



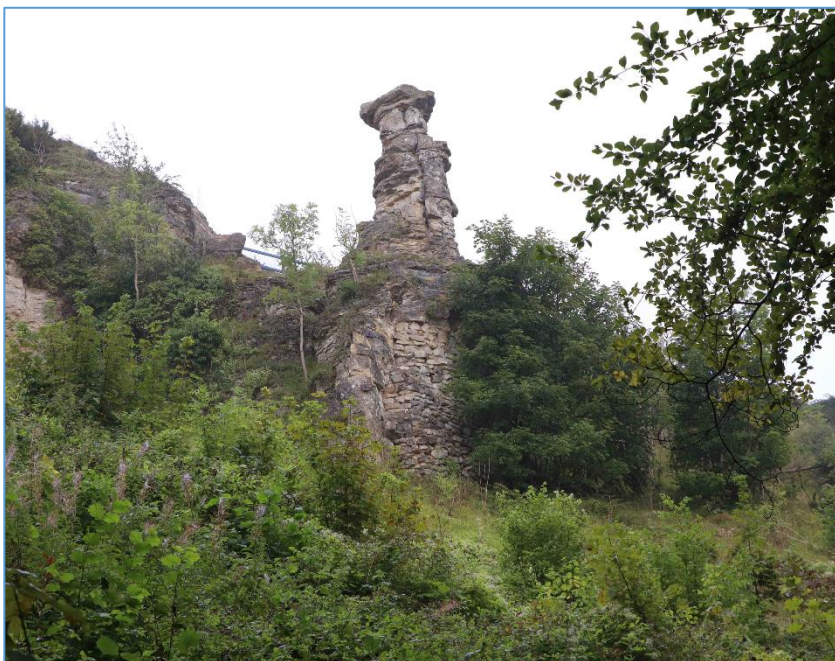
FOLKtalk

Issue 73
Autumn
2023

Friends of Leckhampton Hill
& Charlton Kings Common

Conserving and improving the Hill for you

A FRESH LOOK AT THE DEVIL'S CHIMNEY



One of the many improvements made through the support of the National Grid has been tree work around the famous Devil's Chimney. Over recent years the steady spread of trees around this local landmark has obscured all but its very top, whether seen from the viewing platform by Dead Man's Quarry or below from Woodland Walk. Earlier this year the upper area was cleared and now contractors have opened up the lower slope giving everyone a clear view of the Devil's Chimney in all its quaint glory.

To read more about National Grid funded improvements see The Word from Wayne on [p 9](#)

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FOLK Annual General Meeting and Special Lecture

Tuesday 14th November 2023, 7.00 - 9.00pm

**The Wheatsheaf (function room at side)
Old Bath Road, Leckhampton, GL53 9AJ**

Non Members Welcome – Free Entry

Come to the AGM to find out about FOLK - what we do and the new projects to be undertaken on the Hill and Common.

After the AGM there will be a talk on

Leckhampton: This is your (Geological) Life

given by geologist Steve Peacock

Your copy of the AGM papers can be found either

- enclosed with your newsletter
- or
- through the links on the accompanying email

For further information about FOLK and the AGM

please see www.leckhamptonhill.org.uk

or contact the Secretary, Tony Duffin - leckhamptonhill@gmail.com

Another year has flown by and we are again approaching the FOLK AGM.

Recently we arranged for one of our newer members, Steve Peacock, to give a geology talk with particular reference to the Jurassic history our site. Steve was a speaker at the Cheltenham Science Festival 2023 and he has since kindly led two geology walks on Leckhampton Hill especially for FOLK. These very popular walks were truly fascinating.

The FOLK AGM will see a number of changes to our Executive Committee.

Tony Duffin our very efficient Secretary, having completed his term of office, is not seeking re-election.

