



Friends of Leckhampton Hill & Charlton Kings Common

NEWSLETTER

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WEB SITE <http://leckhamptonhill.homestead.com/FOLK.html>



FOOT & MOUTH Closes The Hill

As the Foot and Mouth crisis continues, Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common have been closed to public access to help prevent the further spread of this disease. Although restriction of access is against one of FOLK's main objectives we fully support these temporary measures and hope that the current outbreak is brought under control as soon as possible. Please do not use the hill until the restrictions have been lifted. For up to date information, visit our website, which has links to the MAFF information.

Working parties have been suspended, but to find out what has been achieved so far, see the conservation section on page 3.

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WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO DATE?

- 28th January - Two Working parties
- Formation of Site Management Sub-Committee
- 31st January - Leckhampton Hill, an illustrated talk by John Milner
- 28th Feb - Grassland butterflies of Leckhampton Hill, a talk by Guy Meredith
- Webcam launched on the web site

WHAT IS PLANNED FOR THE FUTURE?

- All working parties have been suspended until further notice
- All other walks and events on the hill are currently under review until further information is released on the F&M crisis
- Wednesday 20th June - "Getting to know the flowers of Leckhampton Hill. Talk by Rosemary Westgate - 7:30pm @ Leckhampton Primary School.

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A Message from the F.O.L.K. Chairman

Some people are concerned that conservation work by the Friends of Leckhampton Hill & Charlton King's Common [F.O.L.K.] might spoil the unique environment of this part of the Cotswolds.

Others fear that protection of this unique environment might be used to justify restrictions on the recreational activities that the people of Cheltenham and many visitors to the Hill & Common enjoy.

The struggle for access

We learned at F.O.L.K.'s first public meeting, in January, that the people of Cheltenham have fought long and, sometimes, hard for the right of access to the Hill. John Milner's talk gave us a fascinating history of the Hill.

The lengths to which Cheltenham Folk had gone to maintain their right of access between 1890 & 1929 staggered me. From the redoubtable Dorothy Beale, former Principal of Cheltenham College, who cancelled Dale's piano leasing contract with the College, because, as owner of the quarries on the Hill, he tried to restrict public access; through the mass trespasses of thousands of Cheltenham residents; to rioting, which culminated on two occasions with the raising to ground of the Quarry Foreman's house, Tramway Cottage!

It would be arrogant and ultimately futile for any organisation to set itself up to restrict access to this common land. Nevertheless, the enjoyment of different users of the Hill & Common have to be balanced with one another & the impact of users on this important natural habitat also has to be managed.

The impact of people on the Hill & Common

It has to be remembered that, like most of Britain's beautiful countryside, the Common & Hill are not 'natural' environments - they are very largely 'human-made'. From the Iron Age Fort at the top of Leckhampton Hill, to the quarrying that has gone on for at least two thousand years, or the grazing of livestock, people have shaped the land.

Even Cheltenham's most famous landmark, the Devil's Chimney, is not the beautiful product of natural weathering, such as may be found in the Brimstone Crags in Yorkshire, or the fantastic rock formations in Arizona. It is the product of quarrying & possibly even the quarrymen's bit of fun!

Natural Environment

Nonetheless, nature has re-colonised the area and developed new natural habitats. A large part of the Hill & Common is grassland of national significance because it is rare 'unimproved limestone grassland', which means that it has only ever been grazed and never ploughed. As a result the area has been designated as a 'Site of Special Scientific Interest' [SSSI] and is an important example of this type of habitat.

Unfortunately scrub [gorse & 'thorn trees'] is encroaching on this grassland. This scrub is good for neither people nor limestone grassland flora and fauna, although it is good for some birds and other animals. The extent of the scrub needs to be controlled and even cut back, to restore some of the grassland, but if it were removed completely it would destroy the habitats of some of the wildlife.

In this context, by 'grassland' we do not mean the well-manicured lawns of some Capability Brown inspired country parks. We do mean rough, open grassland. Even then, different lengths of grass provide habitats for different creatures and flowers. So the intention is not to create a uniform grassland, but to maintain as much bio-diversity as possible.

