



FOLKtalk

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2025

Friends of Leckhampton Hill & Charlton Kings Common

Conserving and improving the Hill for you

FOLK 25th ANNIVERSARY

Thursday 15th June 2000.



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Friends of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common
Inaugural Meeting, 26th June 2000

I am pleased to announce that the Friends of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common will form on Monday 26th June at Leckhampton Primary School, Hall Road, Cheltenham, commencing at 7.30pm. The agenda for the evening is as follows:

1. Report of the Steering Group
2. Adoption of the proposed Constitution of the Friends Group
3. Election of Chairman and Secretary
4. Election of Treasurer
5. Election of six Executive Committee members
6. Coffee break
7. The way forward
8. Date of the First General Meeting
9. Any Other Business

After months of discussions between different organisations and agencies, this notice from the Cotswold AONB heralded the official meeting at which the Friends of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common would be formed in June 2000.

In this special edition of FOLKtalk, we look back over the past twenty-five years. There is much to celebrate and also many individuals and organisations to recognise and thank.

Most of all, we are grateful for your continued membership and the support this gives us for our ongoing work. We will always strive to conserve and improve the Hill and Common, for the preservation of the site's history, for the sustainability and recovery of its rich wildlife, and for the enjoyment of generations to come.

This extra special addition of FOLKtalk celebrates 25 years since FOLK was formed on 26th June 2000. It will look at our history and some of the highlights over the years.

It is thanks to the founder members, the first and subsequent FOLK executive committees, and of course all the volunteers who have joined the work parties, working so hard over the years to reach this landmark.

Of course, FOLK works closely with Cheltenham Borough Council to manage the site and plan for the future, to improve access and facilities, and support nature conservation on this Site of Special Scientific Interest.



Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common have gone through many changes over the years. Conservation grazing has been introduced. The present grazier is using Riggitt Galloways, a very rare breed of conservation cattle. Charlton Kings Common is now only grazed in the late autumn and winter. This has been made possible with the addition of spring and summer pastures: two fields near Brownstones quarry and two much larger fields below Charlton Kings Common called Hopkins Land.

The more recent increase in footfall has been, in part, due to the Covid lockdowns when many people discovered their enjoyment of the site for the first time. To accommodate this increased usage and reverse earlier damage to the SSSI, the Cotswold Way and some other major footpaths have been resurfaced. Grants from National Grid and Cotswold National Landscapes enabled many projects to be completed by specialist contractors.

The conservation grazing and the resurfacing of stretches of the Cotswolds Way are just two of the recent changes to the Hill and Common. Many more highlights over the last 25 years are celebrated in this Anniversary Edition. I hope you will enjoy it.

Mike Donnelly, Chair of FOLK

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A WORD FROM ADAM REYNOLDS

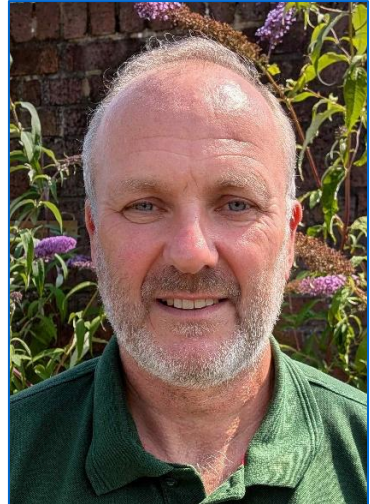
Green Space & Public Realm Manager, Cheltenham Borough Council

For 25 years, the partnership between Cheltenham Borough Council and the Friends of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common (FOLK) has been instrumental in managing this cherished site for both conservation and public enjoyment.

FOLK has played a vital role by contributing thousands of volunteer hours to practical conservation tasks such as scrub clearance, habitat restoration and path maintenance.

Their consistent feedback and local insight have also been key in shaping land management strategies, ensuring that the site supports biodiversity while remaining accessible to the public. This long-standing collaboration exemplifies how local authorities and community groups can work together to protect our natural heritage while fostering inclusive access to green spaces.

On a personal level I have thoroughly enjoyed getting to know and working with members of the FOLK executive committee over the last three years on the steering group responsible for overseeing the “Restoring Cotswold Escarpment Grassland”, and I look forward to working closely with them in the future.

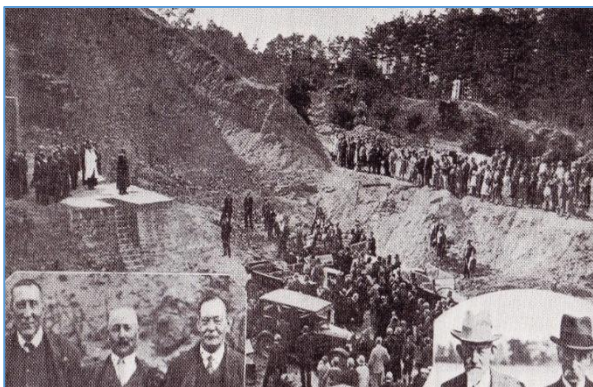


THE FORMATION OF FOLK

Folk has been in existence for twenty five years, but it is rooted in local people's love for Leckhampton Hill . . . and that goes back much further.

