redland & Cotham Amenities Societies.



The new scheme would see previous traditional bedding replaced by a more sustainable herbaceous style. The ground was prepared and the plants were available in good time, but no volunteers were allowed to get them in the ground. The day was saved by the Downs supervisor Ben Skuse and his team who stepped into the breach and offered to carry out the planting work on our behalf. Our thanks to Ben and his team.

## The Thomas Memorial

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Unfortunately, the planting coincided with some of the hottest days of the year which was a real threat to the newly planted tender plants. Without urgent watering the whole scheme was doomed to falling right at the start. Following advice from the City Councils Volunteer coordinator and a slight relaxation of the rules some limited volunteer activity was allowed. This permitted FOD+AG members working singly to undertake deep irrigation every other day, and it looks like this immediate action has proved successful.



The new planting has received many complimentary and positive comments from locals and is already starting to flower and looks to have established well. The responsibility for the ongoing maintenance of the herbaceous beds will remain with FOD+AG and we will need to stay on top of the weeds, the deadheading and the watering.

To see the final result please turn over.



# The Thomas Memorial



## **The Downs Goats**

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In a report to the Downs Committee on June 29 the Downs supervisor Ben Skuse reported that plans to restock the small herd of Kashmiri goats in the Gulley had been put on hold due to Coronavirus. Ben had arranged to travel to the Great Orme in June to collect four replacement animals but travel restrictions has meant the trip had to be deferred.

Six goats were originally introduced into the Gorge to help control scrub growth and restore rare wildflowers and grasses.

Currently only two of the original six animals remain after two died of natural causes and two more were chased off the cliff edge by dogs.

Ben confirmed that companions for the resident pair of goats would be secured at the earliest opportunity and would advise the Downs committee in due course.

## **Litter on the Downs**

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In the same report to Downs committee Downs supervisor Ben Skuse described unprecedented levels of litter and rubbish deposited on the Downs during the heatwave at the end of May beginning of June. Downs operational staff collected 7.74 tonnes of waste from bins and the grounds at Clifton and Durdham Downs during a ten-day period.

This followed the easing of lockdown restrictions which saw people flock to parks and beaches across the region. Ben added, "things became crazy in terms of litter."

Ben, who is employed by the council, said "the weekend of May 30-31 was one of the busiest I have ever seen on the Downs. It basically took all of my team a week to get the Downs looking reasonable again" "On the plus side "The hot conditions meant slow grass growth which has been a good thing as our tractor driver had to spend most of his time driving to and from the waste transfer station with trailers full of rubbish cleared off the Downs."

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## **New Planting on Black Boy Hill Roundabout**



## **What we Love about the Downs Survey**

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Some people have seen less of humankind during lockdown, but not me. Living by the Downs, I've seen tens, sometimes even hundreds more people every day. Schools, offices, gyms and cafes may have closed, but the Downs have stayed open for business.

As our warm spring stretched into summer, the big increase in visitors to the Downs got me thinking: 'How far have people come to get here?' and 'What do the Downs mean to them?'

On a recent sunny Sunday afternoon, I decided to find out. Armed with my voice recorder, I set off to ask people the simple question: "Why do you like coming to the Downs?"

I can't claim that my survey was comprehensive – I only spoke to 10 people - and I'm sure I would have encountered a very different sample had I gone out on a Friday evening rather than a Sunday afternoon. But their responses were fascinating none the less.

My first chat was with David Cooper, age 61, from Westbury Park. He was alone, pushing his bike across the grass near Sea Walls when I caught up with him. For David, the Downs are more than just a place to exercise, as he explained: "It's a place I've known all my life. It's a wide-open space - I like to see it being enjoyed. I like it very quiet. I've recently lost my father and he used to live at the very edge of the Downs, so I come up here to think."

David had just found a wallet on the Downs, so he cycled off to return it to the owner and I headed on towards Ladies Mile. Shortly after crossing the road I came across Wesley Morgan, 42, with his son Arthur, age 4, from Ashley Down. With his long blonde hair and blue football strip, Arthur was quite clear on why he liked coming to the Downs: "I get to play with my frisbees," he said. But Wesley, like David Cooper, has a deeper connection with the Downs that's developed over many years, as he explained: "In these social distancing times [the Downs] are a nice open space. I'm from Bristol and I've been coming here since [Arthur's] age. It's nice to take him here - there's lots of open space."

