

Take a walk on Brandon Hill, in the heart of Bristol, on a clear day, and look out to the horizon. The city stretches for miles on all sides, and beyond lie green fields and hills. It's tempting to think that all nature conservation interest resides in the green beyond the city.

But cities are full of wildlife, too – it is just that sometimes you need to look harder to find it. Recognising this, Avon Wildlife Trust has been a champion of urban nature conservation since the day it was formed, 30 years ago this May.

On that day, 1,000 people gathered together to celebrate the launch of the trust. It was the result of several years' discussion and hard work by a dedicated group of people who believed that Avon's identity was a distinct one that needed serving.

Avon's boundaries may have come and gone, but Avon Wildlife Trust is still with us and still catering for the special mix of urban and rural that identifies Bristol and its environs.

For an example of a wild corner in the city, bring your gaze right back down to Brandon Hill's slopes, to the section managed by the trust as a nature reserve. At this time of year it looks like roughly cut grassland, but every summer it blossoms into a wildflower meadow that is pretty in its own right and

Thirty years and counting

In 2010, Avon Wildlife Trust will be 30 years old. The trust's **Morag Shuaib** explores its priorities, past and present

also attracts butterflies and birds. But of course, urban wildlife isn't confined to special reserves – walls, derelict areas, allotments and gardens can all harbour different species, whether ferns, spiders, birds or foxes.

One of the keys to spreading this message is to involve local communities, and this has been a strength of Avon Wildlife Trust.

The forthcoming year will be no different, with two new exciting projects planned, to highlight the plight of sparrows and hedgehogs. Both of these species have declined throughout the country and both can be helped by individual actions in gardens, allotments and parks.

Involving the younger generation has been a big strength and the trust now has two education centres whose work complements each other – Folly Farm and Willsbridge Mill – and which reach out to adults as well as children.

The more rural element of Avon Wildlife Trust's work has traditionally involved managing nature reserves in such beautiful sites as Folly Farm, Weston Big



Wood and Dolebury Warren. But the past few years have seen a transformation in ideas about conservation in the countryside, emphasising the importance of large-scale approaches. The regional foundations for this

approach were built by the South West Wildlife Trusts, whose pioneering work has helped identify areas that are especially significant for wildlife and which, if joined up, could increase the potential even more. This approach has been

adopted by wildlife trusts across the country under the banner A Living Landscape, and is being pursued through many different projects.

Avon Wildlife Trust's Living Landscape initiative includes its project to restore Avon's wildflower-rich grasslands, which began last year and has a further four years to run. It aims to protect Avon's remaining wildflower-rich grasslands and to look at ways to expand and reconnect this vital habitat.

At 30 years, Avon Wildlife Trust has much to celebrate. It is planning a series of events over the course of the year, beginning with a talk on February 5 by award-winning wildlife documentary producer Martha Holmes, series producer for the BBC's *Life* (for details, call 0117 917 7270).

Thirty years ago, Avon Wildlife Trust started with 800 members. Today, membership stands at more than 17,500 – a vital element of involvement for any charity hoping to flourish in the next 30 years, at a crucial time in humans' relationship with the environment.

Gardens are not just places to hack and hoe, or weed and grow. They're far more versatile than that, as Somerset author Philippa Lewis reveals to *West Country Life*

In your own garden you can do precisely what you want, declares Philippa Lewis. The poet William Blake did. He sat in his, naked, reciting excerpts from Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

These days, if you and your garden were particularly exposed, you would probably be arrested on public nuisance grounds.

But there are lots of other, equally extravagant, eccentric, pastimes you can indulge in.

Which is where Philippa's new book, *Everything You Can Do In The Garden Without Actually Gardening*, comes in.

In an extremely comprehensive 200-plus pages, she sets out the ways, often weird and wacky, we have utilised our gardens, great and small, down the centuries.

They range from a chap called George Durant who inserted a pulpit into his garden wall so he could preach at passers-by.

Or, if you want to be totally over-the-top, be like Charles Burnet III. He hired a group of off-duty soldiers to recreate Falklands War skirmishes on his lawns and flower beds. It was his 51st birthday, after all...

Much of the content is not quite as flippant as either of these gentlemen, but it does provide a fascinating insight into what gardens mean to each and every one of us fortunate enough to have access to one.