For many urban residents in the 1800s, visiting this hill was their best chance of enjoying time in a wonderful open green space on their doorstep. So when local businessman Henry Dale closed off all public access to the Hill after he bought the site in 1894, deep resentment boiled over.

In the early twentieth century this anger erupted into what has become known as the Leckhampton Riots. In 1902 fences were torn down and a small group of rioters were arrested. In response around two thousand people flocked to the site and Tramway Cottage was torn down by the angry mob. Dale continued to refuse public access and further unrest broke out in 1906. An angry mob tore down fences and hurled stones at Tramway Cottage breaking roof slates and window panes. Eight of the rioters, who later became known as the "Stalwarts", were jailed.



As it turned out, the rapid expansion of quarrying which followed the riots proved to be short-lived. A few years after the Leckhampton Quarry Company folded, Cheltenham Town Council acquired Dale's 400 acres of land.

Alderman C.H. Margrett made an address to the Town Council in 1927 in which he

stated "We shall acquire not only valuable property but we shall maintain for the public the right to roam over Leckhampton Hill. We shall be handing to posterity a large open space which can be visited by any and every inhabitant of this town."

Leckhampton Hill was officially opened to the public at a huge event in 1929. In the photograph above, Cheltenham's Mayor can be seen on the left, leading the ceremony from the base of the dismantled Limekilns.

The longed-for public access to the site had been restored, but during the second half of the twentieth century local people became increasingly concerned about the condition of the site. While the Borough Council owned the land, it clearly lacked the resources properly to maintain it. By 1955 it had been designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) which was great news, but this placed an additional burden on the Council to maintain the site to the standards expected by Natural England. Clearly something had to be done.

In 1998 there was a visit to the site by the **Countryside Exchange**, an organisation formed to promote bottom-up rural development. Their report gave weight to the idea of a “friends” group to work alongside the Borough Council. With the enthusiastic support of the **Board of the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty**, a series of meetings quickly led to an agreement that the Friends of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common should be formed.

In a clear sign of the collective desire to get on with things, a steering group was quickly set up and the inaugural meeting of FOLK was held on 26 June 2000.

At this meeting an Interim Executive Committee was appointed, under the chairmanship of Julius Marstrand. Both Cotswold AONB and the Borough Council supported FOLK by ensuring that they were represented at early Executive Committee meetings.

From the outset it was clear that our committee and our members wanted FOLK to make a difference. By August the interim committee had already held a walk on the site, supported by Geoffrey Jenkins for the Borough Council. This was arranged so that the committee could look carefully at various sections of the land and begin to form a list of priorities for an immediate plan of action.

After all, it would not be enough for FOLK simply to focus on understanding the complexity and condition of the Hill and Common. Rather, FOLK was determined to plan practical measures its members could and should take – both to improve public access and enjoyment, and to help protect the site’s history and its rare and precious wildlife.

FOLK: A 25 YEAR TIMELINE

2000 26th June. Folk formed with 72 paid up members.

2000 2nd October. Alan Wood organized the first work party clearing footpaths.

2001 23rd April. Foot and Mouth outbreak. Hill closed and work parties postponed.

2001 12th June. Cheltenham Borough Council (CBC) provided a grant for FOLK funds.

2002 August. Management Plan published, commissioned by Cheltenham Borough Council

2003 13th May. A fire on Charlton Kings Common affected about 40 acres and caused the death of many animals including Roman snails. Eight fire engines were involved.

2003 21st May Cattle grazing trial began.

2003 November. Cheltenham gained Silver Gilt award in Britain Bloom and FOLK cited for its contribution.

2003 A grant of £10,000 from Heritage Lottery Fund through Cotswold AONB in consultation with CBC allowed for the purchase of a rough terrain cutter, materials needed for the temporary grazing paddocks and the hiring of the contractors to clear burnt gorse.

2009 At Cheltenham in Bloom Award Ceremony FOLK was awarded the "Outstanding Community Involvement" Trophy.

2012 In honour of Judith Frazer-Holland's outstanding contribution to the foundation and early years of FOLK, her tireless work for the conservation of Leckhampton Hill & Charlton Kings Common and her love of riding, the track from Brownstones car park to the top of Charlton Kings Common was renamed "**Judy's Ride**".

2012 April. Following the installation of a huge length of fencing, "extensive grazing" began on the site. This replaced the original "intensive grazing" where small temporary paddocks were set up every few weeks by FOLK volunteers.

2014 Summer. Ash Dieback observed on Leckhampton Hill for the first time.

2016 June. FOLK organised a large family even to promote local participation the national Magnificent Meadows project.

2017 Medal of Honour was awarded to FOLK volunteer Mike Donnelly for services to the community over many years.

2019 FOLK and CBC commissioned a professional drone survey of the site.

2021 National Grid Grant. Overall the project was managed by Cotswold National Landscapes and a steering group partnership comprising Charlton Kings Parish Council, Cheltenham Borough Council and FOLK. Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings common benefited from an investment of over £140,000 to fund major conservation and infrastructure projects on the site.

