



# FOLKtalk

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**Friends of Leckhampton Hill  
& Charlton Kings Common**

*Conserving and improving the Hill for you*



## **HISTORIC CATTLE ON THE HILL AND COMMON**

In November a new herd arrived on the site. A mixed herd of English Longhorn (pictured left) and British Whites now graze here. The English Longhorn breed goes back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century while the British White emerged about a hundred years earlier. Both breeds are ideal for conservation grazing on challenging terrain.

To find out more turn to the main article on page 4, and get the latest update on the new grazing regime in The Word from Wayne on page 21.

## INTRODUCING MIKE DONNELLY

### Newly elected Chair of Folk



I must first thank FOLK members and the executive committee for voting me in as FOLK Chair. I also want to say a big thank you to John Harvey for all his work over seven years as Chair. In particular John put in many extra hours on the successful bid for the recent grant received from National Grid.

This is really an exciting time to be Chair of the FOLK Executive Committee. We have so many ambitious projects for work to enhance the landscape, improve nature conservation and improve the site for its many users.

Although we had to stop the work parties during the first lockdown, under the present regulations they are up and running once more. We have had an increased number of volunteers in the last two years. It started with people on furlough as a low risk outdoor activity, and a number of students have attended work parties as part of their Duke of Edinburgh award scheme.

**Thank you to all our volunteers, every one of you. But we still have a lot of projected work to do. So if you think it might be for you please check our web site for work party details.**

Thanks to the National Grid Grant, contractors have already resurfaced a large stretch of the Cotswold Way. With contractors and volunteers working together, we have also started removing gorse on Charlton Kings Common. This is to help restore the rare limestone grassland. There is also a project to improve the views from the Cotswolds Way by removing tall stands of gorse along the side of the footpath.

Finally, you may have noticed before Christmas that there were new cattle on the Charlton Kings Common: English Longhorns and British Whites. These cattle will only be on the common in the winter months. We are hoping that this will improve the wild flower growth in the summer.

The National Grid landscape improvement grant offers a once in a lifetime opportunity to make significant improvements to Leckhampton Hill, Charlton Kings Common and Ravensgate Common. You will find more information on our website about the different strands of the project work, what we are actually doing and what we plan to achieve.

We are always please to hear from FOLK members and the general public regarding issues on the Common and Hill. On 5<sup>th</sup> July 2022 we plan to be at the Cheltenham Midsummer Fiesta in Montpellier Gardens. Perhaps you would like to come and see us there. Cheltenham residents have worked hard for more than hundred years to keep this wonderful space open for public use.

Now, let's work together to preserve and improve the Common and Hill for future generations.

Mike Donnelly has been a member of FOLK for over fifteen years as a volunteer for work parties and as a work party coordinator for three years. He is a long-time member of the FOLK Executive Committee and was awarded the Cheltenham Borough Council Medal of Honour in 2017 for his services to the community working with FOLK. He is also presently on the steering group for the National Grid Project *Restoring Cheltenham Escarpment Grassland*.

## Inside this issue

Read all about the 2021 FOLK AGM and the Guest Lecture by Simon Smith of the Cotswold National Landscape on page 11

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## CONSERVATION GRAZING

If you have walked on the Leckhampton Hill or Charlton Kings Common during the last few months you will very likely have come across the new herd of cattle. Their arrival heralds a change in the way that sensitive conservation grazing can support nature on our site. In particular, the new cattle will not be freely grazing when the wildflowers are in flower as this is a vital time for butterflies, moths and other pollinators to feed.



British Whites arriving in Cowslip Meadow

On 1<sup>st</sup> November heritage graziers, James and Katie, brought a mixed herd of British Whites and English Longhorns onto the site. Their first pasture was Cowslip Meadow. After the short drive from the farm at Perrots Brook the cows and calves were keen to explore their new surroundings.

First of all they formed a long line and slowly walked around the perimeter of the field before returning to start grazing some particularly lush grass near the entrance gate. Within an hour they had slowly spread across the meadow and were immediately at ease here. Some quickly found good grass very near to the electric fence which bordered the footpath up to Windass Hill – completely unperturbed by passing walkers.