Conservation

This is the approach that will be seen in all F.O.L.K.'s conservation work. Even if F.O.L.K. had access to sufficient resources to clear all the scrub and woodland off the Hill - which we don't - this is not what we would want to do.

Where we clear scrub, or trees, we will not clear it all. We will leave significant patches of scrub and woodland for the wildlife that inhabits it. We will also create irregular edges to cleared areas, to make them appear as 'natural' as possible.

Equally important, significant scrub clearance will not be conducted during the main wildlife breeding seasons. Conservation work, such as path maintenance will continue throughout the year, but scrub clearance will cease at the end of March and not resume until the autumn, apart from clearing up after earlier cutting.

In some places, for example along the top of the scarp slopes, we will remove some of the trees and gorse to open up vistas across Cheltenham and the Vale of Evesham to the Malvern's. We have already started to open up the route of the Cotswold Way along the top of the Common, by cutting back the gorse, which was threatening to block the path.

Grassland

Similarly, where grass is cut, particularly to remove young gorse that is growing up through it, it will not all be cut to the same length, or at the same time. Instead 'islands' of uncut grass, or 'glades' of cut grass will be created. These will be varied from year to year, so that eventually much of the grassland will be restored, but not all at once, which would destroy some of the habitats.

Grazing, which maintained the grassland for many years, is considered by some as the best way to continue to maintain it. This is the method preferred by English Nature, but it would be extremely difficult and costly to implement, because of the need to fence large areas of the Hill and Common. Grazing may be considered as one way to maintain the grassland in some limited areas, or the more inaccessible parts of the Common - such as the Eastern scarp slope.

F.O.L.K. has no power to authorise, or prevent, grazing, or fencing on the Hill. That is the responsibility of Cheltenham Borough Council, who are owners & trustees of the land, in consultation with English Nature and any fencing of common land would also have to be approved by the Secretary of State.

However, F.O.L.K.'s Site Management Sub-Committee will consider any proposal for grazing very carefully and the Executive would consult the wider membership on any proposals to graze any parts of the Land.

Officers of C.B.C. have undertaken to take F.O.L.K.'s views into account before any decision is taken and they would be unwise to disregard the organisation that they helped to set up to represent the views of the widest number of users of the Hill & Common.

It may be worth pointing out that F.O.L.K. carries out all its conservation work in consultation with Cheltenham Borough Council. The work is also carried out in strict accordance with the Site Management Plan, prepared by the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust for the Council and the recommendations of English Nature, who are responsible for the S.S.S.I. The Site Management Plan is due to be updated soon and F.O.L.K. should have a significant input into the updating of the Plan.

Recreation

The Hill & Common have always been used by large numbers of people for recreation and continue to be used for a wide variety of activities, from rambling and dog walking, through horse riding, to mountain biking, hang-gliding and model aircraft flying. It is suitable for most forms of non-motorised activities and even motorised model aircraft cause little intrusion.

There will, inevitably be conflicts of interest between different groups of users, but it is one of F.O.L.K.'s stated objectives to seek to balance these differing interests as best as possible and mitigate the impact of recreational activities on the environment.

If you share these aims, we hope that you will not simply continue to enjoy the Hill & Common, but will join us in seeking to preserve it for present and future enjoyment.

Julius Marstrand F.O.L.K. Chairman



CONSERVATION

The picture on the left is of FOLK members in action on 28th January.

Working Parties

An article by Alan Wood

As I write this article in early March all our plans for conservation work on the hill in the near future are on hold due to the restrictions imposed by the outbreak of foot and mouth disease. This includes both work by F.O.L.K and the programme of work due to be carried out by Glebe Contractors in early March. It seems likely that any further large-scale clearance of scrub, which is basically a winter task, will now have to wait until later this year.

However all is not lost as we are planning to continue the work parties on the 4th Sunday in the months throughout the spring and summer subject to the restrictions being lifted. There will be both morning and afternoon sessions starting at 10:30am and 2:00pm, the dates are set out below.

