The
DOWNSMAN
The *Quarterly* Newsletter of Friends of the SOUTH DOWNS

Issue 224 **Autumn 2025**

Our Next Events
Auks and Orcas
The Restless Coast

Commemorating VE & VJ Days
South Downs recollections

Ever stayed at The Minter Hotel?
Sussex Underwater

Free Young Adult Membership launches
See back page

Youth Column
Inspiring and being inspired by the next generation

FROM THE CHAIRMAN

David Green

You won't receive this until the beginning of September. As I draft this message though we are going into what must be at least the third heatwave of the summer.

Tomorrow and Thursday I am doing the final two legs of the Greensand Way, which has been the long distance walk the Friends are doing this year. The pattern of recent years has been to do one a year. Last year, it was the Serpents Trail. Then next week I am off to Yorkshire with friends, who as it happens are both members of the Friends, to do the Yorkshire Wolds Way, a national trail, 79 miles from Hessle, in the shadow of the Humber Bridge to Filey in North Yorkshire. The main challenge looks like being the heat.

Otherwise, this is very much a time of change at the Friends. There is a refocus in where we spend our money. We continue to support schemes to introduce young people to the Downs, but we are about to embark on a couple of environmental initiatives, one with the Sussex Wildlife Trust at Ebernoe and the other with the Western Sussex Rivers Trust. The latter will be supporting the Rivers Trust in their existing citizen science project monitoring water quality in the rivers in their area. There will be further details in later publications and via our social media, including details of how you can get involved, so keep your eyes peeled.

It has also been gratifying to see a very positive response to the launch of our Young Adults programme, coupled with an online talk with Robson Peisley, to be followed shortly with a talk by Şeniz Mustafa on Butterflies of the Downs. It has helped to bring an energy and focus to life in the office, which I hope will filter out to you, our members. Even the business as usual elements of the organisation seem to be in robust good health. Only this week, no fewer than 73 people attended the Westerlands Farm guided tour with Farm Manager Oliver Hancock organised by Gerald Gresham-Cooke to see at first hand regenerative farming in action. The feedback I have heard thus far has been fantastically positive.

Just round the corner is the launch of the redesigned website. These are exciting times at the Friends. Thank you all for your support. It goes without saying that we cannot do this without you.

With very best wishes,

David Green
Chairman

Cover photo Jamie Fielding Photography.

A Walk at Westerlands

A farm walk led by Oliver Hancock, Westerlands, Graffham CEO (Chief Earth Officer) gave the Friends a hands-on look at regenerative and sustainable agriculture in action in August.

As we walked around the farm, Oliver explained how practices like rotational grazing, soil health monitoring, and high welfare slow grown livestock management support both productivity and biodiversity. We learnt how the Dexter cattle contribute to habitat health, how the farm balances food production with conservation goals, and how thoughtful land stewardship can benefit people, animals, and the wider environment..

We gained insight into the four pillars of their plan- to turn the land back to nature from the former stud farm; to give access to biodiversity, with proof already of bird song relieving tension; to give something to the community through walks like ours, and to the healing of children with therapy through horses, and pony trekking.

The walk was arranged by Gerald Gresham-Cooke under the auspices of the Friends, with a total of 73 walkers.

Gerald Gresham-Cooke

Adonis Blue

Pictured on a recent guided butterfly walk by David Taylor, **sussexnaturephotos.co.uk**

OUR NEXT EVENTS

Auks and Orcas: A journey around the British Isles with Michael Blencowe

Tuesday 30 September 2025

Refreshments 7:00

Talk 7:30pm | Cost £10

Assembly Room, The Council House
North Street, Chichester PO19 1LQ

Join us for our joint event with Friends of Chichester Harbour hosting Michael Blencowe, local wildlife expert and author, for a virtual cruise from Portsmouth for a wildlife expedition around the British Isles.

We will sail to some of Britain's wildest islands and search for the incredible wildlife that lives there.

Book using the form included with The Downsman or via our website. Ticket price includes a drink on arrival.

The Restless Coast: Online talk by Roger Morgan-Grenville

Wednesday 19 November 2025

7:00pm via Zoom | Cost £5 - £7

We are excited to be hosting the brilliant author and wildlife campaigner Roger Morgan-Grenville for an online talk following the launch of his latest book, *The Restless Coast*.

A moving and beautiful account of a journey around the island of Britain, the book explores over 10,000 miles of coastline, steeped in history and constantly shifting, changing, adapting and providing. As the author travels around the length of the coastline to discover its challenges and opportunities, he recounts his conversations and experiences with the people trying to protect it.