Arthur was itching to start frisbee'ing with his Dad and I had more people to talk to, so I left them and walked over to Stoke Road where I caught up with Harvey Crocker and his family, near the Café Retreat. Harvey, also age 4, was wearing blue framed dark glasses and gripping a large chocolate milk



## **What we Love about the Downs Survey**

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shake. He really didn't want to talk to me, but his mum, Rachael, closed off all escape routes by perching him on her knee. When I asked him why he liked the Downs he stopped slurping for just long enough to say: 'Flying kites'.

Rachael, age 48, had a different perspective on the Downs: "There's so much space. It's not far from us really. We live at the lower end of Redland, the Cotham end. It's about a 20-minute walk. Even if it's busy like this there's still lots of space."

Space turned out to be a unifying theme in all the conversations I had with adults on the Downs that afternoon. Natasha, 24, from Stoke Bishop, who was sitting on the grass nearby, chatting to a friend, expressed the importance of space in a different way when she explained her love of the Downs: "It's just the fresh air really. It's nice not to be in built up areas."

For Elizabeth Ford, 55, from Westbury Park, space was clearly a big priority. She and 3 friends were sitting in camping chairs in a quiet, shaded spot when I caught up with them. They were sat at least 2 metres apart and Elizabeth insisted I stand a long way off while we spoke. So, I stretched my recording hand out as far as I could towards Elizabeth while she clarified how important the Downs are to her: "[The Downs] is a nice environment - it's very big. At the moment it's very spacious for people to come out and be able to keep their distance. It's very clean and it's nice to see people flying kites. They can sit down and just enjoy themselves and go for a walk."

My final chat on the Downs was with Brandon Preece, age 27. Tall and with sunglasses perched on his head, Brandon was ambling along with a friend and two perky Jack Russells, both charging ahead on long leads.

When I asked Brandon why he liked the Downs his answer caught me by surprise: "It's only the second time I've been here, it's really nice. We've got a camper van down there." And pointing towards the Saville Road/Parrys Lane intersection he clarified: "It's accessible for the camper van."

Brandon was a van dweller! But when I playfully suggested that he liked the Downs more as a place to park his camper van than for the actual space itself, he countered: "No, no! The space is lovely. It's a bit of both in that you can park here and it's a lovely space. It's nice, open, green, not been touched. Being able to see so far - I like the views. Even the houses on the

## **What we Love about the Downs Survey**

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sides are really nice, old houses. I don't live in Bristol - I'm from Cornwall and London. I just visit at this time of year. I've got friends here." So even Brandon, from the unspoilt wilds of Cornwall, was impressed by the open vistas of the Downs.

After a long period of social confinement, it's not surprising that everyone gave the Downs top marks for space. But if I'd asked the same question a year ago, would their responses have been different? I suspect not.

We all know that getting outside for exercise and fresh air is good for us, but the Downs offer more than just a place for recreation. At over 400 acres of grassland meadows and trees, with uninterrupted views across the Avon Gorge to Leigh Woods and beyond, visitors to the Downs get an authentic experience of nature that is missing from smaller urban parks. That, I suspect, is why little Harvey and his family walked 20 minutes to get to the Downs rather than going to one of the smaller parks near their home. It's also why for some people, like David and Wesley, sharing the Downs with people they love has meant this remarkable green sanctuary has become entwined in the fabric of their inner lives.

**Jacquetta Edmonds**

## **FOD+AG in the Community**

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As a voluntary organization, we are heavily dependent on the goodwill of the local community. In Westbury Park we have lively trading associations, many of whose members have promised support in a variety of ways by associating their businesses with our care of the Downs and Avon Gorge.

In the current circumstances and in recognition and appreciation of the vital role they all play in the local community our Chair has agreed to offer them free adverts in this newsletter. We hope that this gesture might make a small contribution to getting them back on their feet after the unprecedented challenge of the Covid-19 pandemic to their survival and to the livelihood of their employees. Fourteen businesses have taken advantage of this offer as an endorsement of our commitment to the Downs. Small ads for each of them appear on pages throughout the newsletter.

**Martin Collins**

# **NEW BOOK**

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## Images of the Downs



*First World War Tank at the Top of Blackboy Hill*



*The Long Hot Days of Spring 2020: Derek Catterall*



## Images of the Downs



*Fairyland*



*Old Man's Beard: Graham Balfry*

## **Granny Downs: Spring into Summer**

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March 1<sup>st</sup> Let's look around ... well, no, the rain is too full on and the wind perfectly horrible ... first day of Spring be bothered. Decide against, even with my wildlife dedication. Dew pond full to overflowing.

