



FOLKtalk

Issue 65
Spring 2021

Friends of Leckhampton Hill & Charlton Kings Common

Conserving and improving the Hill for you



May Hill

We all know that walking to the top of Leckhampton Hill provides us with wonderful views – which have felt all the more important in the midst of the COVID restrictions. May Hill, with its distinctive knot of pine trees (planted in 1887 to mark Queen Victoria's golden jubilee) will be a familiar sight for anyone who has looked roughly north-west from Leckhampton Hill.

Guy Meredith, FOLK member and naturalist specialising in moths, quite literally set about looking further into the views from the Hill. His article on page 10 describes some of the even more distant landmarks visible from the Hill and summarises the work which lay behind his surprising discoveries.

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FOLK AGM 2020

In a difficult year, much achieved and much to look forward to

For the first time in its history - and like so many societies across the country - FOLK held its 2020 Annual General Meeting online. Despite the usual technical glitches which seem almost unavoidable with online meetings, and the additional problems caused by one of the national email providers, the meeting proceeded smoothly and there was good participation by those who attended.

Encouraging news

Our Chair, John Harvey, opened the meeting by announcing that FOLK has just learned that the bid for a substantial grant from National Grid had just passed its first major hurdle: approval by OFGEM. The bid submission targeted a wide range of significant improvements to be undertaken on Leckhampton Hill, Charlton Kings Common and Ravensgate Common.

There are still more stages to complete before any cash may flow from this national scheme, including public consultation and the necessary detailed agreement between the government, National Grid and the Board of the Cotswolds AONB, the body which will receive the money on behalf of the partners who made the application. However, this news was enthusiastically welcomed by everyone at the AGM, as the hoped-for investment would enable Cheltenham Borough Council, Charlton Kings Parish Council, FOLK and others involved in the projects to make significant progress over the next couple of years.

Annual report

John Harvey's annual report to the meeting summed up a challenging year for FOLK. The impact of COVID on our work was both deep and widespread.

While the lockdowns had prompted a very welcome increase in the use of the Hill by an ever wider range of people, this in turn exacerbated footpath erosion and generated more problems with car parking and litter. With countless work parties cancelled, some dreadful weather and the complexities of social distancing, it had simply been impossible to do everything which we had planned for 2020. However, there were still achievements to celebrate:

- more than 800 hours of work party endeavours – enabling extensive work clearing gorse and scrub, mowing selected open spaces, removing harmful plants, creating firebreaks and butterfly motorways, helping to ensure that historic sites like the limekilns and hillfort are easy to see and enjoy, and removing large volumes of additional litter
- continued work plotting aspects such as vernacular names on the maps developed from the drone survey
- extensive consultation and planning to help to ensure that both walkers and cyclists can enjoy the Hill more safely

FOLK's achievements are always a huge collective effort, but John Harvey was keen to single out Geoff Holt, Mike Donnelly and Pete Niblett for going above and beyond the normal expectations of their roles.

The treasurer's report set out a healthy position, with sufficient funds in reserve to cover normal expenditure over the next five years. Members' participation in the Cheltenham Lottery has generated approximately £400 of additional income.

Finally, the meeting approved the proposed Executive Committee for 2020-21, including John Harvey as Chair, Mike Donnelly as Vice Chair, Malcolm Geddes as Treasurer and Tony Duffin adding the duties of Secretary to his existing Membership role.

FOLK WORK PARTY REPORT

After having to stop all work parties during November due to the Covid restrictions, we managed to get back to work in December . . . before having to shut down again in the new year! How frustrating . . . but necessary.



Clearing gorse above The Gallops

In this short time work was mainly focused on cutting and burning gorse. We started with the lower level slopes above the Gallops and then moved up to the top to create some more fire breaks in the big bank of gorse above the Cotswold Way.

To try and catch up on some of the missed work, and because the numbers of volunteers has increased, we decided to hold an extra work party per month (on the first Wednesday). So we managed to get four work parties in before we had to stop again.

As a break from gorse we visited an area above Daisy Bank Road and cut down hawthorn bushes that were threatening to take over an area of grassland.



Cutting down hawthorn

One bonus of the various Covid restrictions has been that there have been more people visiting and appreciating the Hill. As a result we have had quite a few people offering to join the work parties. We managed to get some of these along to work with us in December and hope that more will turn out when we are able to get back.

