

FRIENDS OF THE HERMITAGE OF BRAID AND BLACKFORD HILL

ANNUAL REPORT 2003-2004

The fifth AGM of the FoH was held on Thursday October 30th 2003 at the Cluny Centre in the presence of 24 members. The main items of business were a talk by Countryside Ranger Fergus Cook on the year in the Hermitage, followed by a summary of the main points in the Annual Report given by outgoing Vice-Convener Jeff Maguire. The evening was completed by the formal business followed by refreshments. Rob Elton (Convener), Pete Matthews (Vice-convener) and Morag Smart (Treasurer) were elected as office-bearers but the post of Secretary was left unfilled as no candidates had put themselves forward. Brian Smith, Andy Coates and Mark McInnes remained on the committee as ordinary members, and Paul Mooney was elected as a new member, while a number of long-serving members chose to step down.

The committee was therefore short of a Secretary and more than half of its quota of ordinary members after the 2003 AGM, and no new committee members were recruited during the year, so the inevitable result was a relatively low-key year for the Friends with core activities maintained but not many new initiatives. However, we were still able to offer a solid programme of events to our members organized with great enthusiasm by Pete Matthews, while Andy Coates took on the editorship of Hill and Hermitage and produced all four quarterly editions to an excellent standard, and our website www.fohb.org was maintained and consolidated thanks mainly to the work of Morag Smart. On the down side, perhaps the areas where the lack of active volunteers was felt most keenly were campaigning, practical activities and applications for grants, and we were also unable to restart the Sunday tea room service at Hermitage House which had been a popular attraction for visitors to the Hermitage the previous year.

The Wetland Patch project also entered a quiet phase, with most of the development completed including the excellent new benches made from recycled plastic, but we are justifiably proud of our achievement in implementing this ambitious scheme, which is now being enjoyed by many visitors to the Blackford Pond area. Thanks must again be recorded to Jeff Maguire, without whose unflagging efforts this dream would never have been realised. We look forward to continuing to maintain the Patch with volunteer work sessions mainly aimed at tidying the vegetation.

Our events comprised a number of old favourites as well as some highly successful new ventures. The dawn birdwatch in May was hosted as in previous years by Duncan Priddle, an evening of badger watching at Corstorphine was again arranged in collaboration with Trisha Alderson in July and local expert Natalie Taylor put on another of her delightful bat evenings in August. The three new events were a summer evening guided plant walk with Jackie Muscott, a talk on the new Rights of Way legislation by Alistair Lawson and a guided tour of the geology of the LNR hosted by Cliff Porteous in the September dusk. All of these events were supported by your subscriptions through donations to individuals or their organizations in return for their time and effort.

On the practical side, Braid Burn clean-ups took place in February and March, and the usual large number of bin bags were filled with the assorted debris that accumulates inexorably in the Burn. Thanks largely to the efforts of Susanna Dunbar, the Friends were also involved in the planting of a number of specimens of Sticky Catchfly, which had occurred on the Hill in the past but had disappeared in recent decades, and also of 70 primrose plants grown from seed at the Royal Botanic Gardens which we hope will provide a beautiful show in the Hermitage next Spring. Susanna has also taken the lead in our acquisition of a number of bird and bat boxes, most of which have been put up in various parts of the LNR by Fergus with the help of Friends volunteers. Regrettably, we failed this year to contribute to the upkeep of the reserve by either path maintenance or clearance of invading plants, but we do hope to revive some of these activities if more volunteers can be found.

Although the Friends did not initiate any new grant applications during the period covered by this report, we did see some of our efforts in previous years come to fruition. In December 2003, the splendid new sundial on the open space outside Hermitage House was unveiled by George Russell, who had been the inspiration for this project, and this was supported both by a donation from the Friends and by a grant from WREN raised by ourselves. The other major fundraising effort last year was the LDC grant obtained by Jeff Maguire last year, which paid for the striking new four-way signpost now to be seen at the Scout Bridge, the recycled plastic benches in the Wetland Patch, the resurfacing of the paths around Blackford Pond and the maintenance of our website. The Friends also made a donation towards the upkeep of the Midmar paddock, thus helping to preserve it from possible development.

The Friends' campaigning zeal suffered considerably from the departure from the committee of our most indefatigable activist Sandy Mullay, and therefore our responses on issues such as Hogmanay fireworks, the Braid Burn flood prevention scheme, the works at the Royal Observatory and the development of the new golf course south of Blackford Glen have been fairly minimal. This may change again if the committee membership is increased in 2004-05, but until the Secretary's post can be filled it will be difficult to return to past levels of activity in this area.

Finally, it is a pleasure to report that our relations with the Countryside Ranger team remain extremely cordial, and that Fergus and Duncan have been consistently supportive of our efforts to help preserve and enhance our beautiful territory. We look forward to continuing to work in partnership with them and their colleagues in meeting some of the future challenges that will inevitably arise.