March 5<sup>th</sup> What a jay day!! I count fourteen of them on the Granny Downs, behaving a bit like long-tailed tits and flying in procession from tree to tree. It's that magical time when the male jays gang up, preen and go off to harass females. Jays also make calls like buzzards and at this time of year, sing a secretive spring song. I heard this in our local Westbury park churchyard three years ago.

March 12<sup>th</sup> Bit of sun and the celandines shining around the base of trees, climbing up the trunk. Song thrush shouting. All this goes on while we are wrestling with the virus ...

Dew pond still full to overflowing.

March 15<sup>th</sup> Wow! The wonderful drumming of the great spotted woodpeckers, celandines, primroses and WHITE VIOLETS.

March 19<sup>th</sup> Our human world is so full of virus anxiety. And this morning on the Granny Downs, the nuthatches were shouting, I heard a treecreeper (often a nuthatch companion) and the song thrushes operatic. And above all this, the leaves of the horse chestnuts unfolding ... I have to make myself notice, not be wrapped up in my head and my worries.

March 21<sup>st</sup> Sun, celandines wide open to catch it, and the gorgeous powder blue of Buxbaums speedwell.

March 22<sup>nd</sup> Two peacock butterflies with that wonderful gliding flight and a brimstone like a flying primrose!

March 23<sup>rd</sup> and the country heading for lockdown. Two blackcaps I passed haven't heard this and I welcomed them back for the spring and summer. Oh that nightingale like song!! They are called the northern nightingales and when folk tell me they have heard a nightingale on the Granny Downs it is invariably a blackcap. I don't tell them that though. Why spoil a dream!

March 30<sup>th</sup> and even more primroses. I recollect our biology teacher going on about pin-eyed and thrum-eyed ones. I can still tell the difference.

April 6<sup>th</sup> World events getting more tragic, Granny Downs getting more

## **Granny Downs: Spring into Summer**

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beautiful. Time of the cow parsley bridal path, and the song thrushes singing in a more muted way because they don't have to sing above the traffic, as there is hardly any on the main road. Several ambulances though. We can't get away from this one.

April 20<sup>th</sup> lockdown continues and folk tell me they can hear the birdsong. I'd rather hear planes and commercial activity and let the birds sing louder ...

Horse chestnuts out of heaven, offering thousands of white bouquets to the skies.

May 17<sup>th</sup> nearly a month since I wrote this diary. Since then the world is shut away, the blossoms on the horse chestnuts are almost over and the pavements and roads are pink with fallen blossom. I have been going to the Granny Downs on my daily walk but almost feel guilty about loving the details of spring when so many are suffering and afraid. But we can't lose the beauty of this spring, it is so gorgeous.

A birdwatching friend calls at me through his mask in Waitrose that he has seen a treecreeper this morning and believes that GREENFINCHES are nesting on the Granny Downs with their familiar wheezing noise. Now this would be a really big deal.

May 22<sup>nd</sup> swifts over the Granny Downs – AT LAST. Oh welcome, welcome! Here comes summer!

**Geraldine Taylor**



## **Richard Bland Memorial Spinney**

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In March, just at the start of lockdown a small group of members assembled to inaugurate the planting of a new spinney on the Downs. The planting was to mark and celebrate the life of FODAG founder member and much respected committee stalwart, Richard Bland.

The Covid-19 restrictions on volunteer activity meant that the City Councils Tree officer John Atkinson had to plant the trees and all the whips single handed. We are indebted to John for bringing this project to fruition and for the ongoing maintenance in keeping the trees alive during some extremely challenging weather conditions.



*Mrs Jane Bland with FODAG Chair Robert Westlake / Committee Members*

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## Richard Bland Memorial Spinney

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*Mrs Jane Bland*

This was an initiative supported by many of the organisations that Richard was associated with including The Bristol Tree Forum and the Bristol Naturalists Society. Mrs. Jane Bland was also in attendance to see the trees go in,

The new spinney includes three large Oaks which will remain as the centrepiece and around 100 native woodland whips including Hawthorn, Hazel and Holly.

**Robert Westlake**

*Please Note the Spinney is located on the right hand side of Circular Road just past Ivywell Road as you head towards the Seawalls.*

## **Richard Bland's Journey Round the Downs**

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This week we turn north, round Clifton green. We walk up the elegant facades of Sion Hill built in the 1750s. They are all approached by steps, whose purpose was to keep the sheep, who grazed the whole area, from invading the houses. The pavement is made of pennant sandstone slabs, which used to be universal in Bristol. The stone was quarried in the Frome Valley, and not only provided paving stones, but also slabs for steps, and almost universally as kerb stones, most of which are still in existence in all the older parts of Bristol. The gutter is paved in granite setts from Cornwall, and there must have been a huge trade in this product for there are hundreds and thousands of them in Bristol, and they appear imperishable.