Roger Morgan-Grenville was a soldier from 1978-86. In 2007, he helped set up the charity Help for Heroes, and in 2020 he was a founding member of the conservation charity, Curlew Action. He lives in West Sussex.

Book via the QR code, FSD website or the booking form.

RANGERS of The South Downs

We hear from Jake, a ranger for the South Downs National Park, on his love for the job and his journey from Marine Biology student to National Park ranger.

My name is Jake Barnes, I'm a Ranger for the South Downs National Park's Central Area team, covering the patch between Petersfield, Midhurst and Haslemere.

I completed an undergraduate degree in Marine Biology at the University of Portsmouth, then travelled the world for three years working as a scuba dive guide at multiple resorts. Upon returning to the UK, I had almost given up any hope I had of getting into the marine biology sector but still had a passion to work with nature in some form. I began volunteering across Hampshire whilst working various jobs, until I was successful in landing an apprenticeship with the New Forest National Park Authority (NPA). After nearly three years with the New Forest, I sought to work where I grew up exploring – the South Downs – and was successful in achieving an assistant ranger role with the South Downs NPA.

My role is exceptionally diverse, primarily working with landowners to find nature friendly solutions, I also regularly work with volunteer groups, conduct species surveys and run pop up events. Across the winter period, we have a much more 'hands-on' workload, focussing more on practical habitat management delivery.

Kingley Vale has long been one of my favourite places. Growing up in the local area, I was always drawn to its unique atmosphere—the ancient, twisted yew trees create a sense of timelessness, while the sweeping views from the Devil's Humps offer a dramatic contrast and a glimpse into the area's rich history.

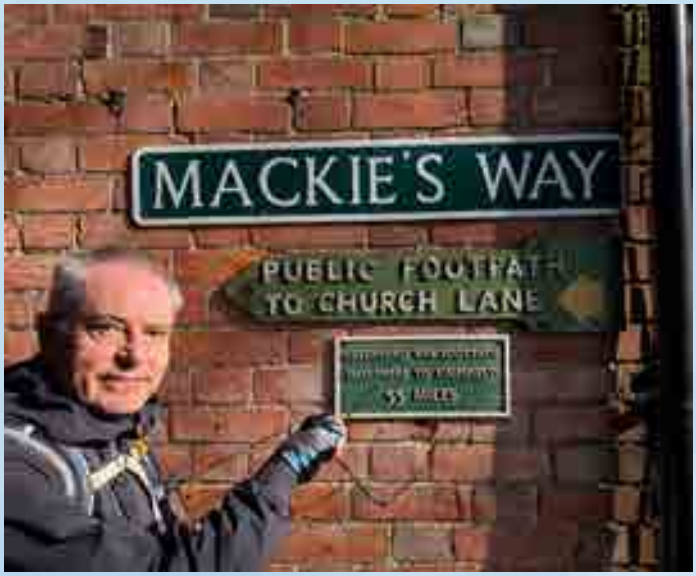
In recent years, however, I've developed a particular fondness for heathland landscapes, and Blackdown has become my top choice. It's an outstanding example of the heathland habitat, offering panoramic views that are nothing short of breathtaking. Each spring, I usually hear my first Cuckoo call of the year at Blackdown, a moment that never fails to feel special. The site is also home to a full suite of classic heathland species; Nightjars flitting through the dusk, Dartford Warblers calling from the gorse, and the occasional glimpse of an adder basking in the sun. It's a place that perfectly captures the wild beauty and ecological richness of heathland habitats.

A very exciting project I was recently part of involved acting as the SDNPA lead on the reintroduction of beavers into an enclosure near Petersfield. It has been a real privilege to be involved in such a project, helping to restore natural processes and boost biodiversity across the South Downs. The reintroduction of beavers is not just about bringing back a species; it's about revitalizing an entire ecosystem.

My best advice for anyone looking to start in a similar role is volunteering! Getting out and about in nature, seeing what the rangers get up to and working with a variety of organisations is key to figuring out which role is for you and how to best determine a route to reach that point.

Jake Barnes
South Downs National Park Ranger

THE GREENSAND WAY



The Valiant Seven at the start of the first section. Photo Ian Lancaster.

Seven valiant walkers just recently completed the final leg of the Greensand Way.

The Greensand Way was walked in seven stages, as part of FSD Walks and Strolls programme, starting in March and finishing on 14th August. The Greensand Way stretches for 108 miles/174 km, starting at Haslemere in Surrey and finishing at Hamstreet in Kent. Whilst it does not lie within the South Downs, the FSD walks and strolls programme aims to include a different long distance walk in the programme each year which is within stretching distance for members. Previous ones have included the Vanguard Way in 2021, the Serpent Trail in 2022, the Belloc Way in 2023 and the Sussex Border Path in 2024. To make it practical to take part, these are phased across several weeks and months, and sit within the normal programme.