2021 Drystone wall re-building from Harley Lane to Hill Fort began. Stone was paid for from National Grid Grant. Building was carried out by Cotswold Voluntary Wardens, with some general support from FOLK.

2022 CPRE Award for “Commendable work at the site” with successful planning and management by partners and volunteers including FOLK of a large and complex site achieving multiple objectives and including access for all biodiversity enhancement and landscape improvement.

2022 Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) Grant from Cotswold Natural Landscape enabled the purchase of a motorised scythe mower and a replacement brush cutter.

2023 Spring. FOLK bought portable defibrillator and arranged training.

2003 Ongoing support for the Cotswold Wardens work in rebuilding the Cotswold drystone wall which leads up from Hartley Lane and now includes the new Memorial Wall.

2023 FOLK Nominated for the King’s Award for voluntary service.

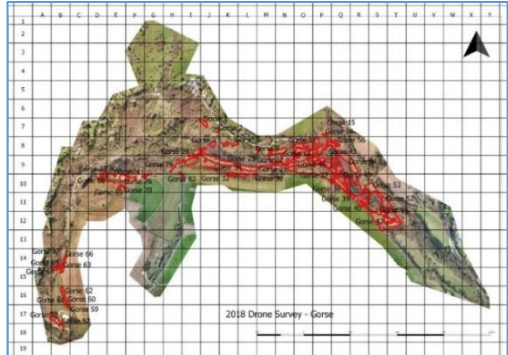
2024 Training for FOLK work party volunteers on First Aid, brush cutter and safe use of pesticides. It was funded by grants from Leckhampton with Warden Hill Parish Council and Shurdington Parish Council.

2024 Lime Kiln Repair. Contractor hired with National Grid grant funding. Coping topping installed to reduce water ingress and a section of stone facing was rebuilt on the front corner. FOLK work parties cleared vegetation etc.

Photo highlights



The re-built drystone wall leading up from Hartley Lane alongside a re-surfaced foot path, part of a new 3km accessible route across the top of Leckhampton Hill.



A map of areas of gorse (shown in red) created with images from the 2019 drone survey. Close-ups of specific sections have informed the planning of selective gorse removal/reduction.



Fly orchids are among fourteen orchid species which thrive on our site.



Gloucestershire Society for Industrial Archaeology walk at the Limekilns



Youth engagement remains an important aspect of FOLK's work. Here a group from High School Leckhampton's Eco Club enjoy a morning visiting the site and helping our volunteers on a work party session.

FOLK – THE FIRST FIVE YEARS

The determination to make a difference - which had characterised the establishment of FOLK in June 2000 – showed no sign of letting up as the organisation got its work under way. By September FOLK had published its principal objectives:

- To promote the conservation and management of the ecology, geology and archaeology of the Land.
- To promote the Land's status as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and AONB, and compliance with relevant National and European legislation.
- To support the widest possible recreational use of the Land consistent with the objectives above.
- To promote public awareness and education in the objectives above.
- To liaise and consult with the owners and trustees of the Land and of adjacent land over matters of mutual interest.

These objectives set out very clearly FOLK's awareness that Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common is a complicated piece of land. It is broadly made up of four different areas: grassland, scrub, woodland, and cliffs and quarries. It must be stressed that this site is particularly special because it largely comprises a species-rich “**unimproved limestone grassland**”.

In the 1930s approximately 40% of the Cotswolds was covered by this type of grassland. It now covers just 1.5%. Much of this loss is as result of a decline in grazing, lack of management of common land, and the natural encroachment of scrub such as gorse, bramble and young hawthorn and blackthorn trees.

So balancing the needs of people, nature and archaeology on a very special site which also offers full public access was, and remains, a complex challenge. This did not deter FOLK from getting stuck into the kind of practical steps that really had to be taken.

On 10th September 2000 FOLK organised a guided walk for all-comers to explore the site, starting at Brownstones Quarry.

By 24th September the first Working Party was held, targeted at an obvious and enduring task, the clearance of some scrub from the lower grass slopes.

On 23rd October FOLK held its first AGM at which the Executive Committee was appointed. **Julius Marstrand became our first Chair**, supported by Jack Shepherd as Secretary and Ann North as Treasurer. Andy Gilbert was the group's first Newsletter Editor, and the rest of the committee was made up of Sheila Chaplin, Shelagh Hallaway, Diane James, Tony Meredith, Maureen Peirce, Alan Wood and Judy Frazer-Holland. It was Judy who then headed the Site Management Sub-committee which steered and organised the practical work which FOLK undertook.

By December 2000 the committee had set up its website, arranged a regular series of Work Parties on the fourth Sunday of each month, and also planned a Geological Walk for 11th March 2001. What was also noticeable was that other local organisations were getting involved. Both Cheltenham and County Cycle Club and the Malvern Hang Gliding Club joined in work parties, and there was already a growing pattern of cooperation with the work of the Cotswold Voluntary Wardens.

2001 Sadly, all this early momentum was brought to a sudden halt in February when the national Foot and Mouth crisis closed vast swathes of the nation's countryside, including this site. It was devastating for farmers and very disruptive for country life in general. However, by June, footpaths which did not cross land where livestock graze were allowed to be re-opened. FOLK work parties were soon able to get back into limited action and by the end of 2001 work parties were in full swing again.