Bridge House was built by Brunel as a hotel, and taken over by the military in the last war, before being converted to very luxurious flats today. At its top Gloucester Row was built in the 1780s follows the edge of the common land. Planting trees on Clifton Green was begun by the first conservator of the Downs, William Draper, appointed in 1766 on his return from conquering the Phillipine Islands from Spain. The details of his campaign are laid out on the war memorial, perhaps the earliest in Britain, which was originally in the garden of Manilla Hall, his mansion, but, when it was redeveloped in the 1880s the memorial was moved to its present position, as was the obelisk dedicated to William Pitt. He created an avenue from the Clifton Camp to his own front door. Since then a variety of trees have been planted on the green and until 1976 there was a rookery in the Elm trees that were then killed by the Dutch Elm Disease. The oldest trees are a Horse Chestnut, and a Common Lime, but there are fine specimens of Holm Oak, Turkey Oak, Norway Maple, Black Pine and Hornbeam.

There is a tarmac surface close to the bus stop by the roundabout and this was the site of a Cabman's Rest until thirty years ago. I have never understood why it has not been re-grassed. Christ Church was built by Charles Dyer in 1841 and the spire, a landmark for many miles around, was created by John Norman in 1885. The house at the junction with Canynge Road is probably the oldest in the area for it was a 17<sup>th</sup> century farmhouse, and may well have gone back many centuries before that. It is clearly marked on the 1746 map.

Climbing up the hill we reach Harley Place, a magnificent terrace set back on a pediment from the road, a common device in the development of Clifton. Beneath the paved area are the coal cellars for each property and the coal

## **Sion Hill North to Bridge Valley Road**

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hole covers are still obvious. It was begun in 1788, but the banking collapse of 1793 halted construction and it was only complete d in 1819.

Across the grass on the main Clifton Down Road there is a milestone, stating that it is two miles to Bristol. This road was part of the Bristol turnpike system established by law in 1727. It can be seen that the road sits in a slight cutting whereas all the other tracks on the Downs sit on the original surface. On to Litfield House, the first of a magnificent series of mansions running down the hill. The first is actually signed on the portico by Charles Dyer, 1830, the only building I know signed by its architect. The architectural style is still strictly classical but as you walk down the Promenade the style changes subtly to Bristol Gothick until you reach the Mansion House, built in 1867 the original home of Alderman Proctor, and given by him to the city.

The triangle of land holds Proctor's Fountain, originally built to replace the Toll House at the top of Bridge Valley Road, which was demolished in 1867. It was given by Alderman Proctor, who was also responsible for the creation of Circular Road. The fountain was removed to its present site in 1985 as it was becoming a traffic hazard.

There are a remarkable group of trees in this triangle, probably all planted after the second world war. There are three rare oaks, a Red Oak and a Scarlet Oak from North America, and a tree that originated in a sport found in Savernake Forest in the 1940s called the Cluster Oak. It grows very slowly, and has distorted leaves, but does produce viable acorns. There is also a Tree of Heaven, a group of Small-leaved limes and a Large-leaved Lime planted to replace the Elm trees that were originally here, and a fine Hornbeam, which was almost certainly planted in error as a Beech.

**This article was originally published in 'The Downs Recorder' Issue 58**

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## **A Local Discovery**

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For the last thirty years, I have been so busy looking for wildlife in places abroad and elsewhere in Britain that I have almost totally ignored a place full of interest to naturalists which is just a couple of hundred yards from my front door. I speak, of course, of Durdham Down which everyone knows as just "The Downs".

During the lockdown of March and April 2020, the only option I had of being able to see wildlife was to explore The Downs. From my flat, I can see direct into Bristol Zoo, which is a great privilege. However, I have no garden, so during the lockdown I set myself the target of seeing as much as I could of the flora and fauna of The Downs. I used my camera to record my observations and encounters and to help me write this piece. The images also became a photographic record of what can be seen by anyone with a keen eye and a bit of luck and will be used as the basis of a photo-book.