Geoff Holt the Work Party Coordinator has kindly given us twelve months notice of his intention to resign from the post. Geoff will have given ten years service as Work Party Coordinator and has really built the work parties into something to be proud of. Geoff has also been Webmaster for FOLK's web site and we need to fill that post as well

The appointment of officers takes place at the AGM. If you feel that you would like to be on the FOLK committee, or fill an officer's post, please fill in the Nomination for Executive Committee form in the AGM Paperwork Pack or contact us by email. leckhamptonhill@gmail.com

I look forward to seeing you at the AGM



Mike Donnelly, Chair of FOLK

THE WORD FROM WAYNE

Wayne Sedgwick, Senior Ranger, Cheltenham Borough Council

PROJECTS SUPPORTED BY THE NATIONAL GRID GRANT

The works described here are part of a large programme called **Restoring Cheltenham's Escarpment Grasslands**, which is principally funded by a large grant from National Grid following network improvement works they have carried out in recent years.

New Cattle on the Hill and Common

In August Eddy Llewellyn, an experienced conservation grazier from Stroud, brought his cattle onto the site. They are Belted Galloways, the small heritage breed often seen on Crickley Hill. This breed is either black or tan, but always has a distinctive broad white "belt". Like our previous graziers, Eddy will also use the Nofence technology to



help control the herd's movement and manage their grazing. However, with a slightly different regime in place to match the needs of this smaller herd of smaller cattle, the zones of pasture on which they are to graze will also have some physical fencing.

The cattle spent their first few weeks in Hopkins Field and were then moved to graze in nearby Cowslip Meadow, before moving onto the main site in early October when the main flowering season for wildflower plants is over. At that stage, rather than freely roaming across the whole site, they will graze four large areas in turn. Each of these "pastures" will be of approximately 7 hectares (17 acres) and they will spend about six weeks in each area, depending on the richness of the grass found there.

The plan is for the herd to graze the main site until around mid-April. At that stage the first spring wildflowers will start to appear and the cattle will be moved onto higher pastures away from the prime conservation area. Usually there will be some good grass by then, but there will be plenty of supplementary bales of feed to make sure that they have plenty to eat.

A key element of the new grazing regime is our team of Cattle Spotters. These are volunteers who regularly walk on the Hill and Common and have agreed to spend about an hour each week to keep an eye on the herd. They have been trained by Eddy and will basically just make sure that the cattle appear to be safe and in good health.

We have seven spotters already but one or two more would be useful either to join a regular rota or just to be available to step in if somebody can't do his or her agreed slot. If you want to know more please contact Wayne on wayne.sedgwick@cheltenham.gov.uk

Perimeter Fencing

A specialist contractor has been hired to replace all the loose or rotting fence posts on the fence which encircles the main site. The fence itself is more than ten years old and these posts are simply reaching the end of their expected life. Replacing them keeps the cattle within the site, helping to ensure the safety of the cattle themselves and keeping cows and traffic out of each other's way.

Gorse clearance

Gorse is a potentially dominant species and, although it has value as part of biodiversity, its presence does call for a degree of control. In other words, the aim is to manage the gorse – not to eliminate it entirely. So contractors have done a great job of clearing yet more gorse from the very steep slopes where it is not safe for FOLK volunteers to work. Over the summer a further acre has been cleared, opening up more grassland where grass and wildflowers can now flourish. The before and after photos below show quite what a dramatic difference this sort of work can make.



Management Plan

An ecology expert, Abbie Saunders, has been contracted to undertake a detailed analysis of the site in order to create a long-term, future-proof plan for its conservation and continuous improvement – for people and for nature. This will involve a scientific scrutiny of the data from the local Habimap project (led by Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust). That study provides a baseline description of the diversity and abundance of all the plants found on the site. It surveyed diverse sample plots from across the site: high ground and low ground, open grassland, shady areas, scrubby growth, light woodland and many more.

The management plan is due to be completed by the end of 2024. When in place it will help the Borough Council and voluntary bodies like FOLK to determine what we want to achieve, and therefore what we should do, and how and when we should do it.

The Drystone Cotswold Wall

The Cotswold Wardens have continued their regular sessions re-building the stretch of Cotswold wall which runs up from Hartley Lane towards the site of the prehistoric hillfort. Their work creating the new Memorial Wall has now been completed, with two dozen or so flat stones being integrated into the wall to carry small memorial plaques paid for by families wishing to remember loved ones who had a special fondness for the Hill and Common. The first plaque to be installed by Cheltenham Borough Council is a special memorial to the late Queen.