British Whites and English Longhorn are ancient British breeds ideally suited to hilly terrain. Like the Dexter cattle which used to graze the Hill and Common, the new breeds are inherently placid and they are perfectly used to being close to people. However, in appearance they are much bigger than the previous herd and the English Longhorns certainly live up to their name.



English Longhorn cow and calf

So for three days in early November FOLK had an all-day presence around Cowslip Meadow, chatting with passing walkers and taking the opportunity to introduce them to the new herd.

We gave reassurance about the cattle's temperament, but also explained that the herd would soon be on the main area of Charlton Kings Common.

Most importantly, FOLK volunteers took time to explain the “Nofence” virtual fencing technology. Using this system, the graziers, in consultation with the Borough Council's Senior Ranger Wayne Sedgwick, use GPS to set a virtual fence line around the area which we want the cattle to graze. When a cow reaches this invisible “line” it receives an electronic warning and, driven by the innate herd instinct, turns around to re-join the rest of the cattle. An added bonus of this new technology is that by using the freely downloadable app walkers can see which zone the cattle currently occupy.



British White cow with Nofence transmitter

After successfully grazing all of the targeted areas of grassland, the cattle were moved off the Hill. You will now see them grazing if you pass the Reversion Field which lies between Hill Farm and the Trig Point. They will return to Nofence grazing on the Hill and Common later this year.

To download the app follow this link

[heritagegraziers.co.uk/where-are-the-cows](https://heritagegraziers.co.uk/where-are-the-cows)

For more information about the new herd's first months on the Hill and Common see the item in The Word from Wayne on page 21.

## 2021 BUTTERFLY SURVEY

*The annual butterfly survey provides valuable data about state of nature on the Hill and Common. It can also help to determine whether any actions FOLK and the Borough Council have taken to support nature recovery may have helped to make a difference.*

*So, once again, a dedicated team of butterfly surveyors spent very nearly six months identifying individual butterflies seen on the Hill between March and September 2021. The surveyors noted the numbers observed and the location of each sighting. In all, they completed ninety six surveys<sup>1</sup> across the different defined sections of the site. **This report by Serena Meredith sets out the initial findings.***

Once again there was an early start to the season, with two surveyors venturing forth on 30 March when 16 butterflies were sighted. Two weeks of cold weather followed at the beginning of April when conditions were unsuitable. Otherwise, at least one survey was undertaken every week until the second week in September, with the highest number (twelve) being completed in the last week of May. The last five butterflies of the season were seen on 22 September. The cool early season weather seemed to affect not only the spring flying species but also the high summer ones, which emerged later than in all but one of the previous years.

### **At this stage, the following observations can be made:**

- Skippers: Small/Essex, Large and Dingy continue to decline in abundance
- Whites: numbers for the three very similar species (Small, Large and Green-veined) always vary greatly year on year. As usual, a far greater number were seen than could be recorded because of the difficulty of identification (ie, distinguishing between them) rather than actual



Large Skipper: continuing to decline in abundance. Brimstones and Orange Tips, however, were at about nine-year average levels. Just one Clouded Yellow was seen.

- Green Hairstreak: a trend seems to be emerging possibly showing a cyclical rise and fall in the population. After two good years, the number reduced by a third to 14.
- Blues: only two Small Blue were seen, a disappointing total given that at other sites numbers were above average. After a very poor year in 2020, Common Blue numbers (137) recovered slightly, but are still well below the peak of 490 in 2018. Brown Argus, never common, were around the nine-year average. Chalkhill Blue did well with the second highest count of 31.
- Comma: only 6 were seen: the lowest number in my records.
- Fritillaries: after a series of poor years, Dark Green numbers bounced back above the nine-year average, whereas Silver-washed went in the opposite direction.
- Browns: in the last couple of years, Marbled White, Meadow Brown and Ringlet numbers on the Leckhampton Hill plateau area have reduced substantially, which may be the result of the rotational management (grass cutting) done on this section of the hill.
- Duke of Burgundy: Although not seen across Charlton Kings Common quite so widely as in some years, the total numbers recorded during timed counts away from the regular survey routes were steady.