We always have plenty to do on work parties and hopefully we will be able to re-start again in April. So, if you, or anyone else you know, would like to help, please do join any of our FOLK work parties. We are a friendly, mixed group of male and female volunteers. You can work at your own pace and take a break as and when you wish. We meet at 9.30am at Tramway Cottage Car Park, Daisy Bank Road, and are on the hill for approximately 3 hours. Tools are provided by FOLK. For your own safety we ask you to wear stout footwear and bring tough gardening gloves.

We normally have three FOLK work parties a month. ***Provided that the Government do relax the Covid constraints as planned***, the proposed dates for work parties for the next few months are:

April 2021	Thursday 8 th	Tuesday 20 th	Sunday 25 th
May 2021	Thursday 13 th	Tuesday 18 th	Sunday 23 rd
June 2021	Thursday 10 th	Tuesday 15 th	Sunday 27 th
July 2021	Thursday 8 th	Tuesday 20 th	Sunday 25 th

For further information you can contact Geoff on 01242 244165 or you can look at the 'Work Party' page on our website (www.leckhamptonhill.org.uk) or send an email to folk.workparty@gmail.com.

BEES NEED GARDENS

On warmer winter days we might have caught occasional glimpses of large bumblebees in our gardens. The males and older queen bumblebees all die as the weather turns cold in the autumn. So the ones we see in the depths of winter are usually young queen bumblebees looking for pollen or nectar in winter-flowering plants.



Queen bumblebee

Many of us who enjoy gardening will seek out plants which flower in the winter or very early spring. After many long grey days, they just lift our spirits – and help winter-active bees. But scientists have now shown just how vital gardens are for the millions of urban bees which are active during the spring and summer.

The study¹ was led by Nicolas Tew of the University of Bristol, in partnership with the Royal Horticultural Society and the Universities of Edinburgh and Reading. It established that ornamental flowering plants in urban gardens are a key source of nectar in cities. Indeed just three urban gardens may feed thousands of bees and gardens can provide as much 85% of the nectar sugars on which urban bees depend.

The study found that residential gardens have a greater diversity of nectar supply and produce more nectar per unit of land than any other land type, including parks, farmland and nature reserves. This is important because, overall, 29% of urban land comprises domestic gardens – six times as much as is found in parks.

So a central conclusion from the study was that gardens “have a pivotal role in supporting pollinators and promoting diversity in urban areas.”

¹ “Quantifying nectar production by flowering plants in urban and rural areas” Journal of Ecology, 26 January 2021.

How can those of us with gardens help the bees?

- Pollinators can fly reasonable distances. (Some bees can fly a few hundred metres or even more than a km from a nest.) So your garden can potentially help to provide food for insects in a really wide surrounding area.
 - The great diversity of food sources (plants) in gardens can help support a diverse community of pollinators and provide them with a balanced diet.
 - This can be a win-win situation. Beautiful ornamental displays of flowers can also be pollinator-friendly. So you absolutely don't have to be making a sacrifice to help nature!
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- Given the widespread decline of biodiversity (including pollinators) in much of our countryside (mainly due to intensively-managed farmland), this is an opportunity for (almost) everyone to help with nature conservation, on their doorstep.

Which flowering plants are best for bees?

- Choose plants with single open flowers. Bees can easily see and reach the central part of these flowers.
- Choose plants with a range of flowering seasons from early spring to late autumn.
- Choose some with purple flowers (eg, lavender, allium, buddleja, catmint) as bees can see purple more easily than any other colour.
- Choose some tubular flowers (eg, foxglove, penstemon, honeysuckle, snapdragons). They suit long-tongued bees like the Garden Bumblebee.

For more information about bee-friendly flowers try searching on the websites of, for example, BBC Gardeners' World or Friends of the Earth.

LITTER ON LECKHAMPTON HILL

With no work parties to run on the Hill during January and February I decided I would fill the gap by doing a bit of litter picking ... but I didn't realise what a task I'd taken on!

I started on an area at the Western end of Charlton Kings Common where I knew there were quite a few sites used for social gatherings and barbecues. I managed to fill two dustbin bags with various bottles, cans and plastic, which was as much as I could carry down, but still there was some left. For my next visit I decided to start from the limekilns end and hoped I would end up recovering the last few items where I'd visited on my first trip.



