

Friends of Troopers Hill - It's Your Neighbourhood 2011

1. Aims of the Project

Troopers Hill is Local Nature Reserve of over 20 acres (6.8 hectares) of acid heath and grassland on a pennant sandstone hillside overlooking the River Avon. This wild and romantic site plays host to rare plants and wildlife while also providing local people with a space for relaxation and recreation.

Friends of Troopers Hill are a community conservation group made of primarily local residents who came together in November 2003 aiming to:

- Provide a friendly community focus for people who care about Troopers Hill.
- Carry out practical conservation work to help look after Troopers Hill.
- Organise public events such as walks and talks.
- Work with Bristol Parks (part of Bristol City Council) to make sure Troopers Hill is well looked after.

Our constitution can be seen on <http://www.troopers-hill.org.uk/constitutionD.pdf>

2. What we have achieved

When our group was founded in December 2003 paths were disappearing under vegetation, large quantities of litter had accumulated on the site and, most importantly, the area of acid grass and heathland which had led to the site's classification as a Local Nature Reserve was steadily disappearing year by year as scrub steadily encroached on the site. The site had no park keeper and a maintenance team appeared for brief periods every 6-8 weeks.

Working closely with our Local Nature Reserves Officer from Bristol City Council we started monthly work parties to pick litter and carry out tasks that would be too labour intensive for paid labour to undertake e.g. removing bramble from around broom and heather, cutting small saplings and pulling or trampling bracken from around the special heathland plants. Our first grant application paid for tools to carry out this work so we no longer had to borrow them from the Avon Wildlife Trust.

We continue these monthly work parties today using a management plan to guide our activities and working to complement the work of our community park keeper. Over 20 people attended one work party in 2006 where Bristol City Council supplied us with over 300 whips to plant to form a hedge of native species to act as a barrier to motorcycles and a food source and habitat when the existing fence rotted.

Our first management plan was drawn up by one of our committee members, Rob Acton-Campbell, with input from Bristol City Council's Conservation Officers, the Local Nature Reserves Officer and other members of the Parks teams. He used existing survey materials. This was formally signed in 2004 by the Chair of Friends of Troopers Hill and the then head of Bristol Parks. The quality of this plan was such that it could be used for creating an application for the prestigious Green Flag Award for Troopers Hill. Bristol Parks and Friends of Troopers Hill's work resulted in the gaining of the Green Flag every year since 2007. In Bristol the only other green space to equal this is Clifton Downs. Our management plan covers a 5 year period and is reviewed and updated every year. See <http://www.troopers-hill.org.uk/plan.htm>.

Litter picking was a huge success. We have moved from generating a skip full of rubbish from a 2 hour work party to less than 1 carrier bag full. A clean site discourages people from dropping waste.

The Green Flag led to the appointment of a Community Park Keeper who works an average of 2 days per week on Troopers Hill. This much higher level of maintenance means encroaching scrub can be controlled, litter is regular picked and any vandalism can be quickly addressed.

Our own conservation work means the Park Keeper can concentrate on machinery based work and we continue with manual tasks. Our clippings are either composted at concealed points on the site or removed by the Park Community Keeper.

Including the events still to come for 2011 we have organised and funded 86 public events to attract local use and interest in the site. All events are free. This excludes our monthly and sometimes extra work parties. If people care for a site they will take responsibility and ownership for it. There is no parking on the site so it is not suitable to be a destination site. We focus our publicity locally encouraging people to walk, cycle or use the bus when they come to events. Events range from walks and talks to annual open air concerts, Tai Chi classes, family fun dog shows to promote responsible dog ownership, picnics with storytellers and craft workshops, quizzes and kite flying.

To further involve the community we have an up to date website featuring our activities, all ecological reports, including those we have funded, and the flora, fauna, geology and history of the site. The site features a discussion forum titled "News and Views". We have also recently created a Facebook presence. We publish a free quarterly newsletter and our membership (also free) exceeds 350 members.

Where work is being considered that will have more than a negligible impact on the site we publicise and consult on that work. Currently we are applying for more that £30,000 of Lottery money to improve access to Troopers Hill, in particular improving existing steps and paths and addressing drainage to an access point via Troopers Hill Field. We delivered nearly 2,000 questionnaires to local addresses and received 467 paper and online responses. Questionnaires are considered very successful if they generate a more than 10% response so we were very pleased with 19%. We also held 3 public consultation sessions about the proposals.

We have raised over £50,000 of funding which, in addition to tools, has paid for:-

- a wheelchair access path at the top of Troopers Hill
- a remodelled entrance and fencing to replace rotten wooden fencing and gates which would have allowed motorcycle access to the site and a great deal of damage to habitats and food sources.
- events, ecological surveys, benches, dog and litter bins, interpretation boards and signs, design work for remodelling another entrance
- projects involving young people such as bench making, bird box building, arts and drama events.
- the setting up of a Walking for Health group
- leaflets and publicity for Troopers Hill

Money has come from local people, businesses and organisations and national funding sources.

3. What we are aiming for in the future

We will continue to carry out conservation work and promote Troopers Hill, particularly via events. We aim to attract new members from the local community, particularly those interested in taking an active part in promoting and caring for Troopers Hill. Once our current project, Stepping Forward, the Big Lottery bid described earlier is complete, it is likely we will look at remodelling the entrance at the foot of Troopers Hill using the designs that we paid for from an earlier grant. This entrance features one of our two listed structures, this one a chimney acting as a reminder of the history of the coal mining industry in this area. Part of the design includes a base for cherry pickers so that maintenance work can easily be carried out on the chimney. We would also like to have information displayed about this historic feature.