



FOLKtalk

Issue 74
Spring
2024

Friends of Leckhampton Hill
& Charlton Kings Common

Conserving and improving the Hill for you

THE TOPOSCOPE IS BACK IN GOOD SHAPE



The ever popular toposcope is now safely and firmly back in its rightful place, having suffered rather badly in recent years from the weathering of its plinth.

After having a good polish and reset, it now sits proudly on a nice, solid square of reclaimed stone. Unfortunately a few of the dimensions and degrees shown on the original engraved brass disc are still slightly out, and without replacing the disc itself it is impossible to match up every point exactly. However, the large majority of it is accurate. So the toposcope will continue to provide visitors and local walkers alike with a good sense of the many points of interest which can be seen from Leckhampton Hill across the glorious North Cotswold landscape.

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GUIDED THEMED WALKS ON THE HILL AND COMMON

FOLK members and visitors to the Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common are aware of the rich variety of nature, history, landscape and recreational opportunities on Cheltenham's doorstep for all to enjoy. So over the years there have been occasional themed "walks" on the site, for example bat walks, wildflower exploration and last year the successful Geology Walks (seen right).



The FOLK Executive Committee has recently discussed the possibility of arranging more of this type of event. It was felt that it would be worthwhile to offer one or two themed walks in the coming months as a way of bringing the attractions of the site to more of the membership and their families. Looking further afield, we hope to attract participation from the wider local community.

At this stage we are exploring the possibilities of a walks programme - and trying to find a reliable source of long-range weather forecasts! We would love to hear from you the members with ideas of topics for walks, your preferred times of day and importantly whether we have any willing volunteers who might lead a walk.

We plan to make a small charge to support FOLK funds, which are always in need of topping up so that we can continue our nature conservation work on the site. Ideas for other fundraising activities are, of course, always welcome.

As with all FOLK's activities on the site we will work closely with Cheltenham Borough Council when organising the walks.

Feedback from members is cordially invited.

Please email Peter Whalley, norwoodpw1@gmail.com

As FOLK rolls into its 24th year, change and new challenges lie ahead. I am pleased to say that we now have a new secretary, Rachel Watson. We thank her for filling the post. We also have a meeting booked with a number of FOLK volunteers who have shown an interest in supporting or becoming work party coordinators.

As reported by the treasurer at the AGM, the committee would be looking to run some fundraising events in 2024. We have just booked Friday 22nd March for a Quiz Night at the Wheatsheaf and also hope to hold a Skittles evening later in the year.

We are also considering conducted walks on the Hill and Common. Your support for these events would be much appreciated as they will be essential to cover our overheads in the coming year.

As pointed out at the AGM most of Leckhampton Hill is in the parish of Shurdington. Based on that fact we are looking to form stronger links with Shurdington Parish Council and a meeting has already taken place with Derwen Hinds, Chair of Shurdington Parish Council.

FOLK has been nominated for the King's Award for Voluntary Service. We have submitted our application and have recently been interviewed by Sybil Rusco, Deputy Lord Lieutenant for Gloucestershire. This is the highest award a voluntary group can receive and only around half the applicants will eventually receive the award. So it is quite an achievement to get this far. The official announcement is due to be made in November 2024.

Thank you for your interest and support for FOLK, and please enjoy this 74th issue of FOLKtalk.



Mike Donnelly, Chair of FOLK

THE KINGS AWARD EXPLAINED

The Kings Award for Voluntary Service is the highest award given to voluntary groups, and is the equivalent of an MBE awarded to individuals. It was originally introduced by Queen Elizabeth II in 2002 as part of her Golden Jubilee celebrations. Soon after succeeding to the throne, King Charles III announced that he wished to give his name to the scheme as it continues to recognise outstanding examples of the many groups across the UK who are making a difference by volunteering.

Each year hundreds of organisations are nominated for the award. Their nomination focuses on each group's achievements in making a big difference to their local community, driving their own efforts, and working to the highest possible standards. So, as with entertainment awards like the Oscars, just being nominated for the King's Award is certainly an honour in itself.

However, nomination is no guarantee of an award. Of the hundreds of organisations nominated in 2023, just 262 received this prestigious award.

A strict and rigorous process considers all the nominations. This includes:

- An independent check of eligibility
- The Lord Lieutenant (or the Deputy Lieutenant) doing due diligence on their local nominations and meeting representatives of each group
- Recommendations for the award being forwarded to a national committee of assessors who draw up a shortlist
- The King's approval of the shortlist and
- The official announcement of the awards on 14th November, the King's birthday

SAVE THE DATE

FOLK QUIZ NIGHT IS BACK

The next FOLK Fundraising Quiz Night will be held

at the Wheatsheaf, Old Bath Road

on Friday 22nd March 7 o'clock for a 7.30 start

Teams of 4 will compete at a cost of £5 per head.

If you want to take part but do not have a team of four,
just turn up and you can join an existing team.

Prizes will be awarded for winning teams.

To book in your team, please email **Pete Niblett** on
pete.niblett@talktalk.net

IN THE NEWS

Butterflies' disappearing spots

Female Meadow Brown butterflies seem to be appearing with fewer spots because of warmer temperatures. This butterfly has a large spot on each wing for protection as it wards off predators, and these are unaffected by climate. However, for the females, the conspicuous differences are being found in the smaller spots, which aid camouflage.