Well, after five more sessions and ten more full bags I finally got there! I was astonished by how much rubbish I'd found. I was also surprised by some of the objects I picked up, including a tent, a bent bike, an armchair cushion, a number of folding chairs, a large metal barbecue and various items of clothing! Just to give you a feel for what I found, the photo (above) is of one site I came across - an isolated spot above the limekilns.

I'm afraid I just don't understand why people visit an area of outstanding natural beauty and then despoil it with litter. They go to a lot of trouble and effort to carry their food, drink and barbecues up to the various isolated spots they use. Why can't they expend just a little more effort to take their rubbish down again? Do they really like spending time in a rubbish strewn spot?

I could rant on more about rubbish, but it's probably a bit futile. Let's face it, some people are going to leave litter no matter what the likes of me might say. Instead, let me make a few positive suggestions:

- If you can take your rubbish away with you, that would be much appreciated, or at least take it down to the bins provided in the car parks.

- If you put dog poo in a plastic bag please take it away with you. If you don't want to then it may well be best not to use a plastic bag in the first place.
- If you must leave litter behind then please do not throw it over the edge of the steep slopes which makes it so much more difficult, and sometimes dangerous, to recover.

Finally, I know I'm not the only one who does litter picking on the Hill. I don't know who you all are, but let me say we are all very grateful for the work that you do.

Please keep our lovely Hill tidy.

Geoff Holt, FOLK Work Party Coordinator

*Why not take a carrier bag with you when you visit the Hill or Common?
If you can safely pick up any litter, you too can make a difference. (Editor)*

IN THE NEWS

Cotswold Water Park

Gloucestershire's new Site of Special Scientific Interest

This enormous site has 177 lakes covering 2,000 hectares and the whole site has been included in the SSSI. The designation was awarded because of the Water Park's extensive biodiversity, particularly in its national importance as an excellent habitat for breeding birds. Around 35,000 water birds are found at the Water Park over the winter. In particular this site sees scarce species like the little egret and little ringed plover, alongside the frequently seen coots, moorhens and various species of ducks, swans and geese. The scrub and reedbeds surrounding the lakes provide good habitat for blackcaps and several species of warblers.

Converting such a large area of mineral-mining landscape into an attractive destination was a big enough task in itself. Balancing the needs of nature and people made it even more complex. So it is heartening to see the skill and determination of a local site's management being nationally recognised.

HILLS BEYOND HILLS

You can see a long way from the top of Leckhampton Hill, but how far? The popular toposcope shows a selection of points of interest, not all of them on



The Leckhampton Hill toposcope

the horizon. One of the furthest views is to the Brecon Beacons which appear to the left of the Black Mountains and are about 90Km away - actually even further away than the toposcope shows and in a slightly different direction. This set me thinking.

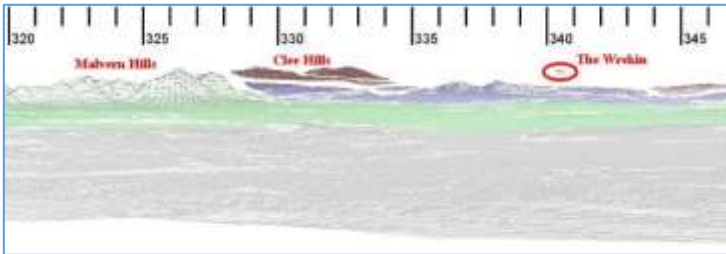
During the first lockdown in 2020 I had downloaded height data on a 50-metre grid from the Ordnance Survey website¹. This enabled me to include “altitude shading” when I was preparing the moth distribution maps for Gloucestershire. Later I thought of another use for the data: to calculate what should be visible from Leckhampton Hill.

Using my long-unused school trigonometry I started by creating a 200km square with Leckhampton Hill at the centre. Then I wrote a computer programme which would calculate how much higher or lower each of 16 million points in the square would be when compared with the height of the Hill, taking the earth's curvature into account. The next stage was to work outwards from the centre of the full-size square to determine which of the 50-metre points on it should be visible from the Hill and which would be obscured by closer land. This in turn enabled a map to be plotted by the program showing what should be visible.

