

Friends of Troopers Hill - It's Your Neighbourhood 2013

1. Aims of the Project

Troopers Hill is a 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 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/constitutionE.pdf>

In October 2012 we completed the core parts of our Stepping Forward project to improve access to Troopers Hill. Details of this project can be seen on www.troopers-hill.org.uk/steppingforward.

This year we have worked with a local school to develop the Troopers Hill Fun Learning trails <http://www.troopers-hill.org.uk/FunLearning>. A tree trail and an audio trail are in development.

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.

Now the site is well managed following an annually updated 5-year management plan <http://www.troopers-hill.org.uk/plan.htm> agreed by ourselves and Bristol City Council. This plan has links to the relevant sections of both the UK and Bristol Biodiversity Action Plans. The Bristol Biodiversity Action Plan is supported by various bodies including Bristol City Council, Avon Wildlife Trust, and Natural England. Regular photographic and species surveys are carried out on the site, funded by Bristol Parks and ourselves or carried out by students as part of their studies. The site has been awarded a Green Flag every year since 2007. In Bristol this has only been equalled by Clifton Downs.

Our group carries out monthly Saturday work parties and some evening ones, mainly addressing encroaching scrub and doing some litterpicking. The success of our initial activities and the award of a prestigious Green Flag to Troopers Hill led to the allocation of a Community Park Keeper (CPK) to Troopers Hill. The group works closely with the Park Keeper so he can carry out machinery based tasks while we continue with manual ones, many of which could not be done cost effectively by paid employees e.g. manually cutting out bramble from around broom, pulling bracken amongst the heather etc. Over 50 different local people have helped at our work parties. We also sometimes lead work parties of volunteers whose employers give them a day per year for volunteering. Groups as diverse as students from Badminton School and Good Gym Bristol have joined us on work parties.

Planting is often inappropriate on a Local Nature Reserve but in 2006 20 of our volunteers planted 380 whips to form an 80 metre hedge of native species to preserve a boundary. This has been pruned every year by our volunteers until December 2012 when the hedge had become mature and could be flail cut. When the hedge was first planted local residents were consulted about hedge management and the overwhelming majority preferred cutting to hedge laying.

We have almost 400 members on our free membership list, 270 followers on Facebook (www.facebook.com/troopershill) and 120 Twitter followers (www.twitter.com/troopershill). We maintain an informative, regularly maintained website www.troopers-hill.org.uk and publish a quarterly newsletter which is either emailed or mainly hand-delivered by volunteers to our members.

We have organised over 100 free, public events since 2004, to attract local use and interest in the site. This figure excludes our monthly work parties, evening work parties and regular meetings.

We are particularly proud of having founded a new Walking for Health Group, the St George Strollers, who celebrated their 2nd birthday this May. They have run over 50 walks attended by over 90 different people.

Since 2003 we have succeeded in raising over £100,000 for different projects.

Notices of all our activities are posted on the site, with contact details and our meetings are open to all. 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.

We work closely with Bristol Parks, are members of the Bristol Parks Forum, and are represented on the St George Neighbourhood Partnership.

Troopers Hill is now used for educational visits both by primary school children and 'A' level students since it has featured in a geography text book. Undergraduates also use the site for their theses and we were particularly pleased to be allowed to publish a recent study of the soils of Troopers Hill. Because of our attractive and informative website www.troopers-hill.org.uk the Friends of Troopers Hill are often the first point of contact for students wishing to find out more about the site.

Dog fouling has been a particular issue on the site. We are in discussions with Bristol City Council about a green dog walking scheme. For several years we have held Family Fun Dog Shows encouraging responsible dog ownership. We have also raised money for additional dog bins. Together with our Community Park Keeper we give out free dog waste bags. We vary eye-catching posters and joined in an exercise with the St George Neighbourhood Partnership to combat dog fouling. We will repeat an exercise in which different coloured spray paints were used to circle dog waste in "hot spots". This draws attention to the problem and enables a comparison to be made over a two month period of any reduction in dog mess. This would be followed by visits by enforcement officers. The problem has been reduced but continuous thought and action is needed to combat the problem.

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 the projects described overleaf are 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 have already designed and installed an interpretation board giving information about this historic feature. We also worked closely with Bristol City Council this year when some restoration work was done on this chimney.