The study, by Exeter University, has found that the changes in the number of spots on the Meadow Browns occurred according to the temperature when they were in their chrysalis, prior to emerging as a butterfly. When the temperature was around 11C the females had about six spots, but at 15C the number of spots fell to about two. According to the study's author, Professor Richard French-Richards, this suggests that fewer spots may provide better camouflage when the grass turns browner in hot weather.

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.

Accessible footpaths

A few more sections of very uneven pathways have been resurfaced by a specialist contractor. These include Judy's Ride (seen right), the Cotswold Way down to and including Cowslip Meadow and several sections of the 3m wide track, starting from Brownstones car park and heading towards Hill Farm.



Tree Management

It is now almost seven years since Cheltenham Borough Council's Tree Officer, Chris Chavasse, reported the first case of Ash Dieback in Cheltenham. Since then it has spread widely, though fortunately it is virtually unknown in the town itself. However, in our surrounding countryside it has had a significant impact, though hopefully the total proportion of trees lost to the disease may not end up as great as initially feared. In part this is because some trees are proving to be more resistant to Ash Dieback than others. Those trees are either surviving with minimal damage or are actually starting to re-grow on branches which had previously been affected.

The other reason for the survival of local ash trees has been the Council's sensitive and selective approach to management. Where some organisations have undertaken widespread, mass clearance of ash trees, regardless of each tree's state of health, Cheltenham has adopted a more targeted approach. This means addressing only those trees close to roads or footpaths – and even then only felling trees when a lighter touch is not feasible.

The preferred method here is always to remove only the damaged and dangerous branches in the hope that the tree can survive and recover. The next phase of these works will include further management of ash trees on the popular incline path from Bridge car park to the Limekiln ruins and selected ash trees throughout the site. We are also removing a number of trees around the base and periphery of Devil's Chimney. A similar programme of ash treatment will also be undertaken on the nearby site of Ravensgate Common in Charlton Kings.

We are also trialling a “high pollarding” approach with the trees.

Traditional pollarding entails removing all branches from the top of the main trunk – a method commonly seen in smaller urban trees or in species such as willow where the new growth is removed every few years for use in basket-making, hurdle-making etc. In high pollarding, the crown is reduced at a much higher level by removing growth from further up on the main branches. Hopefully this will remove all diseased wood while giving the tree a faster route back to full re-growth, although, should it not recover, it may just end up as standing deadwood which is also great for biodiversity.

Conservation Grazing on the Hill and Common

The new herd of Belted Galloways are now well-established on the site and are doing well. Thankfully, they also all passed their Bovine TB testing.

Since the herd arrived last summer, three of the cattle have been moved to one of the other sites which the grazier, Eddy Llewellyn, helps to conserve, and the main herd on our site has now been joined by three pregnant heifers. (A heifer is a cow which has not yet borne a calf, or which has only borne one.)



In May the three pregnant cows will be separated from the main herd and moved to the Reversion Field. There they will calve and be able to care for their newborn young in peace until the calves are weaned and they are all ready to re-join the rest of the herd.

The grazing itself has gone remarkably well and promises to be a great help in helping the grassland to recover its biodiversity. Under the conservation

agreement, the cattle will not graze on our important limestone grassland during spring and summer so that the natural grasses and the many wildflower populations can flourish in the main growing seasons. This in turn will support the survival and recovery of many important species – especially invertebrates including, of course, many of our local butterflies and moths.

Cattle Spotters

Our new grazier is supported by a marvellous group of volunteers who act as “Cattle Spotters”. Each of them has an allocated regular day when they will spend about an hour up on the site checking the wellbeing of the herd. They have been trained by the grazier on signs of injury or poor health, and they also check that the cattle are actually in the area where they are supposed to be. They contact the grazier via a dedicated WhatsApp group to report back each time and let him know of any issues.

The Cattle Spotters are clearly loving their role. The cattle themselves have got to know them and already respond to the call the cattle spotters have learnt which tells the herd that extra food has been put out for them.

As Linda, one of the spotters, explained, “It has been so interesting to learn about the cattle and I am getting to know their different personalities. I am so grateful to be part of this unique group and would recommend it to anyone who is enthusiastic about getting outdoors.”

Peter Fullerton added, “I can see, just in the short time I have been a cattle spotter, the advantages of using our cattle to improve the ecology of the hill. It benefits the hill and the cows themselves, and also shows the wonderful and beautiful inter-relationships of the natural world.”

Grazing infrastructure

Regular readers will know that, while the grazier uses GPS-driven Nofence technology to keep the cattle within a predetermined area of the hill, the whole expanse of the site which is grazed requires a physical boundary fence. This fence is more than ten years old and has been starting to show its age. So significant work has been done to renew it, with around five hundred fence posts having now been replaced. In addition contractors have improved, moved or repaired water troughs, as well as installing solar panels for the electric fencing, and checking (and if necessary replacing) any of the electric fencing’s batteries.

