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Friends of the Downs

AG

Avon Gorge

**Bristol's Undervalued Inheritance ; The Downs and
Avon Gorge**

Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge

Executive Summary

Position Paper - The first Three Years

Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge - August 2011

Bristol's Undervalued Inheritance: The Downs and Avon Gorge

We, the Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge, are particularly proud and privileged to be playing our part in the protection and maintenance of what is clearly a unique urban space in the UK. But our long-term ambition is to move from the protective, sustaining role that we currently have towards one of promotion and wider recognition of this distinctive space. Greater understanding of the area by its users will then generate the pride and respect that will secure its iconic status within the city and beyond.

So what makes the Downs and the Gorge so important an asset for the city, so interesting for its citizens, and so in need of careful husbanding and support? Bristol is blessed with numerous parks and green spaces for recreation and rest, but the Downs and Gorge are both and neither at the same time.

As a place for recreation it is enjoyed by uncountable numbers of visitors throughout the day and the year. Tourists, from all parts of the world, taking in the spectacular views over the Gorge join local joggers, kite flyers, footballers, strollers, and bird watchers. They can do this because the Downs is not a park with fences and gates. It is freely available any time of the day or night with a minimum of restrictive rules as to the conduct of visitors. While there is the inevitable abuse of this freedom, the majority of users respect and appreciate what the area has to offer and leave it as they find it. Nevertheless, a constant vigilance has to be maintained, to prevent unacceptable levels of spoiling by the general public and, to preserve a balance between loss, or damage, of amenity and the legitimate needs of public services.

As an understanding of the area deepens then its pleasures become richer and more rewarding. The "green space" of the Downs is varied and complex. Open cut grass, meadows, scrub and wooded areas provide different habitats for insects, birds and mammals and interest for the casual observer or serious naturalist. The Gorge allows for more adventurous scrambling in wilder terrain and serious climbing for those with a head for heights. For the botanist it is home for a globally unique flora and as such is recognised as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). It is therefore not surprising that many schools use the whole space as an important extension to the classroom and that the nearby University Botanical Garden reproduces the Downs' meadows and the Gorge's rocky habitats where its internationally unique and important flora are displayed.

But what the Downs and Avon Gorge offer today's visitors is but the result of a long and multifaceted history. In contrast to its current role in providing mainly recreation, its past has been much more chequered. For Iron Age inhabitants it was home, for the Romans a point to cross to somewhere more important, mediaeval bristolians cultivated it for food, and in more recent times it has been mined for minerals and quarried for rock to build the city.

Even its recreational history has evolved and we no longer have horse racing or bear baiting, and organised cricket has given way to a football league. Fortunately the spectacle of a public hanging has no modern parallel.

One of FODAG's aims is to make visitors to the Downs and Gorge more aware of all that this vast area has to offer in terms of physical and intellectual entertainment and stimulus. The Downs would then become even more a place of pride for the city and an important addition to the many attractions it has to offer for residents and tourists alike.

There is clearly a need for long-term continuity and consistency of approach towards achieving aims and objectives for the future of the area. Having been agreed between all the various associated interest groups, a strong and independent FODAG would then act as both driving force for any improvements and guardian of the inheritance bequeathed to the city.

Ultimately FODAG would hope to raise the profile of the Downs and Avon Gorge both locally, nationally and internationally to be at least on a par with that of the engineering heritage left by Brunel. To do that requires that we grow our membership and gain the support of as many individuals and organisations as possible.

R.M.G August 2011

Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge

The First three Years

Executive Summary

This paper outlines the formation and structure of FODAG, its achievements in the first three years, current developments, relationships with other interest groups and the challenges for the future.