By jumping ahead to focus on the memorial wall, the Wardens were obliged to leave a gap of around sixty metres from where they last stopped work on the main wall. So they are now working to fill that gap and hope to complete a continuous run all the way back to Hartley Lane sometime in the early part of next year.

On a separate, but equally important, project the Cotswold Wardens have put in more than 150 hours of work clearing overgrown vegetation from the boundary fencing around the main site. Although there are many places where “wild” growth is positively welcomed, it is really important for the safety of the cattle that

they have a clear sight of any fencing to avoid grazing too close to it and suffering accidental injury.

Ongoing funding

Readers of FOLKtalk over the past couple of years or so may recall that in the first year of the National Grid funded landscape improvement works there was a very significant delay in the release of the initial tranche of money. This meant that many aspects of the project were delayed as it was too late either to do the work or too late to find available contractors with the right skills and equipment. On top of this, completing some of the works set out in our bid has also been badly affected by general inflation combined with some specific areas in which price rises have been greater than average. All of this has hindered our progress.

We are pleased to learn that National Grid may be able to provide some additional funding to offset these problems. If successful, our request for extra money will enable the successful completion of important works such as: tree management; supplying stone for the Cotswold Wardens to continue rebuilding the Cotswold drystone wall; and the re-pointing of the Limekilns.

OTHER DEVELOPMENTS

Sharing our precious wildflower seed

Last year experts harvested a great deal of seed from meadows just off the main site and spread it in a large area of the eastern end of Pittville Park. This time around, both the National Trust and the Cotswold National Landscape teams have been harvesting in Cowslip Meadow and Hopkins Field respectively – both of which have a great mix of healthy wild flowers. The national bodies will retain some of the seed for their own use, but Cheltenham Borough Council will be given a significant amount of the seed – enough to enrich about an acre of land at Cowley and a new area towards the western end of Pittville Park.

Youth engagement

The Rangers team continues to work with young people in our area. The new High School Leckhampton has a thriving Eco Committee, from which volunteer students undertook a visit earlier this year. In November a further group will follow a similar pattern: walking the Hill and Common to understand its landscape, getting to see the new herd of cattle and learn about their contribution, and finally undertaking some simple but energetic practical work.

Restoring the toposcope

If you have walked to the very top of Leckhampton Hill in the past year or so and visited the toposcope you will be only too aware of the poor state into which it has fallen. This popular installation helps all visitors – both local and those from further afield – to appreciate just what can be seen for miles around and in every direction.

The plan is to replace the stone on which the brass toposcope is mounted, ensuring that the plate itself is accurately orientated, and also making sure that it is securely framed and attached so that it cannot be prised off its base. Hopefully this will ensure that a popular feature of Leckhampton Hill will be enjoyed again, and for years to come.

IN THE NEWS

2023 weather – Some Good News at last

As this topsy-turvy year rolls on, more weather records are broken. June, July and August were all hotter than average, both in the UK and across much of the European continent. Then we had the hottest September on record, including an unprecedented seven days in a row in which a temperature of more than 30C was observed in the UK. October too is starting much warmer than usual. In fact it has already turned out to be a bumper year for conkers.

People either love or loathe high temperatures, but it seems that for some wildlife it has proved to be a real bonus. The October weather could be really good news for hibernating animals like hedgehogs and dormice as it is expected to boost the amount of berries available for them to feed on before their long winter sleep.

LECKHAMPTON HILL GEOLOGY WALK

Following on from his successful walk on May 23rd and public event at the Science Festival in June this year, retired professional geologist Steve Peacock generously led another walk on August 31st.

This walk was offered to the FOLK members and there was an enthusiastic response: nearly forty members signed up. Due to considerations of damp weather and other commitments on the day, the final numbers were more manageable and Steve led sixteen keen FOLK members on a fascinating exploration of Leckhampton Hill's nationally important Jurassic geology.



Steve Peacock in the lead

Attendees assembled in Salterley Quarry car park to be briefed and introduced to the main features of the geology which were plain to see in the quarry. The walk progressed along the Cotswold Way, passing the iconic feature of the Devil's Chimney to Dead Man's Quarry. This huge quarry has many features of the Jurassic rock layers clearly visible with characteristic fossils scattered around.