The Greensand Way follows the ridge of greensand rock across Surrey and Kent, to the edges of Romney Marsh and almost to the Kent coast. The Way takes its name from the layers of sandstone in each of which is found the green coloured mineral glauconite. The Greensand ridge runs broadly parallel to and south of the North Downs ridge.

Paul Wilkinson
Trustee

Main photo G Linturn. The end of the last section at Hascombe Village Green, Pond and Church.

COMMEMORATING VE AND VJ DAYS

Members' recollections of the Second World War

The commemoration of VE day on 8 May and VJ day on 15 August reminds us of the great impact that the second world war had on the South Downs and on those who lived here.

The war brought many changes to the Downs, especially the requisition of large areas for training and for munitions testing. Defensive installations were placed on beaches and in valleys. Much of the coastal area was barred to non-residents.

The internet carries a number of comprehensive and interesting sources on this topic, two of which are listed at the end of this piece.

It is particularly valuable though to read the recollections of the war that two of our own members wrote in 2020.

John Templeton was born in 1941 and his parents lived in Chichester. John's father kept a diary, of which these are some extracts from 1945 about the time around VE and VJ days.

May 2 Report of Hitler's death in Berlin. Germany almost overrun.

May 5 Unconditional surrender of Germany in NW Germany, Holland, Denmark and complete from this morning and other areas also following

May 7 Very moist and warm day. Note of V day tomorrow. Ceasefire in Germany from 12.01 tonight. Statement by Churchill tomorrow and two day holiday

May 8 (Monday) Public holiday. 'VE Day'. Fixed flagpole in centre flower bed on lawn. Fixed struts. John then hoisted two flags- Red Ensign and Scots National. Broadcast statement by Mr Churchill at 3pm. formal proclamation of end of War. Unconditional surrender of Germany to allies. Scything in afternoon and evening. Celebrations in town- bands, fireworks, siren 'all clear', church bells till midnight, searchlights and floodlighting cathedral. 9pm broadcast by King.

June 28 Car to garage for first basic ration of petrol

July 15 'Single' summer time only, from today

July 26 General election result on wireless at 6pm. Labour Government with large majority- Mr Churchill resigned premiership!

August 15 Woken by church bells ringing from 1 to 2am. Victory-Japan surrendered. Up till 3.30am. 7am news on wireless. Confirmed surrender. V DAY HOLIDAY. Heavy rain all morning. Flags up again after lunch.

Richard Reed, who sadly passed away in 2024, was ten years old in 1939. He wrote a memoir in 2020 about his love for the Downs, of which this is an extract about the war-time period.

As a boy living in Middlesex in the 1930s our annual family holidays were almost always spent at Eastbourne.

Once France fell in 1940, Sussex was no longer a safe place and the coast was now the front line.

Eastbourne was closed to non-residents and the sea front prepared to repel the expected invasion.

The Allied advances following landings in France in June 1944 enabled more normal life on the coasts of Kent and Sussex to resume, and my family visited Eastbourne again. On Christmas Day 1944 we walked from Willingdon to Beachy Head, where I saw artillery practice in progress and was surprised that it was possible to see the shell as it passed over the sea.

The military withdrawal from the areas around Birling Gap revealed a devastated landscape, marked in

in The South Downs

white by excavated trenches and dugouts. There was a rail line down the hillside, used to carry moving targets for gunners. These scars disappeared as the plough and sheep returned.

As it became possible to walk on those Eastern Downs, the evidence of their use as a vast training ground was widespread. One would encounter a half-buried mortar bomb, which might still be live. At the top of Bo Peep bostal was a great pile of rusting munitions and barbed wire. On Firle Beacon was a large corrugated iron hut with an open side facing the sea, probably to shelter artillery spotters during firing practice. On flatter stretches along the crest of the Downs were metal poles carrying cables, no doubt to deter glider landings as part of an invasion.

Interesting remnants of the Downs at war are still to be seen: pillboxes above the Cuckmere at Exceat, a long line of concrete tank obstacles behind the beach there, and more pillboxes and the remains of a Churchill tank on Barnsfarm Hill, near Storrington. The brick steps to be seen to the right of the road from Willingdon to the clump on Babylon Down were built in the war for a prime ministerial visit to troops in training and were known locally as "Churchill's Steps". There is a sort of posthumous relic in some of the masts that have sprung up on the Downs in post-war years, such as at Beddingham Hill, Glatting Beacon and the Trundle. These often replace latticed radar masts erected in the war.

