

Chairs Annual Report 2022

The FORH aims are to conserve biodiversity, improve the environment and raise awareness and understanding of wildlife issues, and to foster interest in the wildlife and geology of the local area through volunteer's days and various events. To do this we work closely with the Wildlife Trust for Birmingham and the Black Country, Sandwell Council, the Black Country Geological Society, and Butterfly Conservation West Midlands Branch.

During the past year FORH have continued to promote the open spaces on Rowley Hills for future generations through our website, on Twitter and Facebook, and by the launch of our first 'Walking Trail Guide'.

During autumn and early winter of 2021, a small band of FORH volunteers inputted a considerable amount of time and effort into restoring the 100-metre section of track running between the double hedgerow on the Portway Hill site. Since quarrying days this stretch of ancient trackway, locally known as 'Church Walk' because it might have once formed part of the old coaching road leading up to Rowley Church, a mile or so away, had become densely overgrown with bramble and hawthorn scrub. Since the opening of this lost walkway, it has now become part of a route regularly used by local walkers, linking up to the shorter section of double hedgerow track on the other side of the public right of way.

In March our Treasurer R Duncan made an enquiry with Western Power asking if FORH could rent the abandoned MEB substation on Portway Hill for the storage of spades, shovels, forks, loppers, and wheelbarrows. Resulting from this FORH now been given permission to use the building for a 'peppercorn rent' of £50.00 per annum, payable in advance. An agreement was signed by both parties stating that the building can be used solely for the use of storing tools and that any necessary repairs were carried out by the Friends group. Since taking over the building in May 2022, the roof has been re-felted, the interior walls of the building thoroughly cleaned, the floor swept and cleared of debris, and a replacement door fitted, together with new locks to secure the unit. Our thanks go to Morris Cole for fitting the door and providing locks without any charge to the Friends.

From old maps it became apparent that in the past a public right of way crossing the Portway Hill site, exited onto Portway Hill at a point just above Old Portway Farm. This PROW linked to the existing right of way used by walkers crossing the hillside. Any possibility of reinstating the old right of way is unfortunately unachievable, but as an alternative the Friends have cut a track through the wooded bank on Portway Hill a short distance away from the original public right of way. This is an ongoing project which when completed, will provide an access route onto the hillside from the lower end of Portway Hill.

On July 19th, during the summer heatwave, a grass fire started on the Portway Hill site close to St Brades Close. Fortunately, West Midland Fire Service put out the fire before it spread to the garden fences in St Brades Close.

In early August, a tree service company employed by the landowner of a parcel of land to the rear of St Brades Close near to where the fire in July had occurred, removed, and chipped the previously felled trees and vegetation on the bank at the back of the houses and gardens in St Brades Close. This was a welcome relief to the residents whose garden fences backed on to the site. Once the bank had been cleared the tree service company then moved on to the fenced-off coppice of Millennium planted trees and proceeded to clear-fell and chip them all. This led to complaints by residents and prompted a visit by a Sandwell Council Environmental Enforcement Officer, and a response from The Wildlife Trust for Birmingham and the Black Country.

The resulting wood chippings were put to good use by Friends volunteers who have spread them along the public rights of way crossing the hillside to fill up the potholes to make walking across the site a safer and more enjoyable experience.

August saw the launch of the first Rowley Hills Walking Trail Guides. 1000 copies of 'Exploring the Geology and Landscape of the Northern slopes of the Rowley Hills' were printed by Needfliers in Lye. Copies of the trail guide have since the launch been distributed to the HQ of GM2LF at The Vicarage, Shelsey Avenue, schools and libraries in the Grace Mary to Lion Farm catchment area, Dudley Museum and Archives, Bumble Hole Visitors' Centre, Ashleigh Road Church Community Centre, and to many individuals. Our thanks go out to GM2LF Big Local for the Lottery Grant Funding received from them which has paid for the guides to be printed. Our grateful thanks also go out to Black Country geologist Graham Worton who designed the guide and supplied most of the written information included in the guide without any charge to the FORH. The intension is that more local Trail Guides will hopefully follow in due course.

At the end of September FORH participated in an event at Top Church in Dudley as part of 'The Great Big Green Week' Eco Fair. Banners, photographs, and information about our group were displayed, and FORH leaflets and Trail Guides were handed out.

In early October FORH purchased two sacks of Daffodil bulbs (King Alfred and Golden Harvest) from Cypress Nursery in Blackheath at a cost of £90.00. They have now been planted in the strip of ground alongside the pavement from the top of Portway Hill near Lye Cross Road, all the way down to as far as the tool storage unit near the bottom of the hill. It is anticipated that in the years to come a colourful display of golden blooms will greet the motorist and pedestrian as they drive or walk along this road during the springtime.

Volunteering days with the Wildlife Trust continued during 2022 and we welcomed Jake Williams, the Trust's representative on the Portway Hill site. During the past 12 months various activities have been carried out by the Trust's volunteers. They include strimming and clearing scrub vegetation on the Trust's land, clearing a pathway at the base of the rock-face, now Black Country UNESCO Geosite 23, to make this attraction more accessible to visitors, and clearing vegetation from along the track through the canyon, and near the entrance to the Portway Hill site along Wolverhampton Road.

Wildlife sightings this year include Andrew Cook's discovery of a Pyramidal Orchid on the Portway Hill site, only the tenth record for this colourful orchid in the whole of Birmingham and Black Country, along with his many butterfly and day-flying moth records, which include good numbers of Marbled White, Small Heath, and Small Copper. Also recorded on the hillside this summer were, Green Hairstreak, Painted Lady, Red Admiral, Mother Shipton, and many Six-belted Clearwing moths.

A summary of the birds seen on the Portway Hill site in 2022 was received from local birder Nick Horton and was read out to those present at the AGM. It included sightings of Peregrine, Red Kites, Ravens, and a Red Listed, Black Redstart, seen in the area near the Wildlife Trust owned land during the summer.

Still to come this year. On Saturday 10th December a joint meeting has been arranged with The Wildlife Trust for Birmingham and the Black Country, and the Black Country Geological Society on the Portway Hill site.

I conclude this report by mentioning two committee members who have now resigned. Josie and Andrew Cook have been part of the Friends of Rowley Hills right from its start in 2014. Both have made enormous contributions and they will be missed on the committee. We wish them well for the future. The good news is that Andrew will continue as Butterfly recorder for the site in 2023.

Finally, our thanks go to our treasurer Robert Duncan for inviting us into his home for the 2022 AGM.