Dark Green Fritillary: rising numbers seen of the rotational management (grass cutting) done on this section of the hill.

Despite the higher number of surveys completed, 2021 saw the lowest number of butterflies recorded since 2016. This is likely to have been influenced by some irregularity in the pattern of observations during the flying season, caused by some unusually extreme and/or unpredictable weather conditions at different stages of the year. Further analysis will help resolve and/or explain whether the apparent decline in numbers is true or just an effect of the variable numbers of surveys undertaken week by week.

This year will bring two developments that should start to see more flowers – and so more nectar – becoming available to the butterflies, bees and other invertebrates. Firstly the change in the grazing regime will mean that the cattle

will not be on the Hill during the late spring and summer when the wildflowers are out. Similarly, the enhanced scrub (gorse) clearance being undertaken by contractors (under the terms of National Grid grant funding) should allow more of the underlying grass and wildflowers to recover.

Hopefully the combined impact of these two factors will enable thriving populations of all invertebrates to become established more widely across the site as a whole. So surveying will continue for the next couple of years in order to record any variations in butterfly abundance and distribution prompted by these projects.

Of course, the amenity value of Charlton Kings Common should also improve along with the increased flower power! If you would like to help monitor these potential benefits, please get in touch with me. The more eyes watching for changes the better!

Serena Meredith

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<sup>1</sup> 96 surveys on 52 different days, with 3848 butterflies counted in total. On three of the days no butterflies were seen.

To find out more about the distribution of butterflies throughout the county, visit <http://www.gloucestershire-butterflies.org.uk/hamearis/butterfly-maps/>

For ideas about other places to visit to see butterflies, why not purchase a copy of “Butterfly Walks in Gloucestershire” from Serena.

See <http://www.gloucestershire-butterflies.org.uk/hamearis/walks-booklet/> for details.

NB Local delivery in Cheltenham can be arranged to avoid p&p charge.



# AN EXULTATION OF SKYLARKS

## Collective Names for Birds

Five hundred years ago or more, the simple term of “flock” for a group of birds was suddenly seen as far too dull or imprecise. So specific names for groups of individual species started to emerge. Many were recorded and published in the 15<sup>th</sup> century publications “*Books of Courtesy*”: handbooks designed to educate the nobility.



Even today we might be familiar with a “parliament” of owls (or of rooks or crows) and a “murmuration” of starlings (left), but there exists a wider – and often bewildering – range of avian collective nouns. Some are just idiosyncratic, some are weird and some are just plain wrong, but they remain curious and intriguing all the same.

Many of these terms are rooted in characteristic (or imagined) behaviours. These include a “chattering” of choughs, a “quarrel” of sparrows, a “trembling” of finches, a “mischief” of magpies, a “scold” of jays or – a great favourite – an “exultation” of skylarks.

On a darker note, some corbids have attracted less favourable collective nouns, like a “conspiracy” of ravens. Crows, indeed, have long been associated with death and were even believed to be sent by the Devil or even to be witches in disguise. Hence a “murder” of crows.



A chattering of choughs

However fanciful, there is a touch of logic in collective nouns based on birds’ movements. One might readily conjure up the image, for example, of a “water dance” of grebes, a “descent” of woodpeckers or a “fall” of woodcock.

Inevitably, though, our 15<sup>th</sup> century antecedents eventually got carried away with anthropomorphism and bequeathed terms which defy any obvious sense of logic. We can only wonder at the coining of terms like an “orchestra” of avocets, “prayer” of godwits, a “hermitage” of thrushes, a “committee” of terns, a “pitying” of turtledoves or a “banditry” of titmice.