The walk also took in the Lime Kilns and returned via the Woodland Walk where yet more intriguing natural features were pointed out. To wrap up a thoroughly enjoyable and educational afternoon Steve cast his view to the wider landscape including the Severn Vale, Malvern Hills and the wider Cotswolds, setting Leckhampton Hill and the Cotswold escarpment in geological context.

It would be fair to say that, despite a rain shower in the evening, all involved left the site with a fair inkling of the amazing geology on Cheltenham's doorstep.

The FOLK Executive Committee would like to express sincere thanks to Steve for giving so generously of his time and expertise.

For those who missed the walk, Steve has also kindly agreed to give a talk on the same subject at this year's FOLK AGM on November 14th at the Wheatsheaf Inn. So come along and enjoy his talk.

Peter Whalley

LECKHAMPTON VILLAGE HALL IMPROVEMENT PROJECT



Many FOLK members will be users of Leckhampton Village Hall (LVH), an integral part of our community for over 120 years.

Recent visitors will agree that the facilities need upgrading.

Our plans include new cloakrooms, better disabled access, improved storage, an updated kitchen, and new multi-purpose changing rooms which will also provide meeting spaces for groups such as FOLK.

The **LVH Improvement Project** was launched in June 2023. A programme of fund-raising events, like our 'buy a brick' scheme, and grants from the Parish Council have already raised several thousand pounds, but many more thousands are needed.

FOLK members wishing to contribute should log onto
www.leckhamptonvillagehall.co.uk

Thank you - on behalf of Leckhampton Village Hall Trustees.

ROMAN SNAILS ALIVE AND WELL ON THE HILL

The limestone grassland of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common is recognised as an important landscape for some highly endangered species. Among these are the Adder and the Duke of Burgundy butterfly. Another rare species made its home here around two thousand years ago and is still here today.



We are talking about *Helix Pomatia* – more commonly known as the Roman Snail because they were probably introduced by the Romans.

Like the French, the Romans regarded them as a delicious delicacy - hence their other common name the Edible Snail. They may also have been re-introduced by other settlers who arrived centuries later from continental Europe. Among these are likely to have been medieval monks, as monasteries were known to have cultivated these snails on a large scale. However, despite the fact that they were almost certainly brought here as a valued source of food, over time they became an increasingly less popular dish. As a result their wild population steadily thrived.

Roman snails are the UK's largest land snail.

Undisturbed, they can live for up to twenty years, though generally they live for eight to ten years. Fully grown they may grow to as much as 45mm (1¾ inches) across – twice as big as the common Garden Snail. Their large shell is ridged and may be seen in various colours and patterns, but may also be very pale.

Roman snails are active each year from late April/early May until October. Over the winter they hibernate and form a rigid calcium carbonate lid over the mouth of their shell. This is known as an epiphragm and it prevents the snail from desiccating over winter. Roman snails are the only snail species to do this. In spring this epiphragm is discarded when the snail emerges from hibernation and their annual cycle of mating and laying eggs begins again.

So why do they flourish on Leckhampton Hill?

A large snail needs a good source of calcium carbonate (limestone) to grow and maintain its shell. So the distribution of the Roman Snail in the UK is concentrated

in large regions of well-drained limestone land, notably the Cotswolds, the Chilterns and the North Downs.

Here they find the rough vegetation they need to provide shelter from predators and, of course, food - though no particular plant species is required. In addition, loose friable soil is needed for egg-laying in sunny and open areas. As a result they are likely to be found in a wide range of habitats including grassland with scrub for shelter, the edges of woodland, hedgerows and open sunny woodland glades. On occasion they may even settle in field margins, former allotments, rail/road embankments and disused quarries. Wherever they find themselves, however, that's where they stay, as Roman Snails rarely roam more than 30-50 metres from where they were born.

The ups and downs of a highly-prized edible species.