Preservation of the Limekilns

It is hoped that contractors will be brought to the Limekilns during the summer to re-point these industrial remains. This specialist job is vital both to protect the stonework from future erosion and to keep the site safe for the many visitors who walk up to see this important reminder of a once crucial aspect of the town's industrial history.

Memorial Wall



The first private letter-box-shaped memorial has now been installed and it is hoped that another five or six will be in place by the early summer. Families wishing to have a plaque dedicated to a loved one who was especially fond of the Hill and Common may choose from three materials: aluminium, stainless steel or bronze.

There is a one-off payment for this permanent memorial and any proceeds (after costs have been met) will go into a ring-fenced fund which will be used to help conserve and improve the site.

The Drystone Cotswold Wall

The final load of stone has been delivered and soon the Cotswold Voluntary Wardens will be starting work on completing the “gap” between the memorial wall and the main length of wall which runs up from Hartley Lane. It is hoped that this part of the project will be complete by the end of the summer.

To add to the natural beauty of this newly rebuilt wall, local amateur stonemason and Cotswold Warden John Shaw is making a very special contribution. He has pledged to carve four stones to be placed in the final section of wall, each featuring one of the four iconic towers which are passed by walkers along the Cotswold Way. The first – showing the Tyndale Monument near Dursley – has already been installed in this last section of the 300m wall. The other three will show the Somerset Monument (near Hawkesbury), Beckford's Tower (near Bath) and Broadway Tower.



Tyndale Monument carved by John Shaw

It is worth remembering that, along with all the other works undertaken on this site in recent years, projects have been hit by the challenge of inflation. For

example, the cost of a 20 tonne load of Cotswold stone has risen from around £2,000 to £3,000 since the project began. So while it remains the ambition to continue rebuilding more of the wall up towards the hillfort, this remains a medium-to-long-term project which is dependent on both funding and the generous commitment of time by the hard-working Cotswold Wardens.

OTHER DEVELOPMENTS

Youth engagement

Cheltenham Borough Council and FOLK continue to work closely with our local secondary school, High School Leckhampton (HSL). Driven by headteacher Helen Wood's strong commitment to environmental concerns, HSL has developed a thriving Eco Committee for young people with a keen interest in all aspects of sustainability, ecology and nature conservation.

The school held a special Eco Day on 6th February, which was attended by both Cheltenham Borough Council and FOLK. It was a great day with around twenty organisations in attendance, explaining to over 200 pupils the effects of climate change, the impact of plastic and litter in the environment, and some simple little ways in which they can try to help us to overcome these issues.

Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust Endangered Species Project

FOLK and the Borough Council are cooperating with Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust in its work to help a couple of local endangered species flourish on the Hill and Common. The project, which is part-funded by Natural England, aims to create new pathways through dense vegetation to help species like adders and the Duke of Burgundy butterfly extend their reach across the site. This is based on well-established knowledge that many species remain confined to their existing territory, even if there is another suitable site nearby, unless the gaps between the two spaces are easily navigable for them.

By clearing pathways through big areas of old gorse and scrub the project will help endangered species to extend their territory. This in turn should help the existing populations to survive and provide opportunities for their numbers to increase over time. The project will also include careful monitoring of sightings of adders and the Duke of Burgundy butterfly in order to gather evidence of the impact of the works.

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. **Georgie Bearder** joined the team in November on an apprenticeship scheme.

Georgie is studying for a Countryside Ranger HND (Higher National Diploma) at Bridgwater and Taunton College, a course which combines learning from experts through the college with practical experience gained during her employment. It is a wide-ranging, two-year course covering aspects such as planning and delivering projects, partnerships with volunteers, nature conservation in areas with public access, and habitat surveys.

She has already made a good start on a long-term research project on protected species in Gloucestershire. This will include cataloguing protected local species and researching published reports about best practice in their protection and conservation, for example, noting advisory safe working distances for some species and giving some generalised advice on how to manage the particular habitats which they each need in order to thrive.

At its heart though, her apprenticeship is based on hands-on experience in the outdoors. So she has already been introduced to rural skills such as hedge-laying, working with the cattle and getting to grips with the safe and effective use of a powerful motorised tools like the brushcutter.



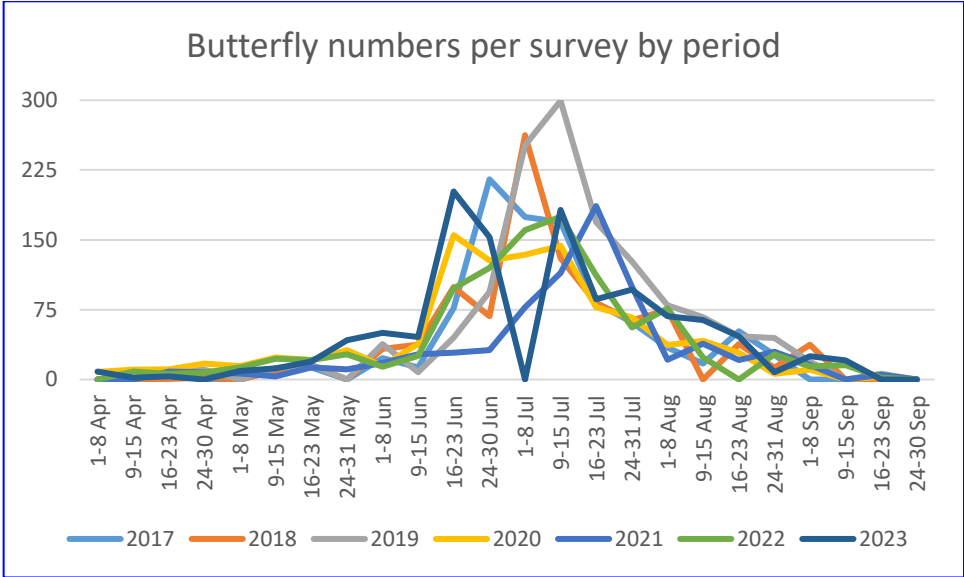
Before too long I hope to enable Georgie to join in with FOLK work parties so that she can also see at first-hand the complexities of managing a beautiful, rare and protected outdoor space for the benefit of both its wildlife and the people who enjoy it.