To find out more you might like to dip into *Chloe Rhodes’* book, *‘An Unkindness of Ravens: A Book of Collective Nouns’* published by Michael O’Mara (£9.99). Another useful volume is *‘A Conspiracy of Ravens: A Compendium of Collective Nouns for Birds’*, with illustrations by Thomas Bewick (Bodleian Library Publishing, £9.99)

## **IN THE NEWS**

### **FIRST TIME HIKERS**

The pandemic has brought untold sadness and disruption, but perversely, brought about some unexpected benefits. We have already been aware of increased footfall on the Hill and Common during the repeated lockdowns. Now the Ordnance Survey (OS) has the data to back this up across the country.

More importantly it seems that increasing numbers of people are discovering for the first time the pleasure to be found in country walks. Using information gleaned from the use of its maps app, OS has observed an increase of nearly fifty percent in the numbers of walks recorded during the past year. Digging deeper, the study also revealed that more people were taking the less demanding routes, and more than 60 percent of walks recorded involved climbing less than 500 feet. Both of these factors suggest an increase in the numbers of new or inexperienced walkers.

# FOLK ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2021

**Held on 10<sup>th</sup> November**

After being obliged to hold our 2020 AGM by “zoom” it was good to be meeting in person once again, courtesy of The Wheatsheaf on the Old Bath Road. Around forty members, along with some guests, gathered to hear about FOLK’s achievements over the past year and its plans for the future.

Chairman John Harvey began by providing a commentary on the key headlines of his annual report. This began with an acknowledgement of the impact of COVID.

In the throes of the continuing pandemic, 2021 had been a challenging one for FOLK and indeed for everyone who helps to care for Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common. The principal problems were the impact on work parties and also on committee work, which had to be conducted by Zoom throughout the year. John thanked all who had made a positive contribution to the group’s work, whether on work parties or in other voluntary activity. It was encouraging, however, that the restrictions prompted by the pandemic saw a significant increase in footfall on the Hill and Common as more and more people found comfort in the great outdoors.

**The big news for 2021 was the substantial grant received from National Grid** and the meeting heard more about progress which has already been made on the projects this grant will be supporting across Leckhampton Hill, Charlton Kings Common and Ravensgate Common. Improvements under way at the time of the meeting included the continuation of the re-building of the drystone wall alongside the Cotswold Way up from Hartley Lane, and works to improve safety and accessibility for those using badly eroded stretches of the Cotswold Way.

**Despite it having been such a challenging year, the Work Parties had achieved a great deal**, with 1,400 volunteer hours recorded. Tasks included: removing gorse, hawthorn, bramble and cotoneaster; cutting fire breaks through gorse stands; the annual mowing and clearance in various areas; removing hemp agrimony and ragwort; litter picking; removing growth to re-expose Cotswold stone walls and fence lines; refurbishing noticeboards; and removing tall scrub to open up a flight-paths for Duke of Burgundy butterflies.

**John Harvey also commended the extensive work done to improve safety where footpaths and mountain bike trails crossed.** This has included blocking off or

diverting some mountain bike trails, and preparing warning signage to increase different users' awareness of each other. In response to a question from the floor, Wayne Sedgwick (Senior Ranger, Cheltenham Borough Council) agreed to look into the idea of the more prominent display of the map of mountain bike trails on sites on the Hill, and also to consider the issue of taking any remedial steps to make horse riding safer where popular bridle paths are crossed by mountain bike trails.

FOLK has more than 430 members and its finances remain on a good footing, despite the continuation of the current policy of not charging for membership.

**Looking ahead to 2022**, the meeting heard about plans for enhanced gorse clearance, making diseased and end-of-life-trees safe for visitors, changing the ways cattle are used for conservation grazing, and the continued removal of invasive plant species. Views were also invited on the proposal to modify a small section of the dry stone wall to mount memorial plaques.

**The new Executive Committee for 2021-22 was elected.** This brought to an end John Harvey's seven years of serving as Chair – a term of office which had been made both longer and considerably more problematic by the impact of COVID-19. John proffered sincere thanks for all that his fellow committee members had contributed during these years, but made particular mention of the tireless work of Geoff Holt, Pete Niblett and FOLK's new Chairman, Mike Donnelly.