Some other sources about the second world war in the South Downs:

merrynallingham.com/20th-century/sussex-in-world-war-two/

www.southdowns.gov.uk/lest-forget-compelling-wartime-story-south-downs/

If you would like to share with other readers your recollections of the second world war in the South Downs, we would be delighted to receive them.

Andrew Lovett
Trustee

PLANNING & CONSERVATION

After the previous quarter's excitement with preparing and submitting our representations on the South Downs Local Plan Review, the past three months have been relatively quiet. However, that is not to say that we have not been active.

On the planning policy front, we submitted detailed comments on the East Dean and Friston Neighbourhood Plan. We supported the Plan's recognition of the value of the views from Old Willingdon Road and the policy on sustainable tourism and generally supported the policies on heritage, the natural environment and transport. We also noted that the National Park Authority has a duty to prepare a management plan for the Heritage Coast, but has not yet replaced the last management plan which expired in 2020.

As regards development proposals, we submitted an objection to an application for the redevelopment of The Woodcote Inn at Graffham to provide a bistro, restaurant, and 16 guest bedrooms in detached lodges and various other works. We felt that the proposals would be harmful to the character, appearance and tranquillity of the area, be overdevelopment and result in increased activity.

Although we did not pick up the original application, we were alerted to an appeal against the refusal of planning permission for the replacement of several commercial units with one large commercial unit in Petersfield. We submitted an objection to the Planning Inspectorate to the loss of the characteristic small shops in this positive unlisted building and the consequent effect on the character and appearance of the Petersfield Conservation Area.

As the largest town in the National Park, we keep a particularly close eye on development proposals in Lewes. We objected to applications for the redevelopment of Garden Street, Astley House and Eastgate Wharf, primarily due to concerns over design and the lack of provision of affordable housing in accordance with the South Downs Local Plan and Lewes Neighbourhood Plan requirements. Affordability is a particularly acute issue in Lewes and we consider It important to secure genuinely affordable housing wherever possible. We have also called for a comprehensive approach to Eastgate Wharf and the Phoenix development, which form parts of the same strategic site in the Local Plan, and for a strategic masterplan for the town.

We also objected to an application for two gypsy caravan pitches in Bignor on the basis of landscape harm and the lack of need for such pitches in Chichester district, and to an application for the permanent retention of 50 tent pitches and associated development at Half Way Bridge, between Midhurst and Petworth.

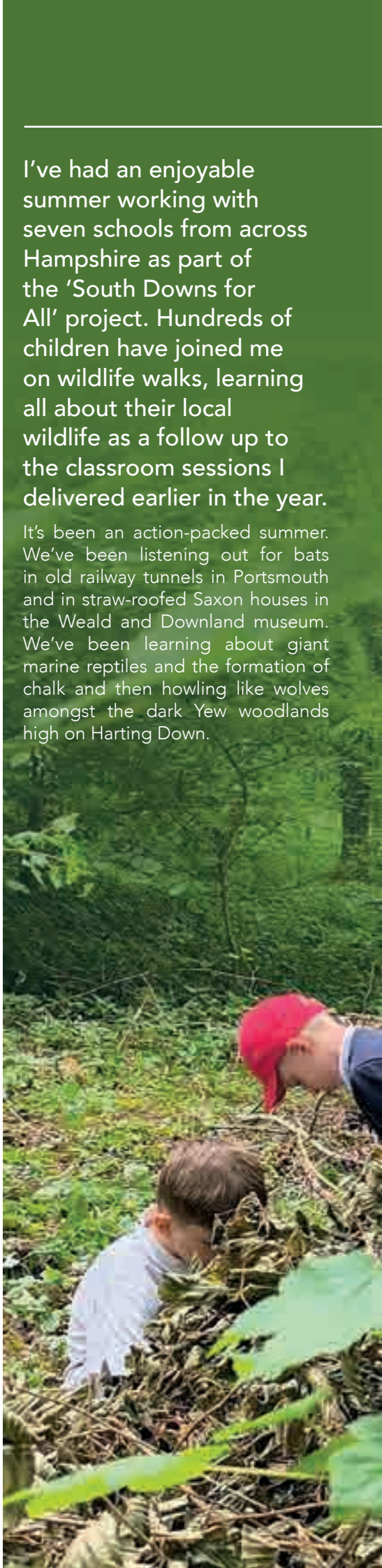
At our July Planning & Conservation Committee meeting George Dagg, a graduate student from Durham University, gave a very interesting presentation on his research into attitudes to development in the South Downs National Park (see separate article by George in this issue).

Finally, we still have vacancies for District Officers in parts of western West Sussex and Winchester district. If anyone is interested in finding out more about being a DO please send an email to enquiries@friendsofthesouthdowns.org.uk and I will get back to you..