2002 By the end of that year both Cheltenham Borough Council and FOLK had voted to adopt the new **Site Management Plan**. This set out a report on the various aspects of the Hill and Common, as well as broad guidance on what could or should be done to improve the site. FOLK had also agreed to expand Work Party activity to two regular sessions per month.

Plans were now beginning to take shape for an introduction of **conservation grazing**. To keep to the minimum any hindrance to public access, FOLK proposed that small temporary paddocks be set up, enclosed by electric fencing. These would, as far as possible, lie between existing tracks and would not obstruct any official rights of way. Each paddock would be grazed out and then a new paddock established in a nearby location.

2003 In May, a trial of conservation grazing began, supported by the Cotswold AONB which directed Heritage Lottery Fund money for the purchase of the electric fencing and the supply of water to the cattle.

Sadly, the actual start date was delayed by a **devastating fire on Charlton Kings Common** in late April, which took eight fire engines to bring under control. This fire affected about 40 acres (25% of the SSSI site) and caused the death of many animals including the rare Roman snails. Before too long, though, the Dexter cattle were introduced to their pasture.

A full programme of work party activity saw much scrub cut down and some footpaths cleared of encroaching vegetation which improved public access to the Hill and Common.

2004 The conservation grazing continued successfully and a number of healthy calves were born. The Work Parties erected and then re-located eight different temporary paddocks over the grazing period on the main site, as well as all their usual tasks involved with scrub management, path clearance and many other activities.

2005 By the end of the year, the FOLK AGM was able to review its first five years of action. This included influencing policy, helping to secure external funding and seeing a steady growth in the hours of Work Party time recorded.

FOLK had been closely involved in both the creation and the implementation of the new (2002) Site Management Plan. FOLK had also formed mutually beneficial relationships with a wide range of local organisations, many of whom contributed to the practical work needed to conserve and improve the site.

Selected scrub clearance has helped the recovery of some of the grassland – to the benefit of the site's wildlife – and those who enjoy walking on the Hill and Common have found some previously overgrown and impassable footpaths now open once more, including stretches of the Cotswold Way. Some paths which had views badly obstructed by old, tall stands of gorse and bramble also benefited from scrub clearance work to open up the views.

The prospects for this complex site had seemed very daunting when our group was first formed, but FOLK, the Borough Council and many local organisations had stuck to the task. While remaining very aware that there was still much to do, FOLK could, at the very least, reflect on having made a good start.

OUR GROWING MEMBERSHIP

By the time the first Annual General Meeting was held in the autumn of 2000, FOLK had signed up more than one hundred members. This number grew and in the next fifteen years or so always stood between around 150 and 250.

By 2017, and with FOLK's finances more reliably secure, it was decided that there should be a trial of free membership. The aim of this was to boost numbers of members. This would help to increase public awareness and support - both for the value of the Hill and Common and for FOLK's activity to preserve and improve the quality of the site. It also gave FOLK a chance to explain the range of tasks its volunteers were doing and how this work helped improve the Hill and Common.

Spreading the Word about FOLK



As well as publicising free membership via the website and Facebook, FOLK has also booked stands at public events. These have included the Borough Council's Midsummer Fiesta in Montpellier Gardens, Charlton Kings Summer Fayres and High School Leckhampton Eco Days.

FOLK also attended the 2024 Party in The Park – an event run by CBC to support families suffering from poverty or other significant challenges. Carefully planned displays routinely explained both the history of the site and the kinds of tasks FOLK undertook.

The combined result of the free membership and FOLK's presence at public events has been a steady growth in membership with the current number exceeding 500.

AWARDS

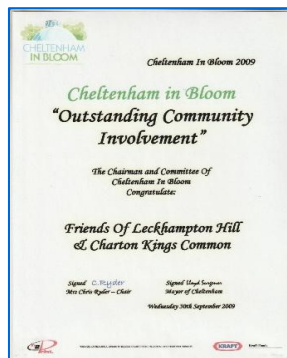
FOLK's contribution to the natural environment of Cheltenham has not gone unnoticed over the years. Indeed it has resulted in a number of awards for the group and for individual members.

Cheltenham Borough Council Beacon Award 2001

FOLK contributed to the success of the Council gaining Beacon status by mounting a comprehensive display of our contribution to the conservation and improvement of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common.

Britain in Bloom

- **2003** November Cheltenham gained Silver Gilt award in Britain Bloom and FOLK was cited for its contribution to both the "Environmental Friendliness" and the "Community Involvement" sections.
- **2009** At the Cheltenham in Bloom Awards FOLK was awarded the "Outstanding Community Involvement" Trophy.



Pride of Gloucestershire Award for Judith (Judy) Frazer-Holland 2010

Judith Frazer-Holland was a founder member of FOLK and served on the Executive Committee as well as heading up the Site Management Sub-committee which continually assessed the site and both planned and actively supported action by our early work parties.

Judy's contribution to the conservation of Leckhampton Hill & Charlton Kings Common was recognised in 2010, when she was awarded the 'Environmental Hero' award at the Pride of Gloucestershire Awards.

