

## **FRIENDS OF THE HERMITAGE OF BRAID AND BLACKFORD HILL**

### **ANNUAL REPORT 2001-2002**

The third AGM of the FoH was held on Thursday October 25th 2001, when 40 people attended at the Cluny Centre in Cluny Drive. The meeting was opened by Convener David Hadley. Cllrs Walls, Sleigh, and Pringle were in attendance.

The Convener then handed over to Vice-convener Jeff Maguire who explained that the members were being asked to break into five groups in order to generate discussion about what activities the group should organise in the coming year. This proved to be a useful means of stimulating discussion among those present about the work of the Friends, and how it could be improved.

More formal business was then conducted. The Convener announced that he was standing down from the chair because of increased business commitments, but wished to remain on the committee. The following office-bearers and committee members were then elected :

Rob Elton (Convener), Jeff Maguire (Vice-convener), A.J. Mullay (Secretary), Susanna Dunbar (Treasurer).

Ian Wotherspoon was voted on to the committee in his absence. Also on committee: Claire Parrott, Nick Marshall, Deb Allen, Neil Young, Susan Wong, Amanda Ingram, David Hadley. One vacancy on the committee was left unfilled. No motions or resolutions had been received concerning the annual subscription of £5, which therefore continued. Group memberships remain at £25; at the time of writing no group members have been approved. David Hadley and Claire Parrott were thanked for their work as office-bearers, and departing committee members Lee Gates, Alex Brearley, and Wilma Elton, for their contribution over the year. During the following year, Claire Parrott, Nick Marshall, and Ian Wotherspoon resigned from the committee because of other commitments. Claire took with her our best wishes for her new career furth of Edinburgh. The committee co-opted Lindsay Ross, who has since taken up an appointment in the South of England, and Liz Brady, who joined the committee in June.

During the year, your committee organised two clean-ups of the Braid Burn, and one of these, in February, was very well supported, with 30 sacks of refuse being removed from the water as well as assorted items such as a sofa bed, electrical testing equipment, a large plastic toy car, a doll dressed in military fatigues and what looked like a severed head, tightly bound in newspaper and string, which appeared to have spent some considerable time in a septic tank - definitely not native aquatic and ruderal species! Individual members also supported clean-ups organised by the Rangers, the latest of these in October. In July, we organised a 'balsam-bashing' event, where volunteers were encouraged to remove (ie cut down mercilessly!) Himalayan Balsam which was invading native vegetation at three particular locations. Eight volunteers reported, four from the committee.

We also offered a number of exciting events for Friends to participate in – but it seems the membership found these less exciting than the committee did! Our trip to St Abbs in June was undertaken only by three committee members and two of their spouses (where was everybody else?). In April we asked local zoology student Iain Munro to provide a lecture on snails in the Hermitage, and this interesting meeting attracted a

dozen Friends. Iain communicated his molluscan enthusiasm particularly well, overcoming the lack of a slide projector. The Dawn Birdwatch was held in May as usual, and was well-supported, although the number of avian species noted was down to 24 this year (33 last year). We asked the Lothian Badger Group to organise two summer visits to Corstorphine Hill for us, and both evenings were well attended. One group was well-rewarded with views of badgers and fox; the other was less lucky. Your committee has made a contribution to Lothian Badger Group for their kindness in accommodating us, and made a personal gift of a Friends sweatshirt to the guide, Tricia Alderton, which was gratefully received.

One of the most important developments this year was the taking over of the Wetland Patch at Blackford. The Friends wrote to the Ranger Service in January to formally propose that the group took over the environmental planning and management of the patch of wetland and mixed woodland between Blackford Pond and the Midmar Allotments. Both the Ranger Service and the Parks Department have welcomed this proposal and have given us the go-ahead to develop the patch as a green space and wildlife resource for the benefit of the local community. We had already discussed this exciting idea at a number of management committee meetings and former committee member Claire Parrott had also previously met with Duncan Priddle, Acting Senior Countryside Ranger for Hermitage of Braid, to discuss our plans for the area in more detail, which we plan to call 'The Friends' Local Wetland Patch'.