Martin Small
Chair Planning & Conservation Committee

I've had an enjoyable summer working with seven schools from across Hampshire as part of the 'South Downs for All' project. Hundreds of children have joined me on wildlife walks, learning all about their local wildlife as a follow up to the classroom sessions I delivered earlier in the year.

It's been an action-packed summer. We've been listening out for bats in old railway tunnels in Portsmouth and in straw-roofed Saxon houses in the Weald and Downland museum. We've been learning about giant marine reptiles and the formation of chalk and then howling like wolves amongst the dark Yew woodlands high on Harting Down.



PROJECT UPDATE: **SOUTH DOWNS FOR ALL**

We've been following in the footsteps of Gibert White in the meadows of Selbourne and looking out for Purple Emperor butterflies, listening to crickets, spotting Red Kites, Roe Deer, orchids and dragonflies. And the children have also been treated to my impression of a Tawny Owl coughing up a pellet.

And we've had some lovely feedback too: "The children were hooked. Michael managed to include so many facts. The content was pitched at exactly the right level and it was great that he included yucky bits, as this is what children enjoy the most".

Well, it's nice to know my owl regurgitation performance has been well received!

Michael Blencowe
Wildlife Expert
@thesussexnaturalist

Photos Mr Lofty.

YOUTH COLUMN .....YOUNG ADULTS HAVE T

Felix Bill is an award winning author and creative writing teacher with experience writing across a range of mediums. His first short play premiered in March, 2024, and he has had short stories published in multiple literary magazines. One of his short stories recently won the Love Letters to London, 2025 writing prize, and his current novel-in-progress, 'Selkie' has been longlisted and placed 'runner up' in multiple work in progress writing competitions. He has been employed in Research & Development writing roles by both individual writers and larger companies such as New Writing North. He also regularly teaches community classes on short form storytelling for Clapham Film Unit, Artswork Ltd, and others. You can read his article on finding early career writing opportunities in Issue 603 of Author's Publish Magazine. He recently gave a highly commended guest lecture on the University of Bristol's Creative Writing MA course.

On the 7th of August, 2024, I got the news. After weeks of anxious waiting, constantly refreshing my email, and driving everyone I knew up the wall, trying to figure out if I'd got the grant or not, there it was in my inbox:

I am writing to congratulate you on your successful application to our National Parks New Perspectives grant scheme. The shortlisting team were highly impressed with your application and we are looking forward to working with you.

I had my commission. Now all I had to do was actually write the short story collection I had promised the Campaign for National Parks. Thus began a 17,000 word love letter to the South Downs.

"Transing the Wild: Wilding the Trans" took six months to write. Six glorious months I spent interviewing other trans people who felt just as passionate about and connected to the South Downs National Park as I did. Recording my interviews, I heard the same story over and over: A story of finding community in the unlikeliest of places, discovering the freedom of wild spaces, and finally feeling at peace in the dappled shade of a towering Ash tree.

For the trans community, peace can be hard to find. As a trans man who came out 10 years ago, I can say from personal experience that being trans in the UK is getting harder - and fast. The current political situation of trans rights weighs heavily on all of us and more than one of my trans friends is considering emigration. Against this backdrop of fear, the South Downs National Park provides a chance to escape into the wilderness and focus on the simple joy of hiking through one of England's most beautiful national parks.

During the research phase of my project, I met trans botany experts, trans walk leaders, trans environmental activists, and trans park rangers. From every corner of the South Downs, I collected stories of trans people passionately defending nature, volunteering on land restoration and rewinding projects, and encouraging their friends to do the same. The message I want to leave Downsman readers with is this: the trans community shares your love of nature and your determination to protect and promote wild spaces along the South Coast.

By sharing stories of my community and our beautiful relationship with the natural word, I hope to help forge the intersectional community bonds vital to our shared future. It's never been more important to stand up in support the trans community.

I will never forget the support and kindness of the people working at Campaign for National Parks, both during the writing process and after my collection was finished. It is free to read online via either the Campaign for National Parks website or my own: felixcbill.com. If you've enjoyed this article, I encourage you to give my short story collection a read.

HEIR SAY.....YOUNG ADULTS HAVE THEIR SAY

A Rainforest Down My Road

As part of our Youth Column in The Downsman, we were excited to receive a creative writing submission from talented volunteer Harry Munt, who reflects on the unique landscape of Portsdown Hill at the edge of the South Downs National Park boundary. Harry explores his early interest in the natural environment and the path he chose into volunteering for wildlife and our local outdoor spaces.

I took the stairs two at a time, sprinted to the end of the alleyway, and slid through a gap in the fence.

A kaleidoscopic ocean of wildflowers stretched in front of me. Voices behind me spurred an adrenaline rush, and I scampered up the hillside, collapsing at the top.

