

A beacon of green space during the pandemic

As residents of Bristol, it can be very easy to take things around us for granted that we've always known. And for many, that may well be the case for the Downs – an amazing piece of open space in the heart of Bristol, that has always been there, and provides a freely available green playground for us all.

During the pandemic, particularly throughout the three national lockdowns, the Downs provided the people of Bristol with 441 acres of beautiful open space and fresh air to enjoy.

Described as 'a beacon of light for Bristol residents', the Downs are easily accessible from all parts of the city. With plenty of space for social distancing, it's a common sight to see families and individuals taking in the fresh air, as well as runners, ramblers, athletes and dog walkers, it's the ideal space for people to exercise and relax.

Whilst there's no exact numbers counted for visitors to the Downs, it's been estimated that during the twelve months that followed the first lockdown in March 2020, visits increased by some 75%, particularly at weekends.

Ben Skuse, who is the Area Supervisor for the Downs, Blaise and Kingsweston Estates agrees: "This last year numbers of visitors have far exceeded anything we've known before. Being in a park is where it's been at!

"The Downs have been so beneficial for people wanting to swop lockdown situations inside for wide-reaching views and fresh air. We've received plenty of emails from people saying thank you to the Downs, which is really gratifying."

Jonathon Baker, a member of the Society of Merchant Venturers who's served on The Downs Committee for the past five years, says we can't underestimate how important the land is to Bristol. "As a city we're so lucky to have this piece of land that is safeguarded for the enjoyment of the people of Bristol. It sets Bristol apart from other towns and cities in the UK and is undoubtedly one of the reasons that Bristol is repeatedly cited as one of the best places to live.

“Green space is so important to everyone’s wellbeing, and to have such a large swathe of stunning greenery easily accessible for us all to relish, is quite amazing. It’s something that we should never take for granted,” he says. “The Downs have a special place in our hearts and minds.”

So who looks after the Downs?

The Downs Act of 1861 brought the two landowners of Clifton and Durdham Downs together – that’s to say the Bristol City Council or corporation, and the Society of Merchant Venturers, into what we know today as The Downs Committee. This committee – the guardians of the Downs - essentially oversees the management and safeguarding of the Downs.

The vision of the Council and the Society of Merchant Venturers, the passing of the Clifton and Durdham Downs Act ensured that the Downs were to be preserved from any development, freely available for the people of Bristol to enjoy. The two organisations were united in this and agreed to work together to make it happen. Since then, the Downs Committee has comprised representatives of both bodies, the Mayor (now Lord Mayor) in the chair; six representatives from the Council, six from the Society of Merchant Venturers, and its current Master. This format still exists today.

Robert Westlake, Chair of the Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge group, says, “The City Council and the Society of Merchant Venturers were very innovative to recognise that there was a need for a public recreation area in Bristol back in the 1800s, and to save the area from local landowners claiming land to build houses. They certainly had vision taking this action.”

At the same time, Bristol City Council has responsibility for the day-to-day maintenance and upkeep of the Downs, today undertaken by a team of five within the Council’s parks department. Led by Ben Skuse, Ben declares he’s got the best office in the world!

He says, “Every time you read about Bristol being a great place to live, it must have lots to do with the fact that we have plenty of green, open space, so you can feel you’re in the countryside while in a city. The open spaces are large scale, so that helps with the feel of being in the country. “I used to come to the Downs as a child. It makes me feel proud to work here now. Life turns full circle and I now enjoy bringing my daughter here.”

Ben’s team have a wide variety of duties when it comes to the daily maintenance of the 400+ acres. Following a carefully laid out management plan, they look after the grassland, woodland, scrub and

amenity grassland, as well as the Bristol side of the Avon Gorge which is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), and the wildflower meadows. Everything is identified and managed accordingly.

With the increased visitor numbers over recent months Ben's team have been particularly busy. "Clearing up the rubbish has been our number one priority. We need to keep the space safe and tidy. In just one seven-day period in 2020 we took away 7.8 tonnes of rubbish.

"Alongside the increased visitors, the wet weather in January and February this year also caused its own issues," says Ben. "It's the first time we've seen such ground erosion alongside the paths, and wear on the grass – but when the weather improved and the ground began to dry out, we were able to reinstate the ground where needed."

Working closely with The Downs Committee, Ben and his team do so much more too! They are guardians of the 32 football pitches on the Downs, they work with events organisers on ground maintenance, and even play their part in daily check on the 'Goats in the Gully', making sure the fence line is secure, and that the goats have plenty of water. They maintain the Downs' 180 benches, they look after the children's play area near the Suspension Bridge, and open and close the toilet blocks every day.

"It's such an important space for the city. It's never a chore coming to work, I'm really pleased to play my part in its upkeep," concludes Ben.

You can read the Downs Management Plan and other items related to the Downs here:

<https://www.bristol.gov.uk/museums-parks-sports-culture/the-downs>