We have produced an action plan (published in the spring 2002 edition of Hill & Hermitage) to be carried out over the course of 2002 and 2003 in conjunction with the Ranger Service, and perhaps other local groups willing to get involved. We received notification in May that Pentland Local Development Committee had approved an award of £4366 to the Friends to fund the construction of a partially cemented drystone dyke, double field gate and pedestrian access gate at the patch. The money will also fund places on BTCV Scotland training courses on woodland and wetland management. Work on the dyke and gates is planned to commence in early October, after the current nesting season. We will then undertake comprehensive surveys with the help of Bob Saville at the Lothian Wildlife Information Centre before any active management of the site occurs, with the ultimate aim being to create a well managed, accessible woodland and wetland green space, rich in biodiversity, for the education and enjoyment of the local community.

We need people to get involved in this ambitious project and help turn our vision into reality. We have formed a sub group within the Friends to take our plans forward. This group is open to any member who wants to get involved, regardless of specialist knowledge and experience. Look out for details in forthcoming newsletters. If your interested in playing a part in this exciting project, however small, please come along and play your part in the Friends' local wetland patch project! For more information, contact Jeff on 447 3314 or email [jeff@jmaguire53.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:jeff@jmaguire53.fsnet.co.uk).

Apart from our successful application to the City's Local Development Committee for grant-aid for the Patch, we have also been successful in obtaining a grant of £300 from the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers for the purchase of tools. As we have no premises of our own, these have been added to the tool store at Hermitage House, where the Rangers, and other volunteers working under Rangers' supervision, are welcome to use them.

The City authorities have asked for our opinion on a number of developments over the year. In April we were asked to comment on the draft management plan for the golf course proposed for the two fields immediately south of the Hermitage. We found this document to be very provisional in its outlook, and pointed out to the planning department that the conditions of consent for development require a detailed management plan, which this was not. We were particularly baffled by the suggestion in the report that the golf course would be attractive to grass snakes. As far as we know, there are no grass snakes within 75 miles of here! Unfortunately, our comments have not been acknowledged.

We are still following the progress of the South East Local Plan, to which we contributed in the summer of 2000, welcoming the City's suggestion that the 'golf-course' fields should be designated as an Urban Wildlife Site, where animals from the Hermitage can forage. In its nearly-final draft, the Plan dismisses this on the grounds of 'insufficient wildlife interest' – yet it was the City's idea in the first place. We are querying the department's policy here. Also, we are puzzled that the City will not acknowledge, in the Plan, that Blackford Hill and Quarry are designated as a Regionally Important Geological Site (RIGS) by the British Geological Survey, while the Plan has assigned this status to Craigmillar Quarry.

Your committee raised no objection to the City's planned Floods strategy, partly because it does not immediately affect the Hermitage, and partly because we realise that something must be done quickly to contain future flooding. However, we noticed that our remarks to the study have been heavily edited in the final consultation document – in particular, our suggestion that the Countryside Rangers be consulted about the environmental impact of any engineering works undertaken on the city's watercourses, has been omitted. We also contributed two ideas to a public-relations firm investigating the City's Parks strategy.

Not surprisingly, we contended that while an urban park might be suitable for fireworks displays, a Local Nature Reserve is not, and we have pointed out to City officials, unfortunately without effect, that both the Scottish Executive and World Wildlife Fund have asked for an environmental impact study to be carried out at Hermitage and Corstorphine into the City's Hogmanay fireworks displays. We have suggested another site, on the north side of Edinburgh, which we believe would present no human or environmental problems.

We have supported the informal group hoping to resurrect the sundial in front of Hermitage House with a donation of £110. In addition we are investigating if we can apply for any grants on the group's behalf. We are also costing and researching the possibility of raising a four-way signpost at the Scout Bridge. One of the arms would, we hope, incorporate a 'mention' for the Friends. Four more issues of 'Hill and Hermitage' newsletter were published during the year. Edited by David Hadley to a very professional standard, it is distributed to members by a number of Friends, led principally by Deb Allen, Jeff Maguire, and Susanna Dunbar.

Friends wishing to advertise their affection for the Hermitage can purchase specially-commissioned sweatshirts which were ordered in March and are available at a retail price of £18. So far, sales have been slow, but it's not too late to order one of these high-quality garments. Contact the Treasurer, Susanna Dunbar on 667 3736.