Made it. I checked back. The kids from my class didn't follow.

Suddenly, a shape clipped the August sunlight, and I looked up. The first came from behind, whipping by so close I heard feathers. I turned just as the other dive-bombed. Then again, and again. The air filled with prehistoric shrieks. It was only months later, the bizarre experience having sparked an interest in nature, I realized the birds were kestrels. A pair, likely viewing my lanky teenage frame and black flapping jacket as a threat, subsequently mobbing me.

I must apologize to the kestrels, as it did not work.

I was back on Portsdown Hill the day after it happened. And as I began reading about nature, purchasing my first identification guide a few months after the encounter, I realized how special a place 'the hill' was.

Stretching for miles lengthways; over 100m high at its peak, Portsdown Hill is like a geological floodgate, holding back the rolling hills of the South Downs to the North from spilling into Portsmouth. As an indoors-y, previously uninterested teen, it was beautifully alien. The daisies here grew as high as my knee, huge "dandelion clocks" ballooned to nearly the diameter of my hand, and spindly yellow umbrellas grew and flowered at almost eye-level. It was my miniature rainforest.

The chalk pits were my favorite. At the base of the cliffs, you could find the only pond on the hill, which I had to abandon every August – there were too many toadlets in the grass! I spent every day there in lockdown, admiring the lives of urban foxes, raptors, and blue butterflies. Due to Coronavirus, I was rationed only one piece of outdoor exercise a day, so I religiously savored each. All nine hours of them.

Volunteering there truly scratched my ecological itch. The Ranger led a weekly band of volunteers across the hill, waging war on the "marauding prickly bushes" as he called them, with billhooks and bowsaws. We'd rove as an ecological mob, collecting seeds to redistribute, dispatching invasive plants, and reconvening at the abandoned Victorian fort on the Hill's summit, the Ranger's office.

Volunteering there, you quickly gain a change of perspective. What appears self-sustaining as an enthusiast, I realized was the result of literal blood, sweat and tears, round the clock. For the practical graft you invested, about 20% of it showed. Hammers were held together by duct tape. Toolboxes were made from butchered milk boxes. Want to go and use the tractor today? It won't start. And sorry, but the spanner is being used as a makeshift lock on one of the office doors. Want to take the mower instead? Ah, I pulled the cord to start it, and it snapped… it's stuck on the side of the hill. And now it's raining…

Due to its vantage point, the chalk pits overlooked everything. Watching from my bedroom window, there it was. On my last day of school, I went up there alone to celebrate. On my last day of college, I silently contemplated in the same spot. My first heartbreak. First job. Hearing a college friend had passed away. It was all experienced to the same, wild backdrop – the miniature rainforest, just down my road.

Harry Munt

OBITUARIES

Gerry Ryan

We are saddened to share the news of the passing of Mr. Gerard Ryan and Mrs. Sheila Ryan, who died within days of one another.

Gerry Ryan devoted a lot of his life to the community, as former chairman of Friends of the South Downs (then Society of Sussex Downsmen) as well as a parish councillor for Midhurst. Gerry had a lifelong love of the South Downs, born in Hove and studying in Brighton, going on to study Natural Sciences and then Law at Cambridge.

When the opportunity arose in 1993 to take on the conservation of chalk grassland at Buriton and at Heyshott, Gerry established the Murray Downland Trust, named for fellow conservationist Betty Murray. He continued working as a trustee until 2024, and leaves a lasting legacy in the orchids, butterflies and other fauna adorning all six trust-managed reserves across the South Downs.

A funeral service will take place for both Sheila and Gerard at Chichester Cathedral on Saturday 16th August 2025 at 10.00am.

Donations in memory of Gerry and Sheila can be made to Dementia UK and Cancer Research UK respectively, via:
Merritt's of Midhurst Funeral Service
West Street, Midhurst GU29 9NQ.
www.merrittsofmidhurst.co.uk
Tel: 01730 816245.

Gerry Ryan addressing Society at the golden jubilee dinner 1973 (Annual Report/R Van Dyke).

Dr Owen Plunkett

1934-2025

We were saddened to learn of the death on 27 July of former trustee Dr Owen Plunkett who died peacefully aged 90.

He was a former chairman of the Hampshire branch of the Ramblers' Association who he represented on the South Downs Campaign's Executive Committee. Owen was a member of the Boundaries Working Group, making the case for areas worthy of inclusion within the proposed national park. He led a total of thirty walks in all areas of the Downs to publicise the long-running campaign for the Downs to be made a National Park. He served as a Friends of the South Downs Trustee from 2009 to 2011 and was particularly concerned that our Sussex based society should extend its remit to include the Hampshire Downs as well. Owen was far more than a colleague but a real friend, always enthusiastic and cheerful. His celebration of life was held on 28 August was at the East Meon Sustainability Centre high on the Downs and he was given a green burial in peaceful woodland beside his beloved wife Valerie who had sadly died in 2022. He will not be forgotten by all who whose lives he touched in so many ways.'