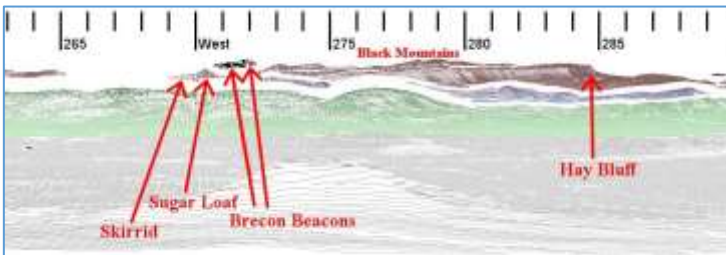
Some of the places on it were obvious, such as Sugar Loaf, Hay Bluff and the Malvern Hills, but some features even further away than those on the toposcope were identified as being visible from Leckhampton Hill. The final step was to make four “linear horizon graphics” for each side of the square, looking west, north, east or south.

¹ OS Terrain 50 (OS data © Crown copyright and database right 2018)

On these horizon graphics (below) the points which should be visible are plotted horizontally according to their OS Grid compass bearing².



Horizon Graphic: view to the North-northwest



Horizon Graphic: view to the West

Naturally some of the more distant features, like the Black Mountains or the more distant Brecons, are difficult to make out except on very clear days. Further away still (95km from the Hill) places like The Wrekin in Shropshire can be seen, but this will require good binoculars or a camera with a zoom lens – and even then these features may be quite difficult to make out.

Guy Meredith

² The horizon graphics are also vertically adjusted for their distance so that there is a gap between far hills and closer ones, and colours have been changed according to distance.

To read Guy's full length description of his work and discover more about its technical and theoretical aspects, please follow the link below:

<https://www.leckhamptonhill.org/site-description/views/>

UK BUTTERFLY POPULATION IN DECLINE

A major report led by Dr Martin Warren, Head of Butterfly Conservation Europe, contains some dramatic findings. Since the 1970s, approximately eight per cent of British butterfly species have become extinct and overall numbers are down by a half. Of the fifty butterfly species currently found in the UK, the report found that 20 are in decline, 21 are stable and just 9 are flourishing.

Much of the loss is directly linked with human activity. The decline in regular coppicing has led to fewer open species within woodland: precisely the habitat of the threatened species the Pearl-bordered Fritillary. Trends such as the draining of fenland, and the replacement of wildflower meadows with simpler grassland pastures/arable land, have caused a fragmentation of habitat. Add in the increased agricultural use of both insecticides and nitrogen, and increasing vehicle pollution, and it would seem like an almost perfect storm.



The situation need not be hopeless, however. The report noted that positive intervention can help. Numbers of the Duke of Burgundy (left) have trebled in North Kent following a project to create woodland clearings and increase the abundance of plants such as cowslips.

This butterfly was targeted for action in the national ***Back from the Brink*** project – and is one of the species on which action is focused in the Leckhampton Hill SSSI. The Duke of Burgundy has declined in its spread across Gloucestershire over recent years and it is now only seen in the larger sites where the management is more favourable. When the data from the 2020 butterfly survey has been completed it will be interesting to note whether positive intervention has also boosted local numbers of this beautiful endangered butterfly.

“**The decline of butterflies in Europe: Problems, significance, and possible solutions**” was published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 12 January 2021.

IN THE NEWS

GLOUCESTERSHIRE CITIZEN SCIENCE PROJECT

Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust is putting together a new Citizen Science programme aiming to reduce the evidence gap in conservation and planning.

There has been an historic lack of funding for survey and monitoring work, which in turn, has limited the underlying data which can be collected to inform nature recovery decisions.

So the **HabiMap** programme has been designed to deliver habitat surveys across Gloucestershire and create detailed information on the state of habitats on and off our nature reserves.

The programme will recruit and train citizen science volunteers who will be involved in providing directly observed data about the state of nature in our county. The data gathered under this programme will then be used to inform the ways in which GWT and other organisations can deliver work to support a net gain in biodiversity across Gloucestershire, now and into the future.

You can find out more about the project by following the link in the email which brought you this newsletter. **NB** *Although the project summary shows training taking place in February-March, we have been assured that training will continue beyond that time to accommodate later volunteers.*

If you would like to take part in the survey you should complete the online **Volunteer Registration Form** by entering this link in your browser <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/ZJW6KKX> or contact the coordinator, Ellen Winter from Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust, on ellen.winter@gloucestershirewildlifetrust.co.uk

We look forward to hearing more about the findings as the project progresses.

