



Friends of Leckhampton Hill & Charlton Kings Common

NEWSLETTER

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September 2002

DRAFT SITE MANAGEMENT PLAN PUBLISHED

The existing Site Management Plan [SMP] is now ten years old and at least five years out of date. The new SMP, paid for by Cheltenham Borough Council, will guide the management of Leckhampton Hill, Charlton Kings Common and Daisy Bank Fields for at least the next five years and sets the overall perspective for the foreseeable future.

A Steering Group, made up of the Council, English Nature, the Cotswold AONB and FOLK, and later joined by a representative of the County Archaeology Department, chose specialist environmental consultants Nortoft to write the SMP.

It should be stressed that none of Nortoft's recommendations have yet been implemented, so allegations that they were responsible for the geoconservation work on the Hill earlier in the year were false.

Nortoft were heavily influenced in the preparation of the SMP by a long process of consultation, including a large public meeting in March. They have received submissions from many of the groups and individuals with a particular interest in the Site, or specialist knowledge.

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*The views expressed in this newsletter do not necessarily reflect the views of the Executive Committee of F.O.L.K.
News, views and general comments are always welcomed and should be addressed to:-
The Hon. Secretary, Mr Jack Shepherd, Rainbow Cottage, Leckhampton Hill, Cheltenham, GL53 9QJ.*

WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO DATE?	WHAT IS PLANNED FOR THE FUTURE?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Council appointed Nortoft as the Management Consultants who have prepared the draft Site Management Plan.• 14th July Picnic celebrating 100th anniversary of Leckhampton Riots.• Executive committee continues to meet monthly.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• FOLK AGM Monday 21st October 2002.• Work Parties continue on a regular basis. Second Thursday each month – 9.30am Fourth Sunday each month – 9.30am Meet Tramway Cottage Car Park
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'Natural Wilderness'

Above all, the consultants recognised the desire, amongst virtually all of those who participated in the consultation process, that the Site would not be turned into another 'country park', with fences, neat paths and 'manicured' grassland, but should retain its natural 'wilderness' character.

Of course, the Site's current character is not purely natural. It is the result of nature interacting with people's influence on the landscape and the management of the Site for many different purposes over the years.

Nature being what it is, it is not possible for the Site to remain exactly as it is. It is constantly changing and, if simply left to itself, would gradually become a largely impenetrable wood and scrub land.

Above all, it would gradually lose its characteristic and ecologically important limestone grassland, and the flora and fauna that this supports. Nortoft also employed their own specialists to advise them on specific aspects of the Site, including some joint biology survey work with English Nature, a landscape architect to advise them on visual aspects of the site [not to design a 'country park'] and consulted the County Archaeologist and others. They also incorporated a large part of the geoconservation report that had been commissioned last year.

There were a series of meetings with the Steering Group to monitor progress on the report and ensure that the recommendations took proper account of the outcomes of the consultation process.

Controversial Issues

The consultants had to consider a number of controversial issues including:

- a) how best to conserve and restore more of the limestone grassland – whether this should include grazing and hence fencing, alongside mowing and manual brush-cutting;
- b) whether to include any further geoconservation work and, if so, to what extent;
- c) how best to reconcile the inevitable conflicts between recreational use and the delicate ecology of parts of the Site;
- d) how best to reduce conflicts between different users of the Site;
- e) how best to preserve the archaeology of the Site

This was never going to be an easy task and more importantly no recommendations could ever please everyone concerned.

However, the consultants have done an exceptional job of finding a balance between some of these conflicting interests. Whilst each one of us may disagree with the precise balance being suggested on any one particular point, hopefully, overall the right balance has been struck – but this is for the final public debate before the Site Management Plan is adopted by FOLK and the Council and forms the basis for future work on the Site.

FOLK's Influence

FOLK's Executive Committee also met with the consultants and discussed the contents of both an early draft and the final draft in great detail. As a result of these consultations and submissions from other organisations, the SMP has been significantly altered and improved during the process, particularly on some of the potentially most controversial points, like those mentioned above.