John Templeton

Sussex Und

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Give nature space to breathe and it will return - that's always been our ethos at Sussex Underwater, though sometimes a helping hand along the way doesn't go amiss.

Our charity has been working with conservation-minded local fishermen to undertake an exciting new project: The Minter Hotel, brainchild of Alan Minter. These hotels are not the plush kind - rather, 3.5 tonne concrete structures placed on the seabed to create an artificial habitat for marine life. With various holes, ledges and grates, the Minter Hotels offer a home to species such as crabs, lobsters, fish and molluscs, with safe places to lay their eggs.

Since the loss of 96% of the kelp in Sussex, marine species have suffered fewer places to shelter, hunt, breed and raise young. Kelp are large brown seaweeds, and in dense populations their tree-like structures create an underwater forest. Alongside other local rewilding endeavours such as the Sussex Kelp Recovery Project, the Minter Hotels aim to re-establish

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TER HOTEL

healthy habitats so that our underwater ecosystem can flourish once again.

After a three-year battle with logistics and laws, the first new habitat was lowered into the water in May 2025. Just 11 days later, our team divers returned to check for any visitors and were amazed by what they discovered! On the structure's surface, seaweeds and clusters of mussels had started to take hold. Spider crabs perched nearby while wrasse and shoals of pout darted in and out of the holes. Eric Smith, co-founder of Sussex Underwater, recalls his experience diving the Minter Hotel:

'As I placed a fixed camera on the seabed to record the scene I felt a tap on the shoulder, Grant Pullen - another of our team who had been checking the perimeter - pointed to a large lobster walking towards the structure. She was a pregnant female (berried) carrying thousands of eggs tucked in underneath her, looking for a home to raise her brood. I must have made a movement as I turned the camera on, she shot into one of the holes that had been meticulously designed for her.

Giving her a few minutes I moved the camera to record her settling in and moving things around in her new home. A blenny who had made its home under the structure came out to watch his new neighbour. We left the lobster looking quite comfortable with her big claws blocking the entrance, protecting her babies from danger. Let's hope she stays. It was more than we had hoped for, if nature could do that in 11 days, what can we expect in a year!'

The Minter Hotel is a fabulous example of a community coming together to preserve their local wildlife. Alan's drive to restore the lost biodiversity of the Sussex coast has led to something really special, that's already having a positive effect. Sussex Underwater's mission is to share 'glimmers of hope' - positive stories of nature recovery to inspire the community to advocate for our local environment. Future plans for the Minter Hotel include interactive ways for the local community to monitor the underwater hotel visitors, and more habitats placed along the seabed in the following year!

Ruby Stothard

Photos Sussex Underwater.

Main Photo James Ratchford Photography.

RETHINKING N
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George Dagg is a First-Class graduate student from Durham University holding a BA (Hons) in Geography. George outlines the research that guided his final year dissertation which he spoke on for Friends of the South Downs at a Planning & Conservation meeting in July.

How can we better understand local perspectives towards housing developments here in the South Downs?

This question has been central to my dissertation research investigation. I set out to discover what drives local opposition and support, specifically in Lewes and Easebourne, engaging with what makes the South Downs special, unique even, as a planning area.

Why seek alternatives to NIMBY?

Not-In-My-Back-Yard originated in the 1970s USA to describe opposition based on proximity. However, problematically, since its linguistic import to the UK, NIMBY has increasingly been conflated with blanket opposition for any reason. Ultimately, most residents I engaged with offered conditional support, dependent on two main concerns: aesthetic design and practicalities of infrastructure and affordability. These residents sought improvements - not opposition - to planned developments. Whereas, NIMBY language simply reinforces a pejorative notion of opposition, devoid of nuance, and delegitimises concerns:

Easebourne Street. Photo George Dagg.

Enshrined in policy

With a Local Plan recognising the Park's special qualities, and Neighbourhood Plans characteristic of localism, in the South Downs, concerns over design or practical liveability should not simply be dismissed as subjective, as selfish, as "NIMBY" - precisely because they are enshrined in policy guidelines and statutory purposes.

In a National Park with a "landscape-led" policy approach, should many local perspectives not be accepted as potentially landscape-led too, without such fear of dismissal?