After closing the formal part of the meeting, John Harvey introduced **Simon Smith** of the **Cotswold National Landscape** (previously known as the Cotswold Conservation Board) who presented a fascinating talk on the topic of the "Cotswold Nature Recovery Plan".

## **NATURE RECOVERY**

### **Guest talk by Simon Smith, Cotswold National Landscape**

**With more than thirty five years of conservation work behind him, Simon was eminently qualified to set out the approach being taken in the Cotswolds.** He noted that 56% of the UK is occupied by pasture or arable farmland. Only 25% is "natural or semi-natural", and of that just one-third lowland.

Three quarters of the UK's lowland "calcareous" (ie, chalk or limestone) grassland has been lost in the last seventy years – a fact which is all the more shocking when it is known that this specific type of landscape is the most biodiverse of any seen in the UK. So this is why not only preserving environments like the Cotswolds

grasslands is so important, but a programme is needed not simply to stop the current decline but actually to help nature recover lost ground.

**What is hindering nature's recovery?** On top of the many landscape changes directly made by human activity, climate change is clearly having measurable impact. Warmer and drier summers, warmer and wetter winters, and unseasonal and more extreme weather events all affect the life of plants and the living creatures which depend on them. At heightened risk, therefore, are species which are only viable on specific habitats, such as butterflies like the Pearl Bordered Fritillary or the Duke of Burgundy.

**Nature can be resilient.** Simon noted that while some species may face extinction, others have learnt to adapt. Mostly this means moving from one location to another. Sometimes this is a longer-term move, such as the generally northward movement caused by higher temperatures in a species' previous territory. At other times, nature recovers from temporary setbacks if the conditions are right, or species may be re-introduced when circumstances are favourable.

**Making connections.** A key to achieving the goals of the Cotswold Nature Recovery Plan is the concept of connectivity between favourable landscapes. This is a familiar theme in small-scale recovery projects nationwide. For example, locally, efforts have been made to create "butterfly motorways" which enable a species like the Duke of Burgundy butterfly to move from one favourable site to a new one which, while quite close to their current ground, is surrounded by land which is not compatible with that butterfly's needs.

On a much grander scale, however, Simon reported on a development to map whole regions of a given landscape type and then to examine where it would be best to create broad, supportive corridors to enable species to transfer from one region to another. One such programme is the Big Chalk Project, which has the potential to link the major areas of chalk and limestone grassland all the way from the South Downs to the North Cotswolds.

**In closing** Simon reminded us that our precious grassland has always been a tapestry of grass, wild flowers, scrub, scrub margins and woodland. So he praised the quality and ambition of our local bid to National Grid, but also acknowledged the huge amount which has routinely being done by local voluntary groups like FOLK to try to maintain and improve our precious limestone grassland – and help nature to recover.

## THE CHELTENHAM LOTTERY

Newer members might be interested to know that, two years ago, Cheltenham Borough Council joined a growing number of local councils supporting community-centred online weekly lotteries. Like many other community groups and charities in the town FOLK is registered with the Cheltenham Lottery in order to generate a small income to help us meet our expenses. ***The income from this lottery is especially important now that we are not charging a membership fee, but still have costs to meet.***



### **How does it work?**

Put simply, players choose six numbers per entry at a cost of £1 per week. Draws take place every Saturday evening and lucky winners can win cash prizes ranging from £25 up to £25,000.

### **To take part and help support FOLK you can log into**

[www.CheltenhamLottery.co.uk](http://www.CheltenhamLottery.co.uk) and search for “Friends of Leck”.

or you can follow this link and go straight to the FOLK page at

<https://www.cheltenhamlottery.co.uk/support/friends-of-leckhampton-hill>

**You can then sign up and buy tickets for as little as £1 per week.**

Finally, we want to say a big **Thank You** to those of our members who play this lottery. Because of you, FOLK continues to receive very welcome funds to support its valuable work.

# FOLK WORK PARTY REPORT



The main focus of our work parties from October to January has been on gorse with our first efforts being to remove bushes that were blocking the views from the Western end of Charlton Kings Common.