FOLK's Executive Committee is made up of members with a wide spectrum of interest in Leckhampton Hill & Charlton Kings Common, from those who are primarily interested in the ecology, to those who, whilst also interested in the ecology, use the Site primarily for recreation, representing a broad cross-section of users of the Site.

Despite this and as a result of some of the changes made to the Site Management Plan during the consultation process, the Committee reached a large measure of consensus over the Plan.

An Historical Document

The result is an extremely comprehensive background and appraisal of the Site, both historically and as it is today. As such it is an historical document in itself. But it is much more than that – it is a working framework that will influence the whole future of the Site.

Following some significant changes to the final draft, FOLK's Executive Committee now feels able to commend the whole Plan to FOLK members and other users of the Site.

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The final draft Plan runs to over 300 pages, so it would be too expensive to produce lots of hard copies. Copies of the Plan can be viewed by the public at the Council's Planning Department, local libraries around Cheltenham in Clarence Street; Church Piece, Charlton Kings; Goldsmith Road, Hester's Way; Safeway Centre, Caernarvon Road; The Burgage, Prestbury; Back Lane, Winchcombe; the North Cotswolds mobile library and the Green Environment Office.

For those who have access to the Internet, a copy of the Plan will be accessible [in PDF format] via either FOLK or CBC's websites.

Final Public Consultation

There will now be a period of public consultation before the Plan is put to FOLK's AGM on Monday 21st October and the Council's Cabinet Committee shortly afterwards.

Hopefully, if the Plan is accepted, everyone involved, including FOLK, will use it to guide the future management of the Site.

Julius Marstrand
FOLK Chairman

100 Years on FOLK Celebrates Anniversary



Left to Right: Mayor Ken Buckland; Allan Wood; Annette North; Edward Smith; Shirley Wood; John-Paul North [in period costume]; Frances Meredith; Mayoress Mrs Buckland.

On Sunday 14th July FOLK celebrated the 100th Anniversary of one of the Cheltenham riots that took place on 15th July 1902 with a walk and picnic. The riot was one of a series of riots and mass trespasses by residents of Cheltenham, which pre-dated the Ramblers famous mass trespass on Kinder Scout by nearly 30 years! The rioters & trespassers were protesting at the closure of rights of way over the Hill by the quarry owner Mr Dale.

Local residents have always looked upon Leckhampton Hill & Charlton Kings Common as 'their Hill' and restricting public access to the site proved desperately unpopular. Even the indomitable Dorothy Beale, Principal of Cheltenham Ladies College, protested at her 'gels not being allowed to take their constitucionals on the Hill' by cancelling a

contract that the College had to lease 11 pianos from a music store also owned by Mr Dale.

On two occasions, including the 1902 riot, the quarry foreman's house, 'Tramway Cottage' was razed to the ground! Several of the rioters were arrested and served time in Gloucester jail for their part in the riots.

In glorious sunshine, the celebration was attended by the Mayor of Cheltenham, Councillor Buckland & the Lady Mayoress. Also amongst those present were two of the great-great grandchildren of Tom Field, who was one of the participants in the original riots, John-Paul and Annette North.

John-Paul wore a bowler hat, trousers, braces, shirt and cane (and even grew a moustache especially for the occasion) that was typical of the dress worn by the rioters & seen in a photograph of the rioters sitting on top of the ruins of 'Tramway Cottage' at the time.

Some of the picnickers walked up from 'Tramway Cottage' to the memorial plaque, commemorating one of the rioters, on top of the Hill, and other members of FOLK & friends joined in the picnic above Deadman's Quarry.

DOWN MEMORY LANE

CORONATION BEACON

Early in 1953, we, in Leckhampton Scouts, were invited to join with other organisations in the Village in building a BEACON ON THE HILL. The first working party assembled on Saturday, 11th April at Nicholls Garage, Leckhampton Road, for transport to Witcombe Woods (along the side of the road just past Birdlip), where Major Hicks-Beech, M.P., had given us permission to fell 96 young trees – a mixture of beech and ash. (I have some photographs of this.) This work, which was done without the aid of chainsaws or other modern methods, took two weekends, and all the timber was transported to the top of the Hill.

