

Britain in Bloom South West Pride in Parks Award 2022

Troopers Hill Local Nature Reserve

Author: Susan Acton-Campbell, Chair, Friends of Troopers Hill, 3rd July, 2022

Troopers Hill is a Local Nature Reserve in St George, east Bristol, extending over 21 acres (8.4 hectares) of acid heath and grassland on a pennant sandstone hillside overlooking the River Avon. This wild and romantic site supports rare plants and wildlife and provides local people with a space for relaxation and recreation.

This document takes the Britain in Bloom South West Parks and Open Spaces Assessment criteria and gives evidence of how those criteria are met by Troopers Hill Local Nature Reserve.

1. Community

In the 19 years of Friends of Troopers Hill's existence we have held over 150 events, excluding conservation work parties and Walking for Health walks. We have raised over £300,000 for works and activities on Troopers Hill. This makes the site attractive for further investment by grant funders and encourages Bristol City Council, the landowner, to use their resources to follow the Troopers Hill conservation management plan. The Friends work in close partnership with Bristol City Council.

We only undertake projects that have a high level of backing from the local community. Our Ways to Nature project, www.troopers-hill.org.uk/waystonature/ started with a consultation in 2017. This resulted in an enquiry to the Heritage Lottery Fund, followed by a full application in 2018 for £44,800 under the "Our Heritage" scheme. The grant has paid for new fencing and gates to replace the preceding rotting fences and gates that were the only barrier to motorbikes. It also funded £10,000 of conservation work spread over 3 winters from 2018-2020/21 following the recommendations of a new conservation management plan, also paid for by the grant. A fungi interpretation board, an invertebrates survey, guided walks and activities in 2019, including 4 outdoor education sessions for adults with learning difficulties were all supported by this grant.

Local councillors supported us in our bid for £15,000 to be allocated from developers' contributions to Bristol City Council. This money was then used as match-funding to apply to a landfill trust for two grants, providing in total the sum of £62,500 for work on paths, also part of the Ways to Nature project. Phase 1 of the paths, was completed in October 2020, helping a wide section of the community including people with mobility issues and families with children in buggies to access the Hill all year round. It has also improved access for Bristol City Council vehicles emptying dog bins and carrying out routine maintenance such as grass-cutting. An unexpected result is that local children are now using the paths to safely learn to cycle. Phase of the paths was completed in May of this year. <http://www.troopers-hill.org.uk/plan.htm#THpath>

Local people were very sad at the end of 2019 when a much-loved slide on Troopers Hill Field had to be removed for safety reasons as it had come to the end of a 40-year life. When asked what they wanted instead there was a clear response of "a slider". Our crowdfunding initiative combined with a successful grant application to the Istock Enover Trust has raised the money needed to install a new slide and safety surfacing. Installation work was carried out at the end of August 2021 into September and a celebration held in October. More about the project on <http://www.troopers-hill.org.uk/field.htm#RedSlide>

The Friends usually hold 5 or 6 meetings a year, locally advertised and open to all, to discuss plans for the future and review what has been done; during the pandemic this changed to Zoom meetings. Our members have asked that these continue through the coming year so we are holding 4 "drop in" gazebo sessions, offering chalk to budding artists so ensure we still have face to face contact with people using Troopers Hill.

We work very closely with the landowners, Bristol City Council.

A free emailing list is maintained and updates sent to our followers. The Friends of Troopers Hill maintain an informative and regularly updated website www.troopers-hill.org.uk plus "@troopershill" Twitter and Facebook pages. There are clip frames on welcoming signs at the Hill's entrances that are used to share news and promote forthcoming events and activities.

A record of all volunteer nature conservation work parties on Troopers Hill is maintained on www.troopers-hill.org.uk/workp.htm and links are posted on Facebook and Twitter. Two to three work parties are held per month. Work parties are another opportunity for sharing news and feedback on possible plans.

Funding has been found to pay for ParkWork <http://www.bristolparksforum.org.uk/parkwork/> to carry out conservation work on Troopers Hill for ½ a day a month. This scheme provides training and skills development for those people needing additional support to secure permanent employment. Volunteers from the general public can also come to these sessions. During the pandemic ParkWork has been able to continue running sessions for City of Bristol College students.

Our free events are made as varied as possible to appeal to many tastes while always carrying the message of the importance of the site and the need to care for it. These events were restricted during the pandemic but have been able to include a Zoom poetry workshop, an art competition and virtual self-guided walks. This year we have run walks ranging from a Dawn Chorus to a history walks and 2 'drop in' gazebo sessions with displays of our work and free chalk for budding artists. Details of future and records of all our previous events can be accessed via <http://www.troopers-hill.org.uk/events.htm>.

Since the play area that we raised £80,000 to create was opened in October 2016 on Troopers Hill Field, we have seen larger numbers of families, particularly with young children, visiting the Hill and in addition to the young boys that were already seen on the Hill we now have visits from more girls. This became even more popular during the pandemic.