- The creation of FODAG is set within the context of the nature of the Downs and Gorge and its large and varied profile of users. (Page 1)
- The consequent challenges for a relatively small group of friends are discussed. (p 2)
- An analysis of the various user groups reveals 6 broad categories viz. Recreation and education, organised fundraisers, service providers, Bristol City authorised groups, commercial enterprises and commuters. (p 2)
- FODAG was created at the request of BCC but retains its own independent existence (p 3)
- The committee structure and its sub-groups reflect the identification of main areas of importance and interest that have emerged viz. Natural, visual and physical environments (p 3)
- The aims of FODAG and subsequent assessment criteria are articulated and essentially seek to enhance, and deepen understanding of, the several environments and to provide independent, argued and evidence based commentaries on all aspects of Downs use. (p 4)
- FODAG produces a quarterly Newsletter and is currently working the development of a website (p 4)
- An important part of its activities is for FODAG to develop good working relationships with other interest groups and organisations that surround the Downs, or represent specific user groups (p 5)
- Over the short lifetime of FODAG a remarkable portfolio of work has been undertaken
 - Six regular activities include deep litter collections, and wildlife surveys (p 5-6)
 - 13 reports and position papers have been produced and include reports on the vegetation management of Clifton Camp ramparts, the Zoo overflow parking, the GBBN proposals for public transport and suggestions for events to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the 1861 Act of Parliament (p 5-6)
- Other future activities include addressing such issues as cycling on the Downs and the possibility of gaining Heritage Site Status for the Downs and Gorge. (p 7)
- The challenges for the future includes expanding membership and relationships with other like minded groups to thus gain access to a greater pool of volunteers to carry out essential work, a wider range of expertise that can be brought to bear on issues, and a broader representation of user interests. (p 7)

Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge

Position Paper: the first three years

Preamble

This document provides an overview of the history, structure, policy positions and activities of the Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge (FODAG), together with a summary of its current activities and relationship with other organisations.

Context

The creation of such a group as FODAG required some consideration as to what constitutes the Downs¹ and who the users are.

The Clifton Downs were originally owned by the Society of Merchant Venturers, but were given to the public and protected by an Act of Parliament in 1861. Included in this act were the adjacent Durdam Downs purchased from the Lords of the Manor of Henbury and the resulting 400 acres are now free for the recreational use of Bristol's citizens within the minimal restrictions as laid down in the current Bye Laws.

The Downs and Gorge can be characterised as an open space largely free of fixed or mobile man-made structures, offering a variety of natural habitats; open mowed grassland, meadows, woods, scrub and cliffs together with sites and structures of historical/archaeological interest and importance, making the Downs a Site of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCI) The natural habitats of the Gorge also include a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), holding a unique collection of plants, and is designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

The area therefore, confronts a group of Friends with a rather different set of challenges than are usually encountered by similar, more traditional Friends groups. These latter are more likely to be concerned with supporting the clearly defined work of an institution, such as a gallery, museum, or botanical garden. Thus they are working with an existing organisation with its own management structure, income stream, fairly well defined interest group of visitors and within a well defined relatively small space or building with limited access points. While all of these aspects exist as far as the Downs are concerned they are nevertheless much less well defined. Management is through the Downs Committee to which City Council officers report; income is limited from the Council with little scope for independent fund raising; the space is vast, open at all times and its boundaries are completely porous to a user group of very large numbers and who are hugely varied in their expectations as to what the facility has to offer them.

A major challenge for FODAG in recruitment is that other Friends groups can offer incentives to their members with free entrance to functions etc. FODAG has very limited opportunities in this respect.

¹ The term Downs will be used to include the Gorge unless otherwise stated

For a necessarily small group of Friends, in comparison to the numbers of users, any attempt at representation, in any meaningful sense, of such a varied set of interests is highly problematic. The best that can be hoped for is that FODAG can act as a conduit for opinions, which it has already undertaken on behalf of people concerned about nuisance dogs and/or irresponsible owners and of runners, as well as working to encourage reciprocal involvement in the protection of the Downs. Nevertheless, it is still necessary for as wide a constituency as possible to be tapped into, hence the suggestions below for web consultation and strengthened relationships with other groups.

It is worthwhile nevertheless, trying to describe the users. Accepting that they include people of all ages, both sexes and differently abled, the users would seem to fall into six broad bands.

Recreational and educational users

- *Strollers* – pedestrians, wheelchair users and pushchairs. It should also be noted that many in this category will be tourists from outside the city.
- *Exercisers* – runners, footballers, cyclists, rock climbers
- *Hobbyists* – birdwatchers, kite flyers
- *Educational groups* – formally organised trips e.g. schools; informal meetings e.g. organised scrambles on the cliffs; individuals e.g. lichen trail.

Organised fund raising

- These would include such events as the prostate and breast cancer sponsored runs.

Service providers and their clients

- Toilets, café, ice cream vans, pie stall.

Bristol City authorised users

- e.g. circus, fair, flower show, firework displays.

Commercial enterprises

- Caravan fair, camping equipment display, overspill parking for the Zoo.

Commuters

- Not strictly users perhaps but who “use” the Downs as a means of accessing other places or simply as a free parking zone.