The next stage was for brushwood. Some of our senior readers may remember a wooden five bar gate at the side of Tower Lodge (this Alf Bendall, our Fount of Knowledge, told us used to be an Ale House). On going through the gate, a wide track with a hedge each side went down to meet the junction of paths for the Court and The Close, and cutting these twin hedges took us three painful weeks of evenings and weekends to clear. Having piled all this material up by the Trig Point (having been transported there by Sharpe & Fisher's lorry), the technical programme started. It took another three weeks to erect what looked like a double thickness scaffold tower – the gap being stuffed with all the brushwood we could lay our hands on, and the centre left hollow with a ladder fixed to one side and a straw rope hanging down the middle. The idea being the bottom of the rope would be lit, the fire would burn up the rope to the top, and the Beacon would then burn from the top down. Just to make sure – the whole thing was then dowsed with 120 gallons of old gear oil, 15 gallons of paraffin and 10 gallons of old cellulose thinners.

As a precaution the older Scouts spent the last three nights and four days in the old hut which used to be just inside the wall at the end of the tarmac. This proved to be a necessary precaution, when three youths on motor bikes arrived intending to have a rehearsal and see if the beacon would burn!

When the time came to light the Beacon, nature took charge. In pouring rain and a howling gale, the straw rope when lit got blown against the side and the whole thing went up in a sheet of flame.

I have some photographs of working parties, but if anyone has a photograph of the complete Beacon before and after lighting, I wonder if I could borrow them to have a copy made for my record.

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Tony Clifford	Judy Frazer-Holland
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Tony Meredith	Allan Wood
	Co-opted Sue Barrett

A DATE FOR YOUR DIARY

The
Annual General Meeting
of
Friends of Leckhampton Hill
and
Charlton Kings Common
will be held on
Monday 21st October 2002 at 7pm
in Leckhampton School, Hall Road,
Leckhampton.

All Welcome

Work Party Report

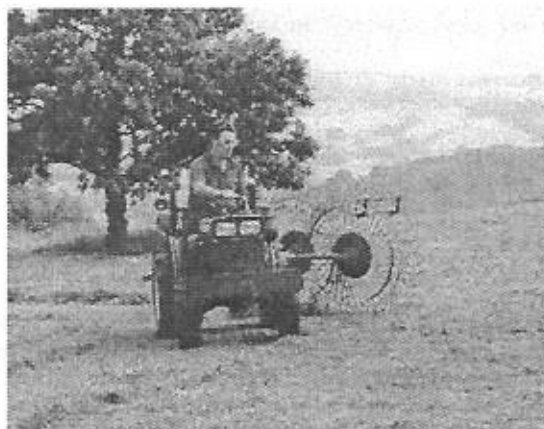


Our summer programme of work was unfortunately disrupted due to problems with our insurance cover, resulting in the loss of 3 work parties. Since resuming, we have concentrated on litter and footpath clearance and ragwort pulling. However, the numbers attending on these occasions have been disappointing, but hopefully will improve after the holiday season. We do need your help in the coming months.

This wagonload of ragwort, collected from a relatively small area, demonstrates what happens if it is left unchecked.

Visitors to the hill will notice that Cheltenham Borough Council have replaced the gates giving access to the hill top from Brownstone Quarry car park. These replace gates vandalised some months ago and will improve access for conservation work, and with further improvements may facilitate wheelchair access.

We have improved the access for machinery to the grassland above Charlton Kings Common enabling us to cut, bale and remove a crop of hay. This involved the relocation of about 70 metres of rabbit fencing to adjoin the boundary wall. When this area was cut last year, the grass was collected by hand and had to be burnt on site, a process we do not wish to repeat. This programme of annual cutting in late summer will prevent the encroachment of bramble and rank grass, and encourage more wild flowers native to limestone grassland, and so provide an improved habitat for butterflies and insects.