The Bristol Astronomical Society (BAS) supported the site to receive a "Dark Sky Discovery Site" designation www.troopers-hill.org.uk/DarkSky/ meaning that this is a good place to visit for star and planet watching, relatively protected from light pollution and with a good horizon. BAS work with us providing an annual winter star gazing event and a solar observation session in August. Sadly weather conditions were not good enough for a star gazing session to be provided this year but we are looking forward to a solar observation session in August.

We are particularly proud of our audio trail, put together by our volunteer Kit Elliott, a professional cameraman and sound recordist, which makes Troopers Hill come alive even to those who cannot visit it or see it.

The accessibility of Troopers Hill, by virtue of its rugged nature, is limited but is to the level approved of by the Bristol Physical Access Chain, a local group who assess accessibility. We were delighted to follow their suggestions to improve and add to signage along the wheelchair accessible route.

Details of all Troopers Hill trails, which also include a tree trail and a woodland trail, can be downloaded via www.troopers-hill.org.uk/trails.

We have supported the national "Future Proofing Parks" project involving young people in green spaces. As a result of the "Young Rangers" <http://www.troopers-hill.org.uk/young.htm> initiative we have an Instagram account and ran a successful art competition as well as having welcome assistance at our work parties.

Our group has been awarded a level of "Outstanding" in the RHS "It's Your Neighbourhood" scheme for the years 2012-21. A summary of our aims and achievements on Troopers Hill for the year 2022, produced for the IYN judge can be read on <http://troopers-hill.org.uk/achievements2022.pdf>

2. Maintenance and Development

All work on Troopers Hill follows the new 10-year management plan, dating from 2019 www.troopers-hill.org.uk/plan.htm developed for the site by Wessex Ecological Consultancy with input from Bristol City Council in partnership and Friends of Troopers Hill. This plan links to the relevant sections of the UK and Bristol Biodiversity Action Plans. The latter is supported by bodies including Bristol City Council, Avon Wildlife Trust and Natural England. Regular photographic and species surveys are funded by Bristol Parks and ourselves, and/or are performed by students as part of their studies. The site achieved Green Flag status each year from 2007/8 to 2013/14 when Bristol City Council stopped applying as they had no staff resource to support the process.

In accordance with the Management Plan maintenance of the site aims to balance the use of the site for recreation while protecting its natural beauty and its diversity. For example, while vegetation is cut back from paths to keep them clear this is not carried out too vigorously and it is accepted that occasionally visitors may have to brush past taller vegetation. The aim is for the site to be accessible but to look natural.

The role of Community Park Keeper disappeared within Bristol City Council towards the end of 2014. The Friends of Troopers Hill have worked closely with the Parks team to ensure that good quality maintenance has continued, following the Site Management Plan, under the new structure. We are extremely pleased with the provision of resource in these difficult times but we are concerned about issues such as an ageing work force and continual budget cuts.

In winter, at the start of 2021 year, we were able to pay for areas of gorse, scrub and broom to be cut back in priority areas, thanks to our Heritage Fund grant and our own funds. We have just submitted a grant application for £5,000 in the hope of funding 2 more winters of similar work.

3. Environment

Litter and dog waste bins on the site are emptied twice weekly by the Parks staff. All entrances have a dog waste bin. Much litter is picked up by visitors to the Hill, particularly dog walkers. Other litter picking is done by Parks staff and the Friends. Cuttings from work parties are concealed to compost at a location onsite. We have continued our relationship with a group called Street Goat who have a milking parlour and shed for a small number of goats in the allotments next door to our site. Goats love most of the cuttings we create so Street Goat members have helped on a small number of our work parties and taken cuttings to feed the goats.

Graffiti is addressed promptly but is rare. Police are advised. The Friends have graffiti removal spray provided by the Parks Department so we do not have to wait for Council staff to attend if it is a simple task. Where it is more complex we use Bristol City Council's online graffiti reporting system where usually graffiti is removed within 3 working days. In November 2020 we had a particular bad graffiti incident but were able to publicise this in a positive light in terms of all the good work carried out to put matters right. An example of our "spin" is in our Christmas 2020 update for our members

<https://mailchi.mp/6a2ab28eaf20/christmas-greetings-news-from-troopers-hill>

Behind the scenes we worked with police in identifying the offenders and had useful interactions with them and their parents.

As a Local Nature Reserve the amount of "furniture"/clutter has to be limited to be in keeping with the site, a view supported by local people. There are welcoming signs on every entrance and a number of interpretation boards. Up to date leaflets on the history, geology, wildlife and events of the site are available in paper and electronic form. Seats are available at the top of each section of steep path. With the replacement of the boundary fence on Troopers Hill Rd two old, tired, entrance signs were "retired". One was replaced with a fungi interpretation board in time for our 2019 IYN/Pride in Parks judging and a new welcoming sign was installed shortly afterwards to replace the second sign.