Although there are a few different edible snails, for those who want the best, it is the Roman Snail they seek. So when, in recent decades, eating them became more popular again in the UK, well-known sites where they lived found their populations being denuded by people gathering them – either for home use or to supply restaurants. Bearing in mind that Roman Snails only reach sexual maturity after two to four years this activity posed an obvious threat to their long-term survival.

Much needed protection has come in the form of strict regulation. Under the 2008 Wildlife and Countryside Act it is an offence to intentionally kill or take a Roman Snail. It is also an offence to sell one or even to handle one unless licensed by Natural England.

In other words, if you come across a Roman Snail do admire it - and reflect on its bumpy ride through two millennia of UK history.

Most importantly of all, though, remember the old adage - **Look but don't touch!**

LECKHAMPTON HILL BAT WALK

A small but keen group of wildlife enthusiasts recently ventured out onto Leckhampton Hill to explore the Hill's bat population. This was a truly fascinating experience organised by Cheltenham Borough Council and led by Steve Mason from the Council's Green Spaces team.



Steve, who is a Community Ranger, explained that whilst not being a bat expert he was acting as liaison with Richard Rolfe in the Education and Applied Ecology Department at the University of Gloucestershire, which has an active research programme into local bat populations.

The University had provided several types of instruments for detecting and recording the high-pitched sounds that bats use for in flight navigation and hunting their flying insect food sources

Steve handed detectors to each of the seven bat detecting amateurs who went on the walk. The group also had an i-Pad that would be recording any bats detected for subsequent data analysis by the University.

The walk started in the Daisy Bank car park at 7.30 pm, where Steve gave a simple but interesting introduction into the fascinating life of bats. It wasn't long before the sharp eyes of a nine year old group member spotted the first bat flying high up above the trees around the car park. At the same time the detectors were loudly confirming the bat presence with a series of clicks and tweeting sounds. A tentative identification of a Noctule bat was made and gave the walk an encouraging start.



Serotine Bat

Our next stop was the open pasture of "Area 16". This turned out to have different species of bat including Common Pipistrelle, Whiskered and Serotine (left). The bats swooped within a few meters of the group, with the bat detectors providing a loud and varied audio accompaniment.

The walk moved through the dark beech woodland and made its way up to the top of the escarpment and onto the Cotswold Way. Further detections were made on the top of the Hill and along the woodland edge up to the Trig Point.

Our return to Daisy Bank was made via the Devil's Chimney, Dead Man's Quarry and the Limekilns, which in the darkness was an interesting hike and the walkers were glad they had come equipped with powerful torches. A few more unidentified flying bats were detected as the group returned to base. The detailed analysis of the acoustic data will be carried out by the University and we hope to get feedback when they have completed their work.

Whilst this event was not organised directly by FOLK, it was an enjoyable and educational walk. Hopefully FOLK will be able to work with the Council in the future to organise events like this to attract more members of the general public to become aware of the wonderful nature on their doorstep.

IN THE NEWS

Fighters or Fliers – birds' contrasting groups

Scientists at the University Massachusetts Amherst have been comparing birds which respond to threats by being good at fighting with those which have become good at flying – and they have come to an interesting conclusion. They believe that the very nature of the evolutionary processes which gave each species of birds either the capacity to fight or to fly also means that they are very unlikely to be good at both. Put simply, the best fliers tend to lack spurs and best fighters do not fly well, if at all.

In part this is linked to weight. If a bird needs to take flight swiftly it is better for it to be relatively light. Similarly if a bird has spurs and is physically equipped for a fight, it is better for it to be both big and strong.

The study also noted that, both groups - fliers and fighters - include some species which attract a mate with colourful plumage or spectacular songs. However, species which are largely ground-dwelling are more likely to be hefty and armed with spurs to appeal to a female, while their airborne counterparts have had to develop other more elaborate courtship rituals.

FOLK WORK PARTY REPORT

We have done a variety of jobs in the period since the last newsletter. We started off by working on the main Cotswold stone wall at its Eastern end to clear away the growth that was obscuring, and potentially damaging the wall. We have been working to clear the whole of this long wall over the last few years and have now finally managed to complete the full length.



Before



during



and after

Our next task was a familiar one to our volunteers: pulling up Hemp Agrimony, and removing Ragwort, both of which are ‘weeds’ we need to control.