The following work has been identified for attention during the period April to September. Footpath maintenance and stile repairs including limited control of scrub adjoining footpaths. Removal of young Ash seedlings, which are a problem in many areas and can be safely removed without disturbing wildlife at this time of year. Cutting and raking of small areas of grassland, and lastly the clearance of litter. The latter will require two sweeps of the hill in both spring and late summer.

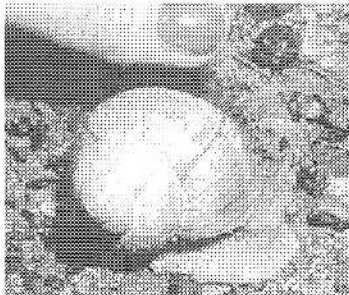
A big thank you to all those who turned out on the four winter work parties. We averaged 15.5 volunteers at these sessions. Please will you continue to bring tools as we have not yet had a reply to a grant application to enable us to purchase our own.

Newcomers are always welcome, no experience is required and you can work at your own pace for as long as you wish. We can also supply a limited number of tools.

Let us hope the 4th Sundays in the coming months are warm and dry and that the restrictions on access allow our work parties to go ahead. We will keep you updated as to the position through notices in the car parks and Village Voices in the Echo, or you can access our web site. If in any doubt please ring me on 01242 233116.

Dates arranged as follows:

All Sundays and meeting at Tramway Cottage car park 10:30 and 2:00pm. 22nd April, 27th May, 24th June, 22nd July, 26th August, 23rd Sept.



Slugs and Snails and Leckhampton Hill by David Long

Most people think of these creatures as pests that eat everything they try and grow, but in fact only a few of this group of animals, which are part of the natural decomposition cycle, are to blame for this reputation, and most of those have been introduced into this country by man. A fair number of snails and slugs have been recorded from Leckhampton Hill. This is not surprising because the upper part of the hill is limestone, and these animals depend on lime, in many cases to produce shells, but also for the covering of their eggs. Perhaps the species which most people notice between about late April and early September is the pale brown Roman Snail.

This is the largest snail living in Britain and most probably was introduced by the Romans, as there are no reliable earlier archaeological records. It is not common in Britain as it is only found the Cotswolds from about Guiting Power to south of the Stroud valley, and in chalk country, particularly the Chilterns and North Downs. Because it is local it should not be collected. It buries itself underground for the winter.

The rest of the molluscs on Leckhampton Hill represent a variety of loosely defined communities. Perhaps the most "historic" of these is the fauna of rock screes and short-turfed limestone grassland, because this includes elements of a community which established itself in southern Britain towards or just after the end of the last Ice Age, about 10000 years ago. Species of this group include the Heath Snail (scientific name *Helicella itala*) with a flat white shell, up to 20mm across with brownish banding, and the Large Chrysalis Snail (*Abida secale*) which is actually small, up to 8.5 mm long and looks like a grey or brownish small insect pupa. Their range on the hill is contracting as the vegetation gets generally longer, a trend which is not only local but widespread at least in England where many Heath Snail sites were lost in the last century, so sites in the Cotswolds where it persists are of wildlife conservation value.

Other molluscs present are generalists which can live almost anywhere, apart from arable, like the White and Brown-lipped Snails, both banded like old-fashioned humbugs and up to 20-25mm across, and a number of species which like leaf litter and are often minute like the small white Slender Herald Snail (*Carychium tridentatum*) which is white and about 2mm long and the Dwarf Snail (*Punctum pygmaeum*), Britain's smallest snail, up to 1.5mm across.

Some slugs and snails have turned up on the hill or its approaches because they have been transported about by man. The most recent arrival is the Worm Slug (*Boetgerilla pallens*), a very slender pale blue white animal, which spread across Europe from south east Europe and the Caucasus, was first noted in Britain in 1972, and was found (as a first record for Gloucestershire) on a road verge on the hill in 1983. It is usually found under stones and logs and does not seem to have become a pest.