Before getting down to the main task of the period – burning gorse cuttings generated by contractors – we did some (mainly) non-gorse work. This included removing gorse and scrub encroaching into the open spaces in Brownstones Quarry where, for example, some interesting orchids grow. During this task, as with most work parties, we did take time out for a break and cake provided by some of our volunteers. Many thanks to our bakers.



Another task was to give the area between Hartley Lane and Salterley Quarry a bit of a trimming. We brushcut some of the long grass to try to encourage a more diverse range of plant species and removed encroaching scrub. (Yes, this included more gorse!)

The next non-gorse work was to do similar grass cutting and scrub removal work on clearings in a couple of areas above Bridge Car Park on Daisy Bank Road. These are spaces that we try to keep open, especially for butterflies to enjoy. See some before and after photos below.



We then moved on to the main gorse tasks. Firstly we cut back the gorse that had been slowly encroaching on the footpath we call Windass which goes up to the top of Charlton Kings Common. This also opened up the views from here.

This was followed by our main task of the period. Contractors were brought in in December to remove gorse as part of the work sponsored by the National Grid grant. To get the most benefit from these resources the contractors focused on



cutting the gorse while we volunteers followed up afterwards to burn their cuttings. We spent four work parties doing this. We also managed to do a little bit more cutting ourselves to complement the work of the contractors. This work has resulted in a large clear area

as can be seen from the 'after' photo above. This area contains species-rich grassland which we hope can now thrive rather than be slowly killed off by the shading gorse.



During some of the work parties in this period, particularly the later ones, we have been joined by a number of young people who are working towards their Duke of Edinburgh Awards and using this as part of their volunteering efforts. We normally get one or two doing this each year but at present we have nine and their input is welcomed and valued.

As you can see, there is always plenty to do. So, if you, or anyone else you know, would like to join in, 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, normally 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.

The planned dates for work parties for the next five months are:

March 2022	Thursday 10 <sup>th</sup>	Tuesday 15 <sup>th</sup>	Sunday 27 <sup>th</sup>
April 2022	Thursday 14 <sup>th</sup>	Tuesday 19 <sup>th</sup>	Sunday 24 <sup>th</sup>
May 2022	Thursday 12 <sup>th</sup>	Tuesday 17 <sup>th</sup>	Sunday 22 <sup>nd</sup>
June 2022	Thursday 9 <sup>th</sup>	Tuesday 21 <sup>st</sup>	Sunday 26 <sup>th</sup>
July 2022	Thursday 14 <sup>th</sup>	Tuesday 19 <sup>th</sup>	Sunday 24 <sup>th</sup>

For further information you can contact Geoff on 01242 244165 or you can look at the 'Work Party' page on our website (<https://www.leckhamptonhill.org.uk/work-parties/>) or send an email to [folk.workparty@gmail.com](mailto:folk.workparty@gmail.com).

**If you would like to read more about the full range of work being carried out on the Hill and Common**, not just by FOLK volunteers, and find out why each project is being done, do take a look at the new page on the FOLK website.

<https://www.leckhamptonhill.org.uk/conservation-work/>

# WEATHER AND NATURE 2021

## Winners and Losers

The British have a bit of a reputation for their obsession with the weather – often for good reason. The recent ferocious Storm Eunice was our worst for a decade. Already, this year’s count of named storms has reached six, reminding us all of the ease with which extreme weather can disrupt our own lives.

Spare a thought then for nature. While we celebrated – or despaired about – last year’s weather in equal measure, many living creatures found the conditions exceptionally challenging. Some aspects of the weather were similar to what we would expect. What caused most problems for nature were some of the extremes seen, and the wide and unpredictable variations both with and between months.

The previous winter (2020-21) had typified this variability. It was colder than average, interspersed with some unusually mild spells. It also brought 35% more rainfall than normal<sup>1</sup>. January was the coldest since 2010 and February see-sawed between sharp frosts and warmer spells.

**It was Spring though which proved the most challenging season.** Overall temperatures were lower than normal, but perversely April was much colder than March. By contrast, last April was the driest since 1980 while May was the wettest since 1862.