Medal of Honour 2017 for Mike Donnelly

Our current Chair, Mike joined FOLK in 2006 and by 2017 had already given eleven years of tireless effort to advance FOLK's aims. Recognition came to Mike in the form of Cheltenham Borough Council's 2017 Medal of Honour.



His contributions to FOLK include working as work party coordinator and Executive Committee member for a number of years, a regular work party volunteer, and the organiser of FOLK events such as attendance at the Midsummer Fiesta. The presentation was made by the new Mayor, Councillor Klara Sudbury.

CPRE (Campaign to Protect Rural England) Gloucestershire Award 2022



The extensive range of improvements made to our site over recent years was recognised with one of the handful of CPRE Gloucestershire's awards for 2022. CPRE Gloucestershire's President Charles Martell (far left) presented the award to each of our project's representatives: Mike Donnelly (FOLK), Mike Dunning (Cotswold Wardens), and for CBC the Mayor, Sandra Holliday, and Wayne Sedgwick (Senior Ranger).

WORK PARTIES

From the very start, Work Parties have formed the backbone of FOLK's efforts to conserve and improve Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common. The greatest single natural threat to this unimproved limestone grassland is the spread of scrub. Gorse, bramble and small trees like hawthorn and blackthorn all have their place on a grassland site, but need active management.



Unchecked, these potentially dominant species gradually overwhelm the grasses and wildflowers which would otherwise thrive. This, in turn, risks degrading the value of the site for other wildlife, including butterflies, moths and other invertebrates. So it is no surprise that the clearance of selected areas of scrub has always been a core part of the programme for work parties.

Over the course of a quarter of a century, however, it is quite remarkable what a wide range of other tasks these work parties have tackled. They include:

- Clearing vegetation which is narrowing footpaths
- Creating firebreaks in large areas of gorse and bramble
- Opening up “butterfly motorways” through scrub to help butterflies move freely between patches of grassland which contain the specific plants which they need for food and breeding
- Pulling up Ragwort on land grazed by cattle. (Ragwort contains toxins that can cause liver damage and potentially lead to liver failure in cattle.)
- Pulling up Hemp Agrimony on open grassland. (Uncontrolled it can dominate the smaller grasses and wildflowers.)
- Clearing selected vegetation from drystone walls to limit its invasion of the stonework
- Clearing the land where the Cotswold Wardens are re-building a Cotswold Drystone wall
- Fence installation and repairs
- Erecting and moving temporary fencing around paddocks grazed by cattle
- Mowing and collecting grass cuttings on designated areas

- Keeping vegetation under control on the sites of quarries, tramways, sidings and the limekilns
- Mowing grass on the Burial Mound and Hill Fort Ramparts
- Supporting contractors, eg, by collecting and burning gorse cuttings taken from very steep areas which required contractors' expertise and equipment. Another task involved backing up specialist tree surgery undertaken to preserve very old trees by removing scrub and young ash saplings from around the base of the trees.
- Clearing gorse from the take-off area used for hang gliding. (Here we were supported by the Malvern Hang Gliding Club.)
- Regularly clearing litter and fly-tipping debris from paths and car parks

Over the years, the Work Party operations have certainly developed. To begin with, for example, the first volunteers were required to bring their own tools. Gradually FOLK has been able to build up a good supply of hand-tools, but has also been able to invest in brushcutters, a rough terrain mower and a scythe mower. Those who use power tools receive appropriate training and supervision.



Some of these purchases have been supported by valuable grants for which the work parties are extremely grateful. Overall, it must be said that all this equipment - and especially the brushcutters and scythe mower (2023 new equipment pictured left) - makes a significant difference to the amount of work which can be completed in any given session.

Naturally, great care is taken to ensure volunteers' safety, but - just in case - there is always at least one recently trained first-aider at a work party. A few years ago FOLK also acquired a portable Automatic External Defibrillator (AED) and a number of our volunteers have taken a training course on its use.

Our Work Parties have always been well supported, not only by FOLK's own volunteers, but also by a wide range of voluntary organisations and local companies who have generously allowed their members or staff to work alongside us. This collective effort has grown over the years. The 2001 AGM Report noted

a total of 821 volunteer hours dedicated to work parties over the past year. By 2024 that total had doubled to 1,641.

Our work parties now meet three times each month – and only very rarely cancel sessions because of bad weather. The volunteers do, of course, need a break during a hard morning's work. So we would like to thank the small band of work party members who always turn up with homemade cake to share.



Brush-cutting the quarry sidings

Coordinating the work party programme is a vital but unseen task. The broad direction of the work is shaped by the Site Management Plan and FOLK's key objectives, but it has always been the work party coordinators who take on the crucial work of regularly walking on the Hill and Common. This allows them to survey the site, plan each session's work and evaluate its effectiveness.

So we are hugely grateful for the past Work Party leaders, Alan Wood, Mike Donnelly and Geoff Holt who achieved so much over the last twenty five years, and, of course, for the dedication of our current work party coordinator, Pete Niblett. Without the level of commitment they have all shown, so much less would have been achieved.