We asked Philippa to tell us what the garden means to her and the role it has played in her life. Here's what she says:

"I have many favourite passages in my book, although some activities I cannot possibly empathise with.

"For example, unlike 17th-century Sir William Temple, I really have no wish to have my heart buried in a china bowl in our garden when I die; nor do I feel it would be amusing to do as Temple's contemporary Thomas Bushell did – lie in a hammock in a dark grotto among Egyptian mummies.

"However, the words of the Victorian curate Francis Kilvert express exactly what I felt during a warm spell last autumn: that sitting in a garden and enjoying the 'still warm sunshine of the autumn day' make it 'a positive luxury to be alive'.

"Being a child of the 1950s meant that if you were lucky enough to have one, you had a very close involvement with the garden from a very early age.

"Our mothers believed that to be healthy, babies should spend long hours parked outside in a pram, under a cat net if necessary; although the extreme view posited by a childcare writer of 1939 that 'infants should hardly be indoors at all between eight in the morning and five at night in winter' was being softened for us post-war bulge children.

"Once we were independent, we were free to disappear with friends on bike rides – 'just be back in time for lunch' – and, since *Children's Hour* on the radio didn't start until five o'clock, we also spent hours and hours amusing ourselves in the garden.

"We had a menagerie of animals that included my brother's newts, my mother's bantams and my fierce white rabbit with pink eyes that constantly escaped (this was laughably unadventurous when compared to the painter Rossetti, who kept in his Chelsea garden a small Brahmin bull, wombats, armadillos and peacocks, to name but a few).

"We made dens, huts and camps to suit whatever our current fantasy was. I remember seeing photographs of Prince Charles and Princess Anne playing in a proper miniature

Sit back and relax



Philippa and her brother in the garden, above, and the author at home today, top

cottage at Windsor and being aghast with envy. During the Davy Crockett craze, a Sussex garden could easily stand in for the Wild West, though I fear I spent much time actually pretending to be a pony rather than a cowboy.

"My brother longed for water and made boats. He still fishes.

"Pocket money was earned by killing cabbage white butterflies in the vegetable garden, which was as close as we got to actually gardening.

"Our 'swimming pool' on hot summer days was a navy surplus rubber life-raft bought by my father, which he inflated by somehow making the Hoover blow rather than suck. We thought it perfect.

"Fireworks night was a highlight: eating toffee apples with friends and neighbours in someone's back garden and with a scant disregard for sensibilities and safety, happily cheering when the guy went up in flames and running wild with squibs and sparklers.

"While researching, I talked to the editor of *Fireworks Magazine* John Bennett, who remembered his uncle at their family parties enthusiastically letting off smoke bombs and flash bangers that he had left over from his

wartime ARP service. Danger *was* allowed in the mid-20th century.

"Unlike Wordsworth, I have never written poetry in the garden and unlike my ancestor James Lewis, who was a footman at the Duchess of Sutherland's mansion in Staffordshire, I have never played skittles in our back yard for money. Although when we returned to my parents' garden as grown-ups we played ferociously competitive games of croquet long into the evening accompanied by midges and wine.

"But what I really have always wanted to achieve, and have yet to do, is to succeed in transporting the television outside into the garden in order to lounge about in a really comfortable deck chair watching the tennis at Wimbledon; another perfect use for a garden."

Everything You Can Do In The Garden Without Actually Gardening is published by Francis Lincoln Limited, price £16.99.



UK Specialist Hospitals is pleased to sponsor West Country Life



AS AN NHS PATIENT, YOU CAN CHOOSE WHERE YOU WANT TO RECEIVE YOUR HEALTHCARE TREATMENT



Shepton Mallet NHS Treatment Centre, operated by UKSH, delivers more choice, short waiting times and greater access to healthcare in the South West. Shepton Mallet NHS Treatment Centre has an excellent track record for delivering high quality clinical results and low infection rates with no cases of hospital acquired MRSA since opening in 2005.

Later this year, UKSH will open three more facilities in the South West:

- Emersons Green
- Devizes
- Cirencester



HEALTHCARE CHOICES TO SUIT YOU

www.nhs.uk/choices

www.uk-sh.co.uk