Many species of butterflies and moths were hit very hard by the very rainy May, and the early-emerging bees, such as *Bombus pratorum* (the Early Bumblebee) really struggled in the harsh Spring weather.



Early Bumblebee (*Bombus pratorum*)

Frogs, toads and newts generally delayed spawning until the Summer. This was better for the tadpoles’ immediate survival, but the later their young emerged, the less likely they were to become sufficiently mature to get through their first winter.

Blue Tits and Great Tits were among the birds hardest hit by the cold wet Spring. When their young emerged from their eggs, the cold April and wet May meant

that there were nowhere near enough caterpillars around to sustain them. Many nests failed altogether.



Tawny owls did well

**Summer was kinder to some species.** It was warmer and sunnier than average, with a very warm spell in July. So the bumblebee species which emerged from hibernation in June found a favourable season in which the wildflowers remained right through August and even into September. Other beneficiaries were Tawny Owls and Kestrels, the burgeoning population of Voles offering them a good supply food for these critical months. For all these successes, butterflies face all sorts of struggles. Many species had delayed or even abandoned their earlier breeding cycle, relying instead on a second attempt much later in the summer.

**The unpredictability continued through the Autumn and Winter.** Overall, the Autumn was warmer than average, but the wetter than normal weather in September and October was followed by only 63% of the usual rainfall in November. It is too early to tell what impact the Autumn weather may have had on nature, but the Winter of 2021-22 is already having visible effects.



Dormice had a tough start to 2022

The unseasonably mild weather this January has seen some bats, and other creatures such as Dormice, emerging very early from hibernation. However, once up and about, they have found very little to eat so early in the year and many have simply starved.

After two years heavily disrupted by COVID-19 we are all hoping for better times ahead – and some warm sunny days would make all the difference. We can only hope that the weather in 2022 will be more favourable for nature too.

<sup>1</sup> In this article, references to *normal* or *average* refer to the mean values for the period 1981-2010.

# THE WORD FROM WAYNE

Wayne Sedgwick, Senior Ranger, Cheltenham Borough Council

## PROJECTS SUPPORTED BY THE NATIONAL GRID GRANT

### Cotswold Way Improvement

Some of the badly eroded stretches of the Cotswold Way between the Topograph and Windass Hill were levelled and lined with several graduated layers of Cotswold stone last autumn. These have now bedded in, losing their raw golden colouration and merging into the landscape. At this stage, though, the repair work has been fragmented as the contractors tackled the very worst areas first. During this year the same restructuring work will be carried out on other parts of the footpath. This will create a more continuous line of safe pathway for all to enjoy - and help protect this stretch of the Cotswold Way from future erosion.



Improved climb up to trig point



There has also been some new fencing installed by the western end of the drystone wall where the official course of the Cotswold Way has been restored. This takes walkers safely down a previously tricky slope (*pictured left*) through a small patch of woodland and out towards the edge of the escarpment, rather than hugging the wall itself. In time the fenced

off section will be allowed to regenerate, with grass and wildflowers on view instead of just bare mud.

### Tackling gorse

Seasoned readers of FOLKtalk will know only too well the challenge posed by gorse. Although small stands of this potentially dominant species are a natural part of a limestone grassland, it is all too easy for the gorse, accompanied by bramble, to spread, choking out grass and wildflowers across increasing large

areas. So a major effort to clear gorse is a key element of the work funded by the grant.

As we reported in the last edition of FOLKtalk, gorse work on Ravensgate was supported by the hiring of a contractor who used a specialist piece of machinery called Robocut. This mechanically cut a large area of gorse in very short time. On the much hillier slopes of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common, however, a different approach was tried. In December a team of expert contractors used hand-held power tools to cut gorse down to ground level across approximately one acre at the eastern end of the site near Windass Hill. The stumps were then treated with a safe and approved chemical to help prevent regrowth. This project, of course, created a great mass of cut gorse which turned out to be very difficult to get down the slope to a safe site where hard-working FOLK volunteers could successfully burn it.