Looking ahead to the autumn and winter programme, we will concentrate on conserving existing areas of grassland by preventing further encroachment of scrub. There are many small areas that require our attention. No large areas of work by contractors are anticipated. With this type of work in mind, the Committee are looking at the possibility of grants to enable us to purchase a heavy self-propelled brush-cutter / mower, to complement our hand held brush cutters. This is all very labour intensive work and we do need your support on the work parties shown below:-

Midweek Work Parties

Thursday October 10th 2002
Thursday November 14th 2002
Thursday December 12th 2002
Thursday January 9th 2003

Weekend Work Parties

Sunday October 27th 2002
Sunday November 24th 2002
Sunday December 22nd 2002
Sunday January 26th 2003

Allan Wood

Biodiversity on the Hill

One of the marvellous things about Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common is the biodiversity. The range of habitats includes bare rock, rock crevices, dry-stone walls, scree, grassland of different kinds, hedgerows, different types of scrub, mixed woodland, planted conifer woodland and climax beech woodland. There are sunny and shady slopes, relatively flat areas, sheltered and very exposed sites. This range of habitats has all been effected by human interventions over thousands of years.

Before early human beings came along and cleared the area by cutting and burning, it is likely that the upper parts of the Hill were covered with beech woodland which is the natural climax community on thin calcareous soils in southern England.

In fact human activity has given rise to a sub-climax community – grassland. This sub-climax community can remain relatively stable given the consistent application of a limiting factor such as grazing. Many flowering plants are well adapted to this situation and provide food for moths, butterflies, birds and mammals.

Grassland can also be maintained by mowing and burning. However, unless these operations are carried out carefully and at the right time, they can have damaging effect on biodiversity by interrupting the life cycles of animals and plants.

Succession

Grazing and quarrying activities ceased on the Hill many years ago and where mowing and cutting have not taken place nature has taken over. This natural process of succession has steadily developed and without proper management the end result over many decades will be the re-establishment of mixed woodland and beech wood throughout. Where the soils are deeper the oak will become the dominant tree.

Primary succession starts on bare rock and rock crevices with hardy pioneer plants, including lichens, algae and mosses. These help to break down the rock surfaces. When these plants die, they contribute humus to the developing soil which also contains weathered rock particles and wind blown material from elsewhere. Gradually the soil builds up allowing the growth of higher plants such as grasses and other flowering plants. This grassland habitat provides for a complex food web which includes earthworms, molluscs, insects, spiders, reptiles, birds and mammals. You can see early stages in primary succession in the quarries, especially Brownstone Quarry behind the car park right at the top of the Hill.

The next stage in succession is the development of scrub. Thorny bushes such as bramble, gorse, hawthorn and blackthorn begin to grow among the grasses and thrive, protected as they are by their spines and prickles. Once established, these plants are left well alone by many grazing animals and, over several years, the density of scrub increases. Scrub affords shelter and food for birds and other animals. Scrub also affords protection for pioneer trees such as ash, hazel and willows, the saplings of which are now out of the reach of the larger grazing animals. These trees eventually grow taller than the surrounding scrub, out-shade it and start the process of forming a mixed woodland. Many areas of the Hill support a mixture of ash, willows and hazel trees.

Eventually beech trees arrive with their shallow rooting system, superior height and longevity. The dense canopy of their leaves finally out-shades other trees and beech become the dominant plant in the climax woodland community. Some shade tolerant plants such as Dog's Mercury, Wood Sanicle and Wood Violets, can grow and flower early in the Spring, before the dense canopy of beech leaves excludes the light needed for photosynthesis.

Natural mixed and beech woodland have trees of different ages. When the older trees die, sunny glades form allowing other trees and sun loving flowering plants to survive for a while. The dead trees provide food and niches for a whole range of invertebrates and the animals which prey upon them.

We are fortunate to have all these types of habitat on the Hill. The grassland is the most vulnerable as it is continually being encroached upon by scrub. Nevertheless, some scrub should be seen as important in its own right, as it supports a wide range of birds, mammals and invertebrates. Many animals and plants also survive well in the transition areas between grassland, scrub and woodland.

If we are to sustain a rich biodiversity on the Hill, we must manage the site carefully to provide for a natural mosaic of all these different habitats. But we must not forget that it is the calcareous grassland which represents the rarest habitat and the one reason the Hill has the status of a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

Jack Shepherd

September 2002