As well as a sharp brain and a love for the countryside, Georgie brings boundless enthusiasm. When asked about the most exciting thing she had done so far, she simply gasped “Oh Gosh. It’s EVERYTHING. I just love it!”

2023 BUTTERFLY REPORT

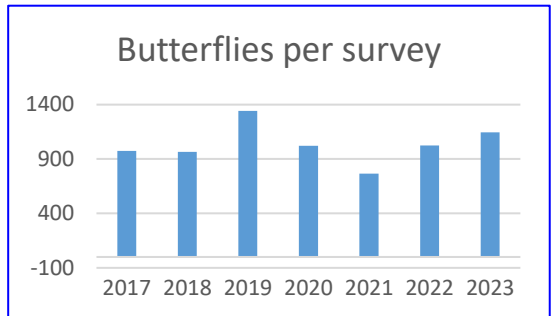
For Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common

In this year, 61 surveys on 44 different days were undertaken by four volunteers, with between 12 and 16 completed in each of the survey sections. There were just four weeks in which no surveys were undertaken: 24-30 Apr, 1-8 July (the first time July has been affected), and both 16-23 and 24-30 September. Those April and July weeks saw no surveys due to unsuitable weather, and there were no surveys in those two September weeks as the season had come to a fairly abrupt end. In total 3,262 butterflies were counted between 1 April and 30 September.



Although the total number of butterflies counted was one of the lowest, the average number per survey was not far off that seen in other years when considering the year as a whole, and my pessimism about the effects of the 2022 drought was thankfully not realised.

Based on the whole data set for the Hill, this year saw a dramatic decline in numbers of some species when compared with the average over the previous 10 years: Large Skipper by 75%, Small Tortoiseshell 90%, Dark Green Fritillary 87%, and Ringlet 78%.



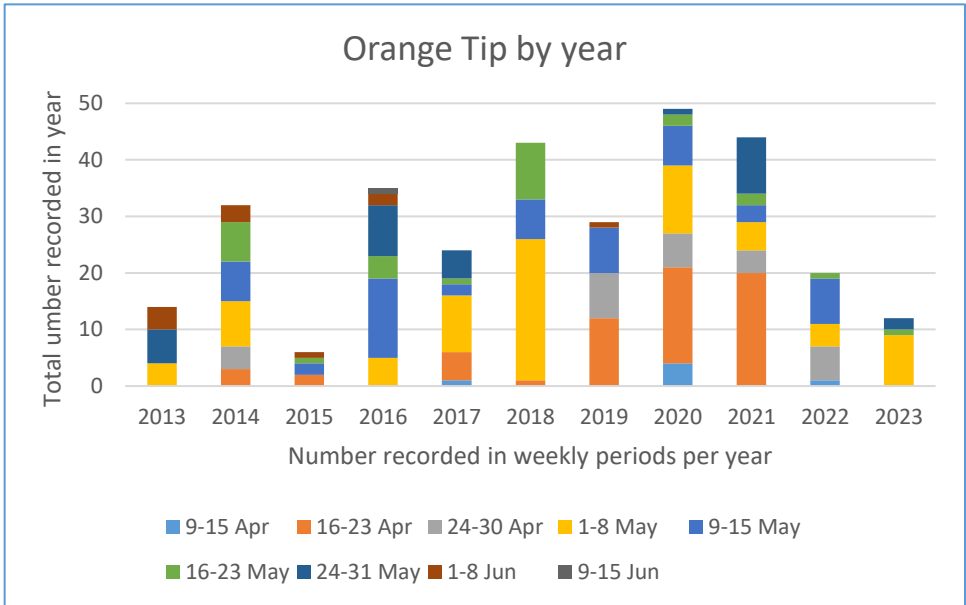
Some of this may be accounted for by the poor high summer weather and thus fewer surveys when some of these would normally be flying. Concerns about the seeming decline of populations of these same species have been raised by others on sites within Gloucestershire and beyond so it would seem that factors such as weather both last year and this may have had a disproportional effect on these rather than site management. The overall abundance of survival of other species, regardless of the stage of development over winter (eggs, larvae or pupa) appeared not to be so affected.

There were other declines as well - Orange Tip by 60%, Green Hairstreak 69% (though on statistically insignificant number), Marbled White 64%, and Small Heath 44%. More details on these are included below.