Simple informative signs are at every entrance explaining Bristol Parks Byelaws. We are very pleased that, thanks to our reports of the impact of fires, Troopers Hill Local Nature Reserve is the only council-owned green space in Bristol where barbecues are completely banned. The message does seem to be working and we explain why on our website <http://www.troopers-hill.org.uk/visiting/NoBBQs.htm>

In common with most green spaces dog fouling and dog control are issues. We encourage good owner behaviour through signage, Facebook and Twitter postings. We have worked with Bristol City Council's Dog Warden. Both issues do seem to be improving. More on www.troopers-hill.org.uk/clearUp/.

We are delighted to say that the number of bee species recorded on site has increased to 83 and our latest invertebrates survey, carried out by entomologist, David Gibbs, gave a very healthy result with a good range of species for such an urban site including a moth, *Dasystoma salicella*, that has not been recorded in this country for over 10 years.

4. Areas for development listed in last year's judging

1. Maybe some consideration to wheelchair users access to take in the stunning views.

Response: Since the judge's visit phase 2 of the path works has been completed and access is probably the best it has been since 2007. The work also included, thanks to the generosity of a local family, a new bench.

2. Toilets would be a good idea

Response: Troopers Hill is not a destination site, there is no parking provision, other than parking on residential streets and visits tend to be of a relatively short duration with the majority of visitors living very locally. However toilets are very important to support educational visits and longer duration nature conservation work parties when we are hosting corporate and other groups. To date we have been very fortunate to have the support of a nearby local church offering toilet facilities and shelter in inclement weather. The church is closing this month and we are exploring other options.

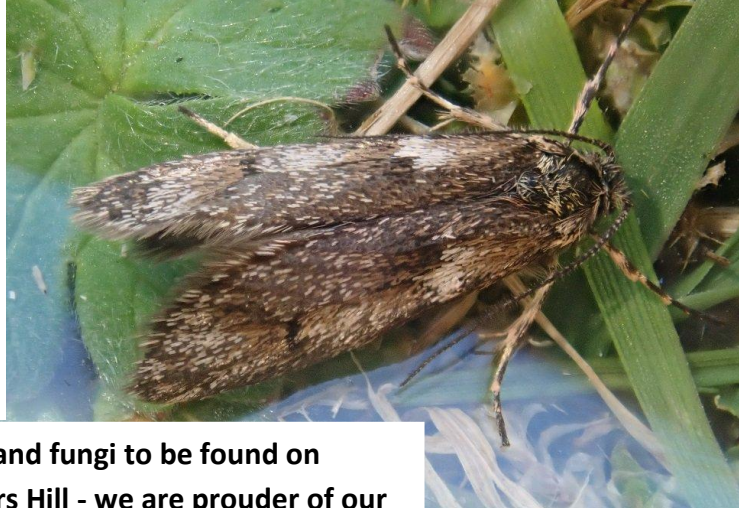
New paths on Troopers Hill Field allow Lizzy to walk her dog in winter

www.troopers-hill.org.uk/waystonature/#access



Troopers Hill Wildlife

Dasystema salicella, a moth unrecorded in this country for over 10 years, presumed extinct, photographed on Troopers Hill by David Gibbs in April 2019



Lichen and fungi to be found on Troopers Hill - we are prouder of our waxcaps but the fly agaric does make a striking image



Plus the odd reptile - a common lizard that supervised a work party



Nature Conservation Work Parties - Advertised online and with local posters

We also host work parties supported by corporate and other groups

Tuesday 28th June 2022

CLF Post 16 - Community Action Day

We were very pleased to host a group from year-12 at Cabot Learning Federation Post 16 as part of their Community Action Day.



In the morning the group completed the work we had started the day before, clearing bracken in areas where there was a good diversity of other plants being over shadowed. This was done both sides of the Gully.

After a picnic lunch the group cleared saplings from the bowl area in the gully.

We enjoyed working with an enthusiastic young group and hope that CLF will return to the Hill in the future.

2019 Management Plan Work Plan activities for this work party (ref no. indicates compartment)

13.2	Remove saplings, retain rowan
15.6	Hand pull or cut bracken from heather and broom on edges of areas cut by BCC

Monday 27th June 2022

A small group tackled an area of bracken at the east end of the gully



We were very pleased that removing the bracken revealed a good diversity of other plants, in previous years much of this area had been so dominated by the bracken that little else was surviving. This suggests that we are having a long-term impact in reducing the bracken cover.

2019 Management Plan Work Plan activities for this work party (ref no. indicates compartment)

15.6	Hand pull or cut bracken from heather and broom on edges of areas cut by BCC
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Thursday 23rd June 2022

Joe from Parkwork brought some 'tree poppers' to try out to remove some of the blackthorn suckers that are spreading into the grassland from the hedge at Greendown.



We found that most of the saplings were too young for the tree popper to grip, so we ended up removing them with loppers. The aim is to weaken their growth and prevent them overshadowing this area of grass later in the summer.

We are very pleased that there is a lot of yellow rattle spreading in this area - this should weaken the grass and allow an even wider range of flowering plants to grow here in future years. This area of grassland is the only area on Troopers Hill that needs cutting. It has a hay cut once a year in late summer.

1.x	Remove blackthorn suckers in grassland - additional item, following discussion with ecology officer June 2022
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