Each of these groups will have its own expectations of what the Downs should provide. They will also have their own distinctive impacts on the visual, physical and natural aspects of the Downs, together with their resultant economic impacts, both positive and negative.

While FODAG has to be cognisant of the characteristic needs of all these groups, in terms of preserving and improving their experience, it is probably with the first group that it is primarily concerned, while taking into account the needs of the others and monitoring the effects of their impact on the area. As such therefore, FODAG is

concerned to recognise the rights of the various users, but also recognises the responsibilities that accompany these apparent rights.

History

FODAG was created at the request of Bristol City Council (BCC) in February 2008 as a means of enhancing an application for Green Flag recognition of the Downs and Gorge areas, but with a view to providing an additional forum whereby the views of Downs users could be discussed and represented to other interested parties, and general support provided in the upkeep, preservation and use of these open spaces. While FODAG has a life of its own it still responds to formal requests from BCC

The initial group was identified at a meeting with BCC. Initial tasks included the drawing up of a constitution, the formation of a committee and the recruitment of a body of friends to represent as far as possible the wide range of interests of the various users of the Downs and Gorge spaces. This has resulted in a number of outcomes.

Committee Structure

Membership of the committee is approved at the Annual General Meeting providing a quorate attendance of voting members is present.

The Chairman, supported by the Secretary and Treasurer, leads the Committee. The other members form subgroups each with a convener to address specific issues viz.

- Natural Environment
- Visual Environment
- Physical Environment

While these subgroups undertake and organise studies, surveys and other activities, it is recognised that they are interrelated and suggestions made by any one group has a potential impact on the others. Thus all reports and position papers are scrutinised by all members of the committee and endorsed by general consensus or, if necessary a majority vote with a casting chair vote, before they are formally adopted by FODAG.

Committee meetings are held at least 6 times a year.

Aims

Whilst considering the competing rights and responsibilities of the various groups of users, as discussed above, FODAG has developed a set of general aims as a guide when assessing or analysing issues that might be of concern to the whole user community

FODAG aims to,

- initiate, promote, support, and conduct activities that will

- enhance the overall and several distinct environments within the Downs
- deepen understanding of the history, natural history and evolving social use of the area.
- provide argued and, where appropriate and possible, evidence based commentaries and position papers, as and when requested, on all aspects of Downs use; both long term issues or as contemporary needs arise.

Assessment criteria

Further to this FODAG has developed a set of criteria to be applied when carrying out these aims and when considering the competing rights and responsibilities of the various Downs users viz.

- Use of the Downs must be compatible and sympathetic to
 - the natural environment and historical heritage
 - other accepted uses both on the Downs and adjoining areas.

If a series of actions or a competing number of options are identified an attempt is made to put them into some order of priority or of urgency and/or desirability. Relevant criteria are established and, together with the aims, options are tested and ranked according to their performance against these criteria.

Means of communication

Communication with the whole membership is effected through

- a quarterly *newsletter* which provides
 - Chairman's comments
 - Notice board of forthcoming events
 - Reports on items of current interest
 - Reports on new initiatives
 The newsletter, for members only, is available in hard copy or via e-mail and invites comments and discussion.
- A newly designed *website* provides information on all current activities of the Committee, an archive of activities undertaken, position papers and links to related associations of interest to Downs users. In the interests of gaining wider representation of views it is hoped to develop a means of on-line communication whereby all members will be able to comment on any position papers or actions being proposed by the committee on their behalf e.g. representations to BCC or the Downs committee
- The *AGM* is held in late autumn and in addition to the standard report by the chairman and treasurer, key activities by the various sub-groups are presented in largely visual forms.

Relationship to other social and community groups

FODAG aims to foment good working relationships with a wide variety of interest groups and organisations that surround the Downs, and that have specialist interests in using the Downs, and who might have particular expertise that can be called upon from time to time. Those organisations with whom FODAG currently have contact

include the Bristol Zoo and its Friends group, the University of Bristol Botanical Gardens and its Friends group, adjoining residents associations, Avon wildlife and other similar groups, RSPB, and National monitoring groups such as those for butterflies and mammals. Other groups where fruitful links might be forged include, Rotarians, Lions Club, Cycling organisations, runners, climbers and the soccer league.