Hesperiidae: (Skippers)

Small/Essex, Large and Dingy Skippers were all less common than the average over the last ten years, with the biggest decline in the Large population. At its height 273 (2014) were recorded, down to 33 (2023), with reductions being seen across the whole site, whereas the Dingy numbers have mainly decreased on the scarp slope of Leckhampton Hill and the lower slopes of the eastern end of Charlton Kings Common.

Pieridae: (Whites)



Orange Tips fly early in the season, usually mid-April to the start of June, a period in which only 12 were seen (the second lowest - see chart 1) despite 21 surveys being completed. In this area, garlic mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*, a biennial) is likely to be the most common of its larval food plants, though in damper ones cuckoo flower (*Cardamine pratensis* a perennial) is favoured.

This year, Brimstone was more abundant with 63 counted in total. Despite only 3 having been counted in the late summer period in 2022, 47 survived hibernation emerging in the spring with 16 seen in the next generation.

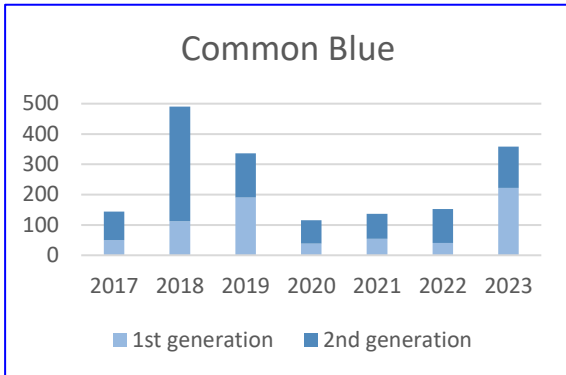
Both Large and Small Whites were recorded in reasonable numbers, with the cooler summer weather making them less inclined to take flight when approached, allowing identification.

Lycaenidae: (Hairstreaks, Coppers and Blues)

For the first time since the regular surveying began in 2013, a White Letter Hairstreak was sighted on Leckhampton Hill in the area above the bridge car park along Daisybank Road. This species' larvae feed on elm, and the adults tend to spend most of their life flying around the tree canopy where they feed on

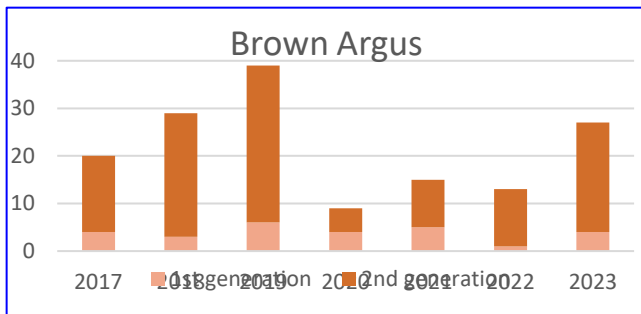
honeydew. Thus, they are difficult to find, though possibly due to the hot dry weather in June honeydew was in short supply. So when the butterfly emerged, it 'tanked up' on a nearby nectar source which in this instance was a stand of marjoram. Indeed, unless there were 2 specimens, it was still in the same area about two hours later!

Another bonus for the year was the sighting of Adonis Blue. The first, a singleton seen in June by a butterfly Conservation member visiting from Wales, was followed by 6 second generation specimens in August and September. This butterfly has been extending its range in recent years, though whether through natural colonisation or



unofficial introduction has never been established. It will be interesting to see whether it succeeds in establishing a viable population on the site in future years.

The following comments and observations are being made using only the data set from the year 2017, when the Hopkins fields were added to the survey route. These fields contain unimproved limestone grassland with the necessary larval food plants for habitat specialists such as Common Blue and Brown Argus and thus hold populations of both. Data from earlier years is not therefore directly comparable. After a few poor years, both Common Blue and Brown Argus seemed to recover, and hopefully numbers will return to their former heights. Normally more of the second generation of Common Blues are seen than the first, but this

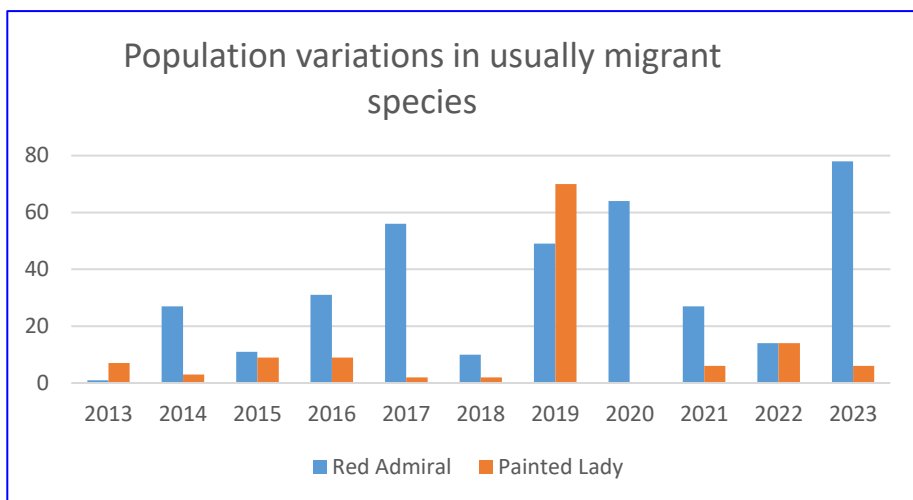


was not the case possibly due to weather conditions that were cooler and wetter than average in July and August. But if that was the reason, a similar result would have been expected in respect of the

Brown Argus due to their similar flight times, but this was not the case. Holly Blue may have started its cyclical decline, attributable in part to increases in parasites.