Finally a bit of a mystery: the mainly central European "Thames door snail," so called because all current sites in Britain are by the Thames in or near London, was found by three people at "Leckhampton Hill" between 1848 and before 1913. Its scientific name is *Balea biplicata* and it has a spindle-shaped sharply ribbed shell about 18mm long, coiled so that the shell mouth is on the left side of the shell when you look at it - there are two similarly shaped shells on the hill but one is smooth and the other has very fine ribbing. The records are based on museum specimens, and I have never found it on or near the hill though I live in hope. Why a snail now confined in this country to Thames flood plain sites should turn up here is a mystery as the habitat here is so different but it was recorded up to about 1950 at a number of southern British sites, and one theory is that it may be an old accidental introduction.

HISTORY

Leckhampton Hill in 1863

A description of the Hill and its environs from a guidebook of that year which makes some very interesting reading.

A pleasant walk or drive along Bath Road for about 2 miles will bring the traveller to Leckhampton Turnpike Gate, at the foot of the hill. Continuing along the high-road a short distance up the hill, he will perceive, on his left, a rough bridle road leading to a path which is continued along the face of the cliff by a gradual ascent to the summit, which is 925 feet above the sea level. He will cross the steep tramway down which stone is conveyed from the quarry at the crest of the hill. This is effected by the rough, but simple, contrivance of a chain passing over and around a drum, and having a tumbrel attached to either end. By that means a laden waggon at the top of the hill, by its own weight during descent, is made to draw up an empty tumbrel, and thus check its own otherwise headlong speed down the incline. The pedestrian will likewise notice the broken and rugged appearance of the cliff in some places towering perpendicularly above him, and at intervals diversified with green slopes intermingled with the debris of the fallen cliff, tufts of grass, and numerous wild flowers and plants of varied form or hue, including wild thyme.

Arrived at the crest of the ridge the observer looks out over a landscape unequalled for its variety, beauty, and extent. The vale lies mapped out in all its loveliness, and the admirer of nature revels in all the diversified and beautiful objects which are here spread out before him. Within the boundary of the Cotswold and Malvern Hills lies a large range of country, for the most part perfectly level. Scattered over its surface are various villages and hamlets, in most instances marked out by the towers and spires of their churches as they peep out from among the neighbouring trees. Nothing can be finer than the picturesque succession of private residences and farmsteads, with thickly timbered parks, waving corn fields, and rich meadows, their fruitful orchards and well-trimmed hedgerows, which extend on either hand, and to a distance far beyond the power of vision, the repose and harmony of the scene being undisturbed save by the occasional passage of the railway train as it flits across the country between Gloucester and Cheltenham. Almost at the feet of the observer may be seen the retired village of Leckhampton, whose unpretending little church and elegantly tapering spire, may be discerned standing amidst the quiet resting places of the dead. A little to the right lies Cheltenham, a compact and extended mass of building where, unlike many towns whose brick and red tiled houses present a somewhat unsightly appearance, or others with tall chimneys, and volumes of black smoke which hangs like a thick pall over their streets, the large lines of handsome residences and stone-built houses render it a pleasing item in the picture.

To the geologist and fossilologist the quarries on the crest of the hill will afford ample scope for the practical exercise of his knowledge, for they abound in fossils. The botanist will also be gratified with the numerous wild flowers and plants indigenous to the neighbourhood.

Alan Gill

RECREATION



Since the last Newsletter at Christmas we were lucky enough to have an excellent covering of snow which lasted a few days. A great deal of fun was had by many people, with Daisy Bank field being used for what many see as its natural use!

The picture of the left is taken at the top end of Daisy Bank with the snow good enough to reach the stile at Pilford Road!

Unfortunately all other recreational activities are now on hold until the foot & mouth outbreak is brought under control.

And Finally.....

Don't forget that the web site now has a webcam page, that is updated weekly in the winter and daily in the summer. Some of the pictures have been a little strange recently, due to the restriction. But it can be a pleasant view from the top of a multi-storey car park in the centre of Cheltenham, looking towards The Hill!

Your committee has set a FOLK membership target of 500 by the end of this year. We have already broken the 200 barrier, and with your help we can reach the target. So please spread the word now that we are established, you can even join via the web site: <http://leckhamptonhill.homestead.com/FOLK.html>