### **A new grazing regime**

After settling in on Cowslip Meadow in early November, the new cattle were given time to become familiar with the “*Nofence*” system which controls their movement. In particular they needed to get used to having transponders round their necks and to the electronic warnings they receive when they cross a virtual fence line. In less than a fortnight they had not only become used to the Nofence technology but also completely grazed out Cowslip Meadow, meaning a move to fresh pastures.

Their next move was to a defined area on the eastern end of the main slope of Charlton Kings Common. It was here that it started to become apparent that this would prove to be a transitional grazing season for the new cattle. The Dexter herd, which were previously used on the Common, was always free to graze throughout the spring and summer and this meant that when the British Whites and English Longhorns arrived there was only a limited growth of grass still remaining.



The new cattle out to graze on the slopes

Within a week on the first Nofence zone out on the Common, it became necessary to move the herd on once more. To start with they were given a wider area of pasture to graze, stretching up to the slopes below Windass Hill, which kept them fed for another couple of weeks. However, after their grazing patch was extended once more it took only another fortnight for this supply of grass to be completely grazed out.

At that point they were taken off the main slopes and moved back to the western end of our site to graze in the two Hopkins Fields. This kept them well fed with fresh grass for another couple of weeks, supplemented by large quantities of hay bales.

Towards the end of January it was clear that these fields were also grazed out and the herd has now moved to its winter pasture, the so-called Reversion Field between Hill Farm and the Trig Point. This field has not been fertilised for more than ten years. So any silage cut there for the cattle is effectively organic – another benefit in the journey towards making this a fully sustainable grazing regime.



The herd on the Reversion Field

To support the new scheme the National Grid grant funded the installation of water supply at key points and will also enable the purchase of two “cattle crushes”. Despite their somewhat harsh name, these devices are simply strongly-built metal stalls farmers use for holding cattle, horses, or other livestock safely while they are examined, marked, or given veterinary treatment.

The cattle will return to extensive Nofence grazing on the Hill and Common later next year - after the main flowering season for the wildflowers which are vital for the regeneration of the limestone grassland. However, even in the short few weeks of their time openly grazing, people using the area have had no complaints about the Nofence system or the presence of these larger, but placid cattle. There have been no safety incidents and the cattle themselves are now fully accustomed to the technology which contains them in their designated grazing areas.

## OTHER NEWS

### Ash Dieback

On a recent walk with the Council's tree officer, there was some evidence that the eventual loss of ash trees on the site may not end up being quite as severe as first feared. Scientists believe that, in part, this may be because, in some cases, the disease and tree learn to accommodate each other's needs rather than the ash dieback always seeking to kill its host. It may also be that some strains of European ash are more disease resistant than others. For all that, ash dieback does pose a real threat. Our immediate concern here is with diseased trees which are close to routes used by people – roads, lanes, tracks and footpaths – rather than those in isolated patches of woodland. So we will expect to see some work by contractors before too long. The treatment may be anything from the removal of weakened branches, through overall crown reduction to complete felling of the tree.

### A New Ranger Joins the Team

I am delighted to tell you that the Borough Council has appointed a new Ranger to work alongside me. Lucy Wise joined the team in December and got stuck in straight away – helping us to move the new cattle to their next grazing site. She even managed to steer one of the British Whites back to the herd (*right*) when it became temporarily separated from the rest of the cattle.



Since Lucy gained her degree in Outdoor Education Leadership and Management she has been involved in outdoor education projects for all ages from tiny tots upwards. She loves helping to engage people with the outdoors, but has also committed her own time to nature conservation and outdoor education as a volunteer for the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust. So her new post with the Borough Council brings together her love for the outdoors and nature with the chance to interact with volunteers and all who enjoy the Hill and Common. She has already been introduced to a wide range of green space work here including at Pittville Park and the new tree-planting on Burrows Field. Her time here has also included joining in with FOLK Work Parties – when she was highly impressed by the ginger cake shared over the coffee break!

## 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](mailto: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](mailto: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](http://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.*