Nymphalidae: (Fritillaries and ymphalids)

One definite winner was the Red Admiral, with the first 2 recorded in the third week of May, rising to a peak of 29 during the last week in July. Sightings continued well into September (and beyond) with 78 counted in total. By contrast, very few Painted Ladies seem to have migrated to these shores which suggests that the bulk of the Red Admirals may have been 'home grown' rather than migrants, possibly the offspring of adults that had survived the winter in hibernation.



Both Dark Green and Silver Washed Fritillaries had poor years with only 3 of the former recorded, down from 50 in 2022. The latter, never as abundant, was only seen in two locations.

Satyrinae: Browns

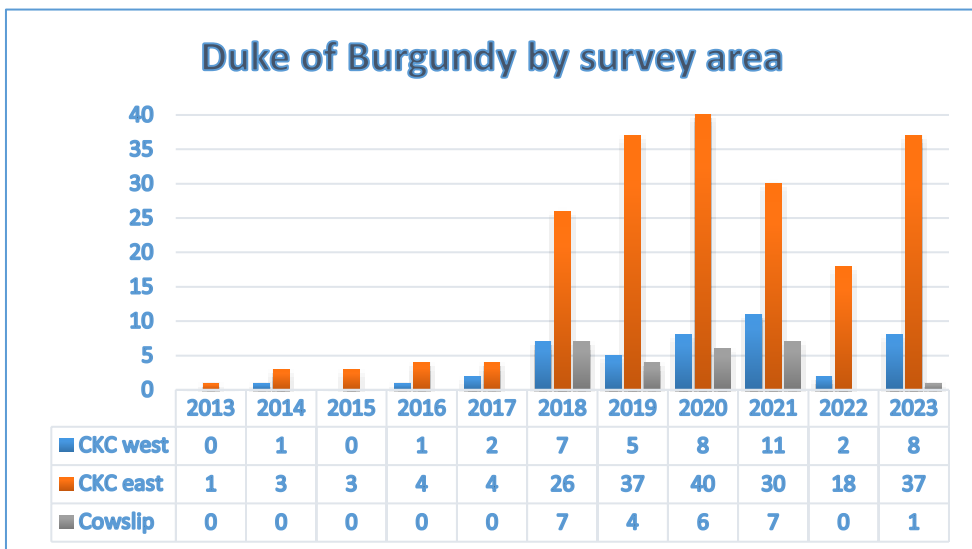
Marbled White, usually present throughout the majority of the site were noticeably absent from several sections where they had been regularly seen in previous years. As mentioned above, the population appears to be in decline.

Speckled Wood, after a delayed emergence two to three weeks later than usual, numbers were at the ten-year average, as were those of Gatekeeper whereas Meadow Brown and Ringlet were slightly above. Small Heath has continued the

steady decline of the previous two years in both first and second generation populations. This is beginning to look to be a cyclical trend, but only time will tell.

Riodinidae: Metalmarks

Timed counts done across their likely breeding areas (but away from the set survey routes) have continued for the sixth year in order to establish the extent to which the site is used by the Duke of Burgundy. This is confirming the main stronghold to be the eastern end of Charlton Kings Common where habitat management is being concentrated to encourage this butterfly, whilst still accommodating the Fly Orchids in the same area that require somewhat different conditions.



2024

Hopefully, surveying will continue this year, not least to determine the effects on population numbers and distribution due to both the further change to the grazing regime and additional extensive clearance of gorse by contractors.

Finally my thanks to all the surveyors who gave of their time and expertise to contribute to the records of butterflies on the site. I couldn't have done this without you. If anyone else would like to help with surveying in 2024, please get in touch.

Serena Meredith (Butterfly Survey Co-ordinator)

email gmeredith308@btinternet.com or phone 01242 524138

FOLK AGM 2023

The Annual General Meeting was held on 14th November 2023

Around forty members gathered for the meeting at The Wheatsheaf on Old Bath Road. We are grateful to the proprietor, Ronnie Opperman, for allowing FOLK to use the function room at no cost.

Our Chair, Mike Donnelly opened the meeting with a warm welcome to all. Apologies were logged, the minutes of the 2022 AGM were approved and there no matters arising from those minutes.

The Annual Report was the main presentation to the meeting. Mike began by focusing on the photographs shown on the front page of the report – setting out why each of the images was chosen, and the significance of the work involved. He made particular mention of three.