Some of the work party tasks are regular seasonal activities and some are occasional or even one-off efforts, but they all make a difference. In short, whatever the task, our work parties make a huge contribution, in making the site a better place for people and for nature, and in caring for its rich archaeological history.

* * * * *

Every now again a member of the public takes the trouble to write in to thank us for our efforts. A regular user of the Hill, Linda, did just that. She wrote *"Thank you for all your hard work. I love walking over Leckhampton Hill particularly with the new paths which enable disabled and less active people to enjoy the outdoors. It's my calm space and I thoroughly enjoy the peace and environment of the hill and farmland. You all deserve a pat on the back for keeping a beautiful area in such good condition."*

BEING A WORK PARTY VOLUNTEER

Mark's reflection on his experience

I have been volunteering on our work parties for three years. I already knew the Hill and Common from regular dog-walking and found out about FOLK from their noticeboards. I care deeply about the countryside and wanted to make a contribution, just like my mum had always done. So when I joined FOLK it was with the specific aim of volunteering with the work parties.

Still working three days a week, I typically join one work party a month and have been part of our efforts on a wide range of tasks. I have spent mornings pulling up Hemp Agrimony, helped with the mowing and raking of grass on the Hillfort and cleared excess vegetation from the beautifully re-built Cotswold stone walls.

I also enjoy the perennial task of cutting and burning gorse, with the camaraderie around the fire and the satisfaction of seeing more grassland opened up once more. From the outset I have also been impressed by the Work Party Coordinators who have always allowed people to work at their own pace and helped new volunteers to feel part of the group.

It's hard to identify stand-out sessions, but I vividly remember a freezing cold morning near the ridge above Salterley Quarry. The land below was shrouded in fog, but soon the rising sun slowly bathed everything in early morning light. It was just magical: a telling reminder that work party volunteers don't just get sore backs - they also get great memories and a real sense of making a difference.

RESTORING CHELTENHAM'S ESCARPMENT GRASSLAND

Projects supported by the grant from National Grid

In 2019 Rob Williams (Charlton Kings Parish Council) was alerted by a member of the Gloucestershire Butterfly Conservation Group of grants available from **National Grid**. This followed recent network improvement works they had carried out in the Cotswolds. Rob and Dr John Harvey (FOLK) followed this up with Cotswold Natural landscapes who were managing the grant fund.

Our project was entitled **Restoring Cheltenham's Escarpment Grassland (RCEG)**. The success of our application was, in large measure, due to the expertise of the bid's lead experts, John Harvey and Rob Williams. It resulted in more than £140,000 of capital grants, plus match funding in respect of our volunteer hours - worth more than £60,000.

Due to many delays, including the Covid lockdowns, no funds reached us until late August 2021. The steering group has spent many hundreds of hours preparing and running the projects, and Tony Duffin was also key, controlling the finances of each strand of the project in fine detail.

This capital grant funded a number of large projects which needed to be undertaken by specialist contractors, but many of these were only successful because of the energetic support of the many volunteers, and particularly FOLK Work Parties and the Cotswold Voluntary Wardens.

The main contracts were as follows

Footpath restoration. The resurfacing of the complete length of the Cotswold Way on Charlton Kings Common was the main notable improvement to access on the Hill.

Drystone wall. Rebuilding the common boundary wall from Hartley Lane towards the Hill Fort had a target of 120 metres. With the dedication of the Cotswold Wardens volunteer labour this target has been greatly exceeded and with an inflation payment by National Grid we have been able to purchase more stone so that the project can continue.

Mechanical cutting and stump treatment of gorse. This was a major project, mainly completed by contractors who clear invasive gorse from very steep limestone calcareous grassland on the Charlton Kings Common escarpment. At the

same time, FOLK volunteers created fire breaks on the top of Charlton Kings Common.

Lime Kiln Refurbishment. The Kilns have badly deteriorated in recent years, mainly from water ingress. The project was to reverse this deterioration. With the use of a specialist contractor the top of the kiln was capped to prevent water ingress and a section of the side wall was rebuilt.

Fencing. 1,000 metres of fencing has been checked and repaired with new posts and wire where required.

Veteran Trees. A number of older trees, some possibly up to 300 years old, had a specialist survey and have been haloed and had retrenchment pruning, by a specialist contractor. This will increase their chances of reaching the veteran stage of life.

Scrub management. Clearing 400 square metres of mainly hawthorn to create glades, open up views and improve footpath access. Areas of hawthorn islands were also created.

Tree felling. Mainly along the Woodland Walk and the lower slopes of Devil's chimney. This project was to create a safer and more open footpath, to open up the views to Devil's Chimney and reclaim some of the limestone calcareous grassland.

Larch Management. Some small areas of Larch were felled to create more ground vegetation and to remove a number of trees adjacent to the foot path which were visually intrusive.

Infrastructure. To reduce the requirement for additional fencing, *NoFence* GPS cattle-tracking collars were purchased. A cattle crush has been purchased and installed to assist the grazier with cattle welfare and TB testing.