We had taken a bit of a break from pulling Hemp over the last couple of years, but in the meantime it has spread and thickened up in some areas, particularly on the top of the Common, though it is still not as bad and dense as it was 10 years ago. We also removed Ragwort in advance of the cattle returning to the site as this plant can be extremely harmful to them.



Our later tasks involved mowing with our new power scythe mower (right) which we bought with grant funding earlier in the year.

We spent one work party mowing various areas on the top of Leckhampton Hill - including around the Barrow (below left) and along the edges of 'Judy's Ride' which is the main footpath onto the Hill from Brownstones Car Park.



Our new Power Scythe



Quite a few of our volunteers had a go with the new mower and the general opinion was that, despite its seemingly complicated controls, it was quite easy to use and very effective.

So - all in all - a very good purchase!

We then spent three work parties mowing and raking up on 'Area 16' (right) which is the clearing above Bridge Car Park on Daisy Bank Road.



Clearing Area 16

Our final tasks in the period have involved working alongside - and after - the contractors cutting down gorse on very steep sections of the Common.

Firstly we cleared the young gorse and hawthorn that had regrown in the area below where the contractors were working. Then we started on the significant task of burning all the cuttings produced by the contractor. We have been helped with this particular task by a group of corporate volunteers from Capita.



Burning the gorse cuttings



The Capita team

Finally, as it's the end of FOLK's accounting year, here are some statistics:

- We held a total of 39 work parties, though three were cancelled due to bad weather.
- We logged a total of 1744 volunteer hours
- The numbers of volunteers attending work parties ranged from 6 to 35, with an average of 15.

So, thank you to all of our volunteers for all of their efforts. It is much appreciated and the Hill and Common would be in a much worse condition without them.

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 come to 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

three 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 6 months are:

October 2023	Thursday 12 th	Tuesday 17 th	Sunday 22 nd
November 2023	Thursday 9 th	Tuesday 21 st	Sunday 26 th
December 2023	Thursday 14 th	Tuesday 19 th	Sunday 24 th
January 2024	Thursday 11 th	Tuesday 16 th	Sunday 28 th
February 2024	Thursday 8 th	Tuesday 20 th	Sunday 25 th
March 2024	Thursday 14 th	Tuesday 19 th	Sunday 24 th

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.

IN THE NEWS

State of Nature Report 2023

The 2023 State of Nature report shows that, among those species studied, their abundance in the UK has declined by 19 per cent on average since records began in 1970. The State of Nature report is the most comprehensive survey covering the UK, its Crown Dependencies and Overseas Territories. It has been compiled by around sixty conservation organisations and analyses long-term and shorter term trends.

The latest report has found that nearly one in six of the 10,000-plus species surveyed using Red List criteria were judged to be at risk of becoming extinct in Great Britain. Overall, the UK is currently classified as one of the world's most nature-depleted countries.

The most at-risk UK groups included birds, amphibians and reptiles, insects, fungi and lichen. Since 1970, for example, there has been:

- a decline in numbers for 43% of our bird species
- a decline in the spread of 54% of flowering plants
- a decline in the distribution of 18% of pollinators

The reasons for these continually disturbing trends are many and complex, but key among them are loss of habitat, climate change, intensive farming, and persecution.

There are, however, some good news stories where positive measures have been taken. The Duke of Burgundy butterfly - one of the species highlighted for action in the Cotswolds – is just one example.

Between 1979 and 2021 this butterfly's numbers fell by 35%, but a range of targeted conservation measures have been taken in many locations. This is likely to have played an important role in a degree of recovery. The Duke of Burgundy has recently been down-listed from Endangered to Vulnerable in Great Britain. There is still a long way to go – but it is good news all the same.

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 send an email to: martinwood360@gmail.com. Articles of around 500 words, plus a photo if you have one, would be most welcome at any time.

Contact FOLK

Mike Donnelly, Chairman: 01242 238790

Geoff Holt, Work Parties: 01242 244165

Mark Dowie, Treasurer: 07872 336006

Peter Whalley, Membership: 01242 517024

Martin Wood, Newsletter: 01242 231230

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.