- **Firstly the shot of the newly resurfaced stretch of the Cotswold Way** as it rises up from Hartley Lane. What had been a bumpy and challenging length of footpath is now safe for all – and importantly now offers access to the Hill for those using wheelchairs or all-terrain mobility scooters.
- **Secondly the rebuilding of the drystone wall from Hartley Lane to the hillfort** – a project being undertaken by the Cotswold Wardens – and the increasing work for FOLK volunteers in cutting back excessive vegetation alongside the wall to avoid structural damage. The meeting’s attention was also drawn to the new Memorial Wall.
- **Thirdly the new mower** (or “power scythe”) which has greatly improved the efficiency of the volunteers’ work in mowing specific areas of the Hill and Common.

Mike went on to note the huge amount of work undertaken this year by the committee and the many volunteers. In part, the increased amount of work for the committee has been due to the additional projects undertaken thanks to £127,000 funding from National Grid. A regular cycle of ordinary committee meetings - plus the June meeting on the site - have enabled the Executive Committee to maintain a good understanding of what is being done and helped ensure that resources were targeted at key improvements and were completed well. ***National Grid has now agreed that a further year will be allowed for the completion of the grant-funded works,*** after early projects were delayed when

the initial round of payments had been received much later than originally planned.

The meeting also heard that FOLK had been represented at the Borough Council's Volunteer Recognition event, when sixteen or so voluntary groups met to share news and ideas. Members were also reminded that last November FOLK - alongside the Cotswold Wardens and the Council - received a CPRE Award for the improvements made on our site.

The coming year's grant-funded works will focus on some continual projects such as clearing gorse and scrub as well as further measures to preserve the limekilns, improved fencing around the areas grazed by the cattle, and the selective crown reduction or felling of dangerously damaged, diseased or unstable trees.

Mike was proud to report that the three-year target for matched funding, largely raised in respect of voluntary hours clocked up by FOLK and others, had already been exceeded by the end of the project's second year! This is a glowing testament to the efforts of the many regular volunteers, the dozens of school students, and the staff of local companies who had willingly spent community volunteering days on the site.

There had been thirty nine FOLK work parties, clocking up a record 1,744 recorded hours. Notable achievements by the work parties included clearing tracks and paths, removing unwanted gorse and scrub, moving the stone used by the Cotswold Wardens to help them in rebuilding the wall, and mowing and then raking important features like the barrow, the sidings and the hillfort.

Looking after the Hill and Common is, of course, a collective effort and Mike was keen to pay tribute to the Herculean efforts of the **Cotswold Wardens** who alone have undertaken 1,805 hours of work just on rebuilding the drystone wall. Other people like the Ramblers, local mountain bike riders from the Cheltenham and County Cycling Club, and a nearby paraglider group have also been actively involved.

The Financial Report was presented, having been audited and signed off. FOLK has been grateful for the award of various grants from Cotswold National Landscape, Leckhampton with Warden Hill Parish Council, Charlton Kings Parish Council, the Ramblers, several private donations and £155 raised by voluntary donations following the geology walks. However, FOLK has faced a very

significant rise in expenditure in the past year. The bulk of this was related to supporting the purchase of a wide range of new tools and larger equipment. This in turn greatly increased the cost of FOLK's insurance. Overall then, the group's reserves have fallen by about one third to £2,000. However, the purchase of two large items of equipment represented long-term investments and no such large outlay is expected in the coming years.

Questions and Answers on the Annual Report from members at the meeting

Q Should a membership subscription be reintroduced to help with the funding?

A This matter is regularly reviewed. It is felt that, for a number of reasons, reintroducing a subscription would not be helpful at this stage. However, the committee is actively exploring the re-introduction of social events such as a quiz night or skittles evening to help boost income.

Q Should there be a programme of tree planting to replace trees felled for safety reasons?

A The Committee and the Borough Council do not currently believe that replacement planting would benefit the site. Evidence indicates that "natural regeneration" is more effective in the long run than planned planting.

Finally Mike Donnelly set out the current membership of the Executive

Committee and paid tribute to the huge contributions made by four members who are not seeking re-election: Tony Duffin (Secretary), Geoff Holt (Work Parties and Website), Pete Niblett (social media and social events) and Anne North (grazier and a founder member of FOLK). Mike also praised former treasurer, Malcolm Geddes, who was our treasurer for many years.

Mike also emphasised the pressing need for members to come forward and contribute to the work of FOLK by taking on committee roles, especially for the key positions of Secretary and Work Party Coordinator (a role which could be job-shared). Two FOLK members had already put themselves forward for membership of the Executive Committee and they, along with those seeking re-election, were voted in by the meeting. The Committee may now co-opt two further members to bring its numbers up to the full complement.

After the election of the committee Mike closed the formal business of the AGM, and a member from the floor proposed a vote of thanks to the 2023 Executive

Committee for all that they had done over the past year – a proposal that was universally supported by an enthusiastic round of applause.

The minutes of the 2023 AGM are now available to read in the Documents section of the FOLK website.

The AGM was followed a special talk given by Steve Peacock on the subject of the geology of Leckhampton Hill.

In this talk, Steve was able to give a lively description of how our local landscape was formed millions of years ago and has continually changed ever since. Steve's wide range of clear and informative pictures perfectly complemented his words – and even those members who had been on one of his geology walks over the last summer, found more to learn about the long, long history of our hill.

IN THE NEWS

ENCOURAGING NEWS ABOUT 2023 BUTTERFLY NUMBERS

The Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) has released some early findings from its 2023 survey of butterflies. These cover regular surveys undertaken in its five gardens, located right across England - from North Yorkshire to Devon. The overall picture appears to be one of increased numbers being observed.