To widen the variety of views available to FODAG it is proposed that official representation at the AGM be offered to all these interest groups. For the right to speak at the AGM it is proposed that reciprocal arrangements be made available to a FODAG representative, that there be free interchange of, and comment on, relevant policy papers and full AGM Voting rights afforded upon payment of an associate subscription, or other qualifying donation to a single representative of each organisation so affiliated.

It should be noted at this point that two local Residents Associations and three Neighbourhood Partnerships have made substantial financial donations to FODAG and should be immediately offered representation and voting rights at the AGM. (Where there might be overlapping membership it should be made clear that a non FODAG person represents the other organisation.)

Activities and events undertaken

A range of activities has been undertaken in the last three years. These might be described as providing the backbone of the group's activities in that they present opportunities for members to meet socially and undertake tasks of intrinsic value for themselves and/or the community. As part of a drive towards increasing membership and forging a greater sense of belonging to FODAG, it might be of value to think how activities might be increased.

To date they include

- On-going *deep litter collections* carried out on the last Saturday of the month, autumn to spring and avoiding the nesting season.
- Two regular *butterfly transects* are walked on the Downs and Gorge throughout the summer and details fed to the national survey
- A similar *mammal survey* is to be conducted
- *Monitoring the feral goats* to be introduced to the Gorge will be undertaken
- Occasional Gorge *scrambles, guided walks* of the meadows and *history walks*.
- Supplementary *educational/entertainment* events take place so as to afford members an approximately monthly programme of activities.

Position statements and discussion documents

A number of position statements and discussion documents have been produced with the former representing the current policy of FODAG. With the advent of the Website a FODAG house style for reports is currently being developed.

To date the reports produced include

- Vegetation management of Clifton Camp ramparts
 - *Conclusions*: Four options provided

- *Status:* with Downs management committee
- Commuter parking
 - *Status:* discussion document or position paper
- Access and movement
 - *Status:* provisional position paper
- Zoo overspill parking
 - *Conclusions:* Time limited support, no overall damage to downs, recommended improvements to Zoo access path.
 - *Status:* Action by Downs committee and Zoo resulting in the upgrading of the access path.
- Public transport
 - Comments on the proposed GBBN proposals as they relate to the Downs
 - *Conclusions:* After survey of traffic and pedestrian use of Parry's Lane and Roman Road, FODAG felt that both options should be regarded as being outside the scope of the GBBN proposals. Short, medium and long-term options were suggested for their development. It was further proposed that alternatives to road widening should be considered for Stoke road traffic flow improvements and suggestions made as to what these might be.
 - *Status:* Presented to Downs Committee and paper forwarded to the GBBN committee.
- Physical environment
 - *Status:* discussion paper
- Cycling on the Downs
 - *Conclusions:* five proposals for present and future use and a draft code of conduct..
 - *Status:* Discussion paper
- Bridge Valley Road, Bridge
 - Proposal for design competition being investigated.
- Running and its impact on the fabric and conservation of the Downs
 - *Status:* Under consideration.

Responses to events and proposals affecting the Downs or its access

Responses have been made to Council or other party proposals that will have an impact on the Downs and/or its users. To date these are

- zonal parking scheme
- suggestions put to Downs Committee for events to celebrate 150 years of 1861 Act of Parliament
- Avon Gorge Management Plan
- "Up and Running" proposal for developing facilities for runners.

Proposed future activities

Currently FODAG is engaged in organising events to celebrate 150 years of Downs Act.

A number of other issues would seem to be in need of addressing and they include:

- Evolving social use of the downs, to include such things as metal detecting, running, and barbeques.
- Scrutiny of the Byelaws to include any suggestions for changes and how they might be effectively policed.
- Changing role between public and private ownership, particularly in the light of the current proposals to sell off publicly owned forests, and how the downs might be affected.
- Investigating the possibility of gaining Heritage Site Status for the Downs

The challenges for the future include expanding the membership and relationships with like-minded groups. This is essential, as it will increase the pool of volunteers to further facilitate carrying out essential work such as the deep litter collections and animal surveys, and to enable FODAG to expand its range of activities. By having more members and affiliations with other groups the range of expertise that can be brought to bear on the varied issues and concerns that FODAG could deal with will also be expanded. Furthermore, a broader representation of users interests will be enhanced adding to the legitimacy of any FODAG statements and positions.

R.M.Garrett February 2011

This document and its executive summary were submitted to the FODAG Committee and accepted. 20th April 2011

FOD+AG
42 Lower Redland Road
Redland
BRISTOL BS6 6ST