Every day, and at different times of the day, I explored the parts of the Downs where I anticipated being able to see a varying selection of birds, insects, flowers and the occasional mammal (really just grey squirrels). Amongst my favourite areas was the path that starts from near the top of Bridge Valley Road and comes out at the peregrine viewing area. Also the woody glades and paths following round from here along the edge of the Avon Gorge and thence to Sea Walls were part of my regular itinerary. Later on I started to explore other areas within walking distance but usually fitted in a visit to the peregrine viewing area. On quite a number of occasions it was possible to watch one of these amazing birds flying in and around the gorge, hunting or just surveying its territory. On occasion I spotted an adult bird resting on a ledge below the path.

In mid March, when I started my walks, there were very few leaves on the trees and bushes but by the end of April, probably as a result of all that sunshine with some rain later, foliage quickly started to appear. Wild flowers appeared, like lesser celandine, and then disappeared as new ones, like bluebells started to spring up everywhere. In March, bee flies were much in evidence using their long proboscis to extract nectar from the dandelions and celandine and they seemed so preoccupied that they not mind me getting my macro lens close to photograph them. Bumblebees were not difficult to find but, being rather unpredictable, they were quite tricky to photograph in mid air!



## **A Local Discovery**

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By mid April, butterflies started appearing such as the peacock, speckled wood and orange tip. In fact flying insects of all sorts generally seemed to be proliferating. I clocked up twenty species of birds seen over a period of a month which included those seen within the Avon Gorge – not just peregrines but also cormorants, gulls and ducks of various types, occasional sightings of buzzard and even, on one occasion, a red kite. All over the Downs, crows, jackdaws and magpies abounded with blackbirds and robins in the areas with bushes and trees. In the areas of more dense woodland I was particularly pleased to spot a couple of Jays – the most colourful of the corvid family. No doubt folk with sharper eyes than me (and quicker with their binoculars) would have clocked up more species than I did.

As for the trees themselves, I knew I was ignorant even of many of the most common species so I embarked upon the two Tree trails. One is in the area known as 'the Granny Downs' sandwiched between Westbury Road and Westbury Park. The other starts and ends at Christchurch Clifton. There are excellent leaflets about the trails which you can download from the Friends of the Downs website. Some of the original work was carried out by my friend Richard Bland, a brilliant Bristol naturalist, who very sadly died in 2019.

My next project must be to learn more birdsongs. We so often hear a song without identifying the particular species singing the song. Of course if you are in the habit of wearing earphones whilst exercising, you never hear the fascinating and beautiful songs of birds and this is a great shame.

There is plenty of evidence that spending time in nature can have a profound and positive effect on our health and well being. In particular, it is clear that spending more time in the natural world will improve both our physical and mental health.

So, although you may not live close to the Downs there must be other parks and gardens you can explore somewhere in our wonderfully green city near where you live - even after the period of lockdown is history.

**Charles Kinsey**

***Charles Kinsey is a retired teacher who now lectures on wildlife and conservation [www.charleskinsey.co.uk](http://www.charleskinsey.co.uk)***

## Noticeboard: Events

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

**Francis Greenacre Illustrated Lecture:** Wednesday September 23rd 7.00 p.m. at Redland Friends Meeting House Hampton Road.

**AGM: Wednesday 18th November 2020 7.00pm.** Redland Green Bowls Club (Please note this was incorrectly stated as September in the Winter Newsletter.)

**ALL EVENTS SUBJECT TO CONFIRMATION DUE TO COVID-19**

## COMMITTEE:

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

**SECRETARY:** Jac Solomons

## KEY CONTACTS:

Membership: Joan Gubbin

Articles for the Newsletter: Robin Haward / Luke Hudson

**Please Note: Deadline for submissions for the Autumn edition is 10th October 2020.** Articles to [robinhaward@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:robinhaward@blueyonder.co.uk) or [fodagcontent@gmail.com](mailto:fodagcontent@gmail.com).

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

Please go via the website

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

## SOCIAL MEDIA:

**Website:** <http://www.friendsofthedowns.org> The website has further information on events and a regular blog on the Downs.

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

**Instagram:** [Friends\\_of\\_the\\_Downs](#).

Please send any Downs & Gorge photos to [fodagcontent@gmail.com](mailto:fodagcontent@gmail.com).

### **Correct ID List of Butterflies**

1. Red Admiral
2. Speckled Wood
3. Essex Skipper
4. Marbled White
5. Holly Blue
6. Green Hairstreak
7. Ringlet
8. Comma
9. Small Copper
10. Common Blue
11. Gatekeeper
12. Orange Tip