One theory is that the prolonged drought in 2022 impaired plant health. This in turn restricted the availability of food for many butterfly species and so had a negative impact on butterfly populations. By contrast 2023 in England was much wetter and was also the fourth warmest on record. (As it happens, for Gloucestershire 2023 was the warmest since records began.) The full results of the survey are not yet published but two examples illustrate the apparent trend. At both RHS Hyde Hall (Essex) and RHS Wisley (Surrey) numbers of Meadow Brown butterflies were so great in July that, for the first time ever, staff had to use clicker counters to keep up to speed with their surveying.

Likewise, across the five RHS gardens - and particularly at Bridgewater (Greater Manchester) and Harlow Carr (N. Yorkshire) - the Red Admiral was the most-seen butterfly during August, with numbers up 338% from 2022.

All this data from the RHS is fed into the national dataset compiled by the UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme (UKBMS).

VANDALISM ON LECKHAMPTON HILL

It is a sad reflection on life that, despite all the work done by FOLK and others to make Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common a delightful place for nature and for people, there are always some who undermine what has been achieved.

Littering is a continual problem – and ranges from small casually-discarded items to the large-scale dumping of chairs, tents, sleeping bags, glass bottles and other detritus from impromptu overnight activities.

Less frequent, but in a way even more troubling, is the deliberate vandalising of things which have been installed to make the hill safer and more enjoyable.

In November our Chair, Mike Donnelly, found that the FOLK noticeboard at Brownstones Car Park had been unbolted from its supports and used in an unsuccessful attempt to start a fire in the quarry area.

With considerable patience and effort, Mike managed to repair the noticeboard, but such thoughtless malicious behaviour is so dispiriting.

On a brighter note, it is heartening that those FOLK members - and other like-minded volunteers - who go up onto the Hill to pick up litter are frequently thanked by passing walkers for taking time to make, and keep, the Hill such a beautiful place to enjoy.



FOLK WORK PARTY REPORT

Geoff Holt, FOLK Work Party Coordinator

Since the last newsletter report, covering up to the end of September, we have been mainly working on our usual winter task of 'scrub-bashing'. We were initially assisted with this by contractors who spent two weeks cutting down gorse on the steep slopes at the Eastern end of the Common. This left a lot of cuttings for us to burn. We were helped with this at the beginning of October when we were joined by 15 volunteers from Keir staff who are working on the new A417 link. It still took another 2 work parties to burn all the cuttings and towards the end of this the new cattle came along to assess our work!



Before getting fully into our own scrub-bashing work we had one regular Autumn task to complete. This was to give the sidings area at the top of the Hill its annual 'haircut' (right) to re-expose this historic industrial archaeological feature.

As we had a good turnout of volunteers that day we also took the opportunity of clearing out more gorse in a nearby area to encourage the fly orchids that grow there.



In November our focus turned primarily to scrub-bashing but, rather than working mainly on gorse removal as we had done in previous years, we decided to give equal effort to removing hawthorn and bramble that has been slowly but steadily expanding and encroaching on the grassland at the lower levels of the Western side of the Common.

We started this work at the North-West corner of the Common where we were assisted by some extra volunteers from Spirax-Sarco to open up a clearing and to make the footpaths here more passable.



During the work . . .



. . . and after!

Since then we have been slowly working Eastwards, firstly opening up a clearing that contained a lot of hawthorn saplings and was partly ringed by gorse which we also removed.



During the work . . .



. . . and after!

At the beginning of the new year we next moved on to open up a route between two open areas of grassland that had become disconnected by the hawthorn growth.



In between working on these areas we also did some gorse clearance to maintain a bit of variety. The main area we worked on was on the ledge just below the top of the Common at its South-West corner. We were ably assisted with this work when we were joined, in



November, by 30 pupils and staff from the High School Leckhampton who seemed to enjoy wielding loppers and saws!

We did two more work parties here ourselves to remove more gorse and to complete the burning of the cuttings.

Later we worked on removing thinly spread gorse (right) in an area on the lower slopes of the Eastern end of the Common which has now been opened up into a nice clear area of grassland.



In addition to the above we did one other job with a difference. Just below the Gallops track there are a number of veteran ash trees that were worked on by specialist contractors in the year before.

They had given these old trees more breathing space

and light by opening up the area around them. This involved removing nearby younger ash trees and partially clearing growth around their bases (a process called 'haloing'). The haloing was not done around the whole area under each tree as this can shock the trees if done all at once. We were asked to complete the haloing work which we did.

While we were in the area we also thinned out some of the bramble below the Gallops which was getting a bit too overgrown and was over-shading the grassland.

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 few months are:

March 2024	Thursday 14 th	Tuesday 19 th	Sunday 24 th
April 2024	Thursday 11 th	Tuesday 16 th	Sunday 28 th
May 2024	Thursday 9 th	Tuesday 21 st	Sunday 26 th
June 2024	Thursday 13 th	Tuesday 18 th	Sunday 23 rd
July 2024	Thursday 11 th	Tuesday 16 th	Sunday 28 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.

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

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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.