THE WORD FROM WAYNE

Wayne Sedgwick, Senior Ranger, Cheltenham Borough Council

Higher Level Stewardship

There is every prospect of continued funding to support work to preserve and improve the natural environment of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common. The documentation for the next one-year extension of the Higher Level Stewardship agreement has been completed. This will cover the next twelve months and it is anticipated that it will be renewed once more next year before the new government scheme, The Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS), comes into force in 2023.

The associated process for renewing the ten-year licence issued by the Planning Inspectorate for the continued use of the existing cattle fencing is also underway. Both of these are central to our collective efforts to preserve and improve the site which FOLK helps the Borough Council to manage.

Car Parking on the Hill

More and more people are enjoying the open spaces which FOLK helps to look after. Sadly, one unwelcome by-product of this increased urge to walk the Hill and Common is a growing demand for safe accessible parking space. As we reported in the previous edition of FOLKtalk, Brownstones Car Park - just off the very top of Hartley Lane - has been extended and re-surfaced. An outstanding problem was the existence of potholes scattered across the entrance and exit roads. These have been repaired, but unfortunately not well enough – and the patches are already crumbling. So the Borough Council is looking to resolve that problem.

The general success of the improvements to this car park have prompted a similar plan to improve the lower car park off Hartley Lane - Salterley Quarry. While the enclosing quarry walls make expansion impossible, it is hoped that the existing very uneven surface will soon be replaced, making it more attractive to people who want to drive to the Hill for their walks. In both sites, it is to be hoped that improving the car parks will also reduce the amount of damage caused by vehicles parking on nearby grass verges.

Revealing and preserving drystone walls

Cotswold drystone walls are marvellous structures which are functional and yet an absolute joy to see. However, even though they are also potentially extremely long-lasting, they do need some care. One threat to their longevity is invasion by strong plants such as bramble which penetrate the gaps between the stones and gradually destabilise the structure.

As well as the new wall being constructed by the Cotswold Wardens up from Hartley Lane, there is, of course, a significant length of drystone wall along the top of the escarpment. This is a key feature in the arrangements to allow the cattle free range across a large section of Charlton Kings Common without straying onto roads or private land. So work is underway to clear the more invasive plant growth from the sides of both walls, providing a clear margin and making easier the ongoing care and maintenance of the walls.

Cycle Trails and Footpaths

Following the extensive initial discussions involving FOLK, Cheltenham Borough Council and local mountain bikers and walkers, further discussions are now underway to agree firm proposals to improve both safety and enjoyment for



both groups. This initiative stems from concerns that there are many paths and trails criss-crossing the Hill and with, footpaths and cycle trails intersecting, there is an obvious risk of accidents, especially in locations where neither walkers nor mountain bikers may be aware of each other's close presence. One simple change has already been made by putting in place

recently felled logs (pictured) to slow down cyclists entering a popular car park.

Following a detailed survey of all the routes, the various parties are now involved in drafting proposals to reduce the number of approved mountain bike trails and to improve visibility at some intersections, as well as making it clear there are any individual trails which are specifically for either walkers or cyclists by adding some helpful signage.

ABOUT FOLK

FOLK is an organisation set up to work with landowners to promote the conservation and management of the ecology, geology and archaeology of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common. We support sustainable recreational and agricultural use of the land. We welcome new members to support and help us in this important work. If you wish to join (either as an individual or as a family) please contact any of the people listed below. ***There is currently no fee for membership.***

Why not have a look at what is new on the FOLK website <http://www.leckhamptonhill.org.uk/> and look us up on Facebook Friends of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common.

Contributions to the FOLK Website are always gratefully received.

Contact: webmaster.leckhamptonhill@gmail.com

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If you have any comments on the Newsletter or would like to contribute an article to the next edition please contact **Martin Wood** on **01242 231230** or email to: martinwood360@gmail.com. Articles of around 500 words, plus a photo if you have one, would be most welcome at any time.

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Find the ***Friends of Leckhampton Hill & Charlton Kings Common*** on www.leckhamptonhill.org.uk and on Facebook

The views expressed in the articles are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of FOLK or its Executive Committee.