Landscape and beauty

I identified a landscape emotive and experiential, urban and rural, that generates a place attachment naturally differentiated between settlements. It offers a transformed, positive sense of back-yardism, developing from the diversity of: rural landscapes across the Downs; vernacular styles in its streetscapes; and desires for our homes, communities and broader surroundings to be beautiful places to live, in both aesthetic and practical terms.

Celebrating place distinctiveness non-pejoratively recognises the legitimacy of relevant local concerns,

without positioning them as solely self-interested or contrasting to 'yes'-to-development YIMBYs. This also illuminates potential for improving participation in planning by thinking beyond NIMBY-YIMBY binaries.

My dissertation report explored the political potential of this 'beauty' - BIMBY - to achieve such an objective. BIMBY's popularity has been driven by The King's Foundation, who promote design charrettes to ascertain what is desired locally - employing consensus-building.

Whereas, Just Build Homes champion unlocking the voice of the "silent majority" who support housebuilding, from their self-titled "YIMBY" position. Their aims are ambitious, but also much-needed at a time when public planning participation is so low, and scepticism high. However, does a focus on majority/minority ultimately risk further polarisation by reproducing binary positions for/against?

New RTPI research on the "MIMBY majority" may seem to combat this risk by accounting for those who support developments under the right circumstances - 'maybe'. This echoes the conditionality I identified amongst many South Downs residents.

However, those I encountered were often more radical and certain in their support for the principle of development, but also their extent of concern and conditionality, than MIMBY could represent.

Positioning MIMBY between NIMBY and YIMBY implies a linear scale of acceptance, across which conversion can occur - what some term "planners' alchemy". Whilst beginning to appreciate complexity, 'Maybe' does not move beyond, or aside, from 'Yes' or 'No'.

Perhaps the problem is acronyms? They create identities, competing camps, that challenge the realisation of participatory benefits. However, aiming to increase public participation and inclusion in the planning process, perhaps the language we use to describe attitudes does not hold the greatest significance, rather the fundamentals of approach that lay behind it. That is, willingness to understand complexity in perspectives, and openness to nuance beyond simply the possibility of a "middle ground".

Cliffe High Street, Lewes. Photo George Dagg.

Farriers Court, Easebourne. Photo George Dagg.

So, what is the solution here in the South Downs?

Something specific to this area, that speaks to both frequently-expressed local sentiments and existing policy architectures, is required. Landscape? Beauty? An approach that reorients place attachment into purpose.

This is a small contribution to a discussion that I hope is only just beginning, one particularly salient to all of us who love the Downs, and want to see our communities thrive, all across its varied landscapes.

George Dagg

IMBY G LANDSCAPE

Free Young Adult Membership to Friends of the South Downs launched

Friends of the South Downs are excited to announce the launch of a new, free membership targeted to people aged 18-30.

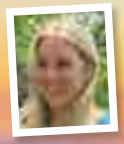
A new membership programme, aimed at young adults, has recently been launched by the Friends of the South Downs. The aim of the programme is to broaden and expand the membership base and strengthen community engagement among Generation Z. By opening up its membership, the Society hopes to hear from a more diverse audience and respond to the growing concerns posed by the climate crisis among young people.

David Green, Chairman of Friends of the South Downs commented, " Young adults must be given the chance to influence what we do. We want to create a vibrant and inclusive member-based organisation that delivers on the expectations for all those who share our love in the South Downs."

"This is a fantastic opportunity for young adults who share our love of this beautiful landscape to get involved and have their voice heard. We have been working to protect the future of the South Downs for decades and now find ourselves at a pivotal moment in time, says Eloise Phillips, Social Media and Events Co-ordinator.

"When I helped to develop the idea, I wanted to encourage more young people to have their say in our campaign and the future of our charity. With rising climate anxiety and uncertainty over the future, we provide an environment where everyone can feel part of a community where environmental protection and nature biodiversity are at our core."

To kickstart the launch of the free membership, the Friends have organised a series of free, online events catered to young adults. These will explore themes from careers in conservation, to the wildlife of the South Downs and the role of young people in environmental decision making. The charity works with young people of all ages, from schoolchildren to university students, supporting projects that help to preserve and promote nature in the South Downs. We look forward to welcoming our new young adult members and expanding the South Downs community.



Eloise Phillips
Social Media &
Events Co-ordinator

Having recently volunteered for the charity, I am looking forward to signing up as a young adult member and making the most of the opportunities to get involved. As a recent university graduate entering the working world, the chance to volunteer with Friends of the South Downs and boost my CV with vital experience has been very useful when applying for jobs.

Dominic Owen
Friends Young Adult Volunteer

Friends of the SOUTH DOWNS
Protecting the beauty of the Downs

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Designed and printed by Selsey Press | 01243 605234