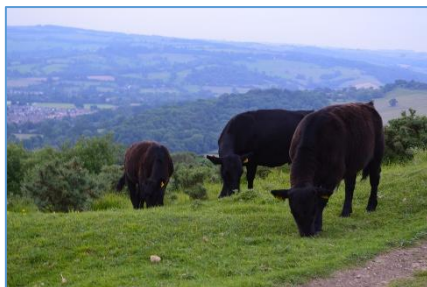
New Management Plan. The National Grid grant included a contribution towards the cost.

CONSERVATION GRAZING

The idea of re-introducing grazing on the site came onto the agenda in the very early in the life of FOLK. It was judged that the gradual demise of regular grazing on this “common land” site had been one of the causes of the slow decline in the quality of its limestone grassland. So the introduction of “conservation grazing” soon emerged as a possibility. It was, though, not without some strong reservations.

The largest, and understandable concern was that, less than a century after Henry Dale’s hated fences had been taken down, new fences would restrict the cherished public access and make the site look more like ordinary farmland. On top of that, concerns were raised about excessive erosion on some areas of unfenced grassland and a clash with the rights of those walking dogs. Even if approved in principle, there would also be the matter of addressing everything which grazing would involve, like regular supervision, health checks and water supply.

Eventually these concerns were addressed, in no small part by the decision to use “intensive grazing”. This involves erecting temporary paddocks using electric fencing and avoiding overlapping any established footpaths. In May 2003 the first trial began with local farmer Anne North’s herd of Dexter cattle (seen right). This was successful, and Anne North’s Dexters



continued to graze the site intensively for the next nine years. 2012 saw the erection of a huge length of cattle-proof perimeter fencing around the main site. This ended the need for work parties to be regularly erecting and then moving the temporary fencing. These prize-winning Dexters continued to graze the site for the next nine years until the contract reached the end of its term.

In 2021, a new conservation grazing contract saw two important changes. Firstly it was decided that cattle should no longer graze on the 40 acre SSSI section of the site during the Spring and Summer. This was to support the survival and, indeed recovery, of many species of pollinators which rely on wildflowers to thrive during the peak months for breeding.

Secondly, the new graziers, James and Katie, brought much larger cattle onto the site: British Whites and English Longhorns. Despite their conspicuous heft, these breeds were, like the Dexters, docile, hardy and good at grazing on poor and challenging grassland. James and Katie also introduced NoFence Grazing technology, with the herd wearing GPS collars so that the graziers could limit the movement of the herd to specific areas without having to erect temporary fences.

When James and Katie acquired their own farm in Wiltshire during 2023, the conservation grazing changed hands once more. Eddie and Emma Llewellyn brought their herd of **Belted Galloway** cattle on site for the first time in the autumn, again using NoFence technology and avoiding grazing the main site in Spring and Summer. Since then they have seen the birth of healthy calves over each of the past two years.



Belted Galloway with NoFence GPS Collar

A key element of this success has been the recruitment of a 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 basically just make sure that the cattle appear to be safe and in good health.

It is clearly too early yet to establish any measurable impact on the actual numbers of pollinators following the introduction of a new grazing timetable. However, informal observations indicate some encouraging improvements in both the abundance and spread of several wildflower species in specific areas since the cattle stopped grazing the SSSI site over the Spring and Summer.

OUR WONDERFUL WILDLIFE

Around 165 acres of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common has been designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). So in celebrating its first twenty five years, FOLK is still very mindful of the amazing biodiversity of the wildlife which is found on this area of limestone grassland. Indeed, some of its inhabitants are among those seen nationally as endangered, and they deserve some special attention.

Our site supports a wide variety of wildlife, some of which rely on the particular conditions offered by the limestone grassland and natural aspect of the Hill.

The site supports, among many others, a number of species of bat as well as field mice, field voles, badgers, foxes, roe deer and muntjac deer, lizards, glow worms, Roman snails (seen right) and adders. It is also home to many species of birds, butterflies, moths and other invertebrates as well as numerous grasses and flowering plants.



Adder basking on the Hill

The recent national **Back from the Brink** project (2017-2021) identified two endangered species which live on our site but need some help for their populations to thrive: the **Duke of Burgundy** butterfly and the **Adder**.

So our work parties have opened up grassy pathways through broad areas of gorse and bramble to help endangered butterflies such as the Duke of Burgundy to move from one patch of favourable vegetation to another.

Similarly “adder mats” were installed in secluded locations to provide our population of adders with a warm place for basking and a ready shelter for protection, and more recently a new adder-friendly zone was created not far from the hillfort.

On a more general note, it is useful to take a closer look at three groups: butterflies and moths, birds, and wildflowers.

Butterflies and moths

Since 2013 FOLK volunteers have conducted an annual butterfly survey. Thirty six different butterfly species have been sighted at least once. Twenty nine of these are regularly recorded and can be regarded as resident species. Of these, seven (Dingy Skipper, Green Hairstreak, Small Blue, Brown Argus, Chalkhill Blue, Duke of Burgundy and Dark Green Fritillary) are regarded as “key” species because of their reliance on particular habitats found on our site. There are also a minimum of 300 moth species on the hill, and probably far more as no intensive night time trapping sessions have been done.



Chalkhill Blue butterfly



Duke of Burgundy butterfly

For many reasons, despite variations in weather and changes in available plant life, the total number of species found here has been relatively stable.

Pleasingly the Duke of Burgundy butterfly has extended its spread over the past twelve years from just a single sighting in 2018 to a fairly stable population of forty in recent years.

It is very difficult to draw any firm conclusions about changes and trends in butterfly populations over the twelve years of these surveys, though the overall abundance of each species has reduced in line with national trends.

Birds

The height and position of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common above the Severn Vale corridor provides a natural flyway for migrating birds as well as being home for a wide variety of resident birds. The site contains a mixture of habitats: woodland, farmland, grassland, hedgerow, scrub and scarp faces. These provide food and shelter throughout the year, plus suitable sites for our breeding birds.

Based on historic sightings, bird surveys and our own 2024 Wildlife Walk, the Site List now stands at more than sixty five species of birds that have been seen or heard on The Hill and Common, with many more which have been spotted flying overhead – and not to mention a number of scarce birds which are occasionally seen following unusual weather events.

The picture, of course, is more complex than that. In addition to dozens of resident (ie, all-year-round) species there are many short-term visitors. For these birds a safe temporary stop-over with reliable food and good shelter is absolutely vital to their successful Spring and Autumn migrations.

There are also species like Fieldfare, Redwing and several others which stay over Winter to escape the more severe Winter weather in their breeding ranges.



Fieldfares are seen here in Winter



Tree Pipit - a Summer visitor

Finally there are the Summer visitors like the Cuckoo and Tree Pipit, which spend the Winter months in hotter regions further South, but fly here in the late Spring and Summer when the Hill and Common provide vital habitat and food to support successful breeding.

Wildflowers

This site has been described as a plant-rich unimproved limestone (calcareous) grassland for good reason. Examination of the site in 2000-2002 found a wide range of plants. There were at least 165 flowering plants (not including the native orchids) as well as various trees, nineteen different grasses and four species of fern, of which the Adderstongue Fern is the most notable.

Whilst many of the flowers on site are typical of unimproved limestone grasslands, they are not necessarily entirely dependent on it. For some of the local butterflies, though, horseshoe vetch, kidney vetch, common dog violet (seen right) and rock rose are important food sources for their larvae.



This site is particularly valued as home to a wide range of native orchids. The orchid season starts with the early Spring emergence of ‘rosettes’ - the leaves of the various species - although we have to wait until April for the first to flower. The Early Purple Orchid is the earliest. This is followed by Common Twayblades, White Helleborines, Bird’s-nest Orchids and our site speciality: the Fly Orchid, so-called for its intricate flower which has evolved to mimic and attract certain species of insects which act as pollinators.

By Summer we start to see Pyramidal and Common Spotted Orchids, and a small number of Greater Butterfly Orchids. We are also fortunate to have a healthy population of Bee Orchids, another trickster species with colourful flowers that look, smell and even feel like female insects, encouraging the male insects to attempt to mate with the flower, triggering pollination in the process! And if that wasn’t enough to spur an interest in orchids, there is even a small cryptic species, the Frog Orchid.



The ‘Orchid Summer’ is finally rounded off with the late appearance of Autumn Lady’s-Tresses, a delicate, spiral-shaped orchid adorned with tiny white trumpet-shaped flowers.

Editor’s note. I am especially grateful to **Mark Dowie**, and **Serena and Guy Meredith** for their expert assistance in compiling this article.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A Huge Thank-you for all the Grants made to FOLK . . .

As a voluntary “Friends of” group we are always grateful for the financial support that has been given over the years, particularly for larger capital projects.

So we are pleased to acknowledge all the contributions made by:

- Cotswold AONB/Natural Landscapes
- Cheltenham Borough Council
- All three local Parish Councils and
- Gloucestershire County Council.

FOLK has also been provided with valuable financial support by many other organisations, companies and individuals, all of whom have greatly contributed to the success of our efforts over the past twenty five years.

. . . and the support of our many partners

FOLK has always welcomed close collaboration with other groups and organisations which support a shared vision for the site and are keen to contribute to the planning and implementation of what needs to be done.

When FOLK was formed, we were regularly supported by major organisations like **Cotswold AONB** and **English Nature (Natural England)**. As things progressed FOLK carefully consulted with others in shaping and implementing our work. Here we engaged with organisations like the **Gloucestershire Society for Industrial Archaeology**, the **Gloucestershire Geology Trust**, **Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust**, **Gloucestershire Ramblers**, **Malvern Hang Gliding Club** and **Cheltenham and County Cycle Club (mountain bike division)**.

In other cases, it has also meant co-working. For example, FOLK volunteers have provided practical support to the **Cotswold Voluntary Wardens** and to hired contractors, so that best use is made of their expert time.

And finally, of course, we have always been keen to welcome onto our work party sessions extra volunteers from local companies and organisations.

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

If you have any comments on the Newsletter please contact the Editor: Martin Wood, tel **01242 231230** or by email to: martinwood360@gmail.com

If you would like to contribute to the next edition, articles of around 500 words, plus a photo if you have one, would be most welcome at any time.

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