

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

### **ANNUAL REPORT 2004-2005**

The sixth AGM of the FoH was held on Thursday October 28th 2004 at the Cluny Centre in the presence of 25 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 Convener Rob Elton. The evening was completed by the formal business followed by refreshments. Rob Elton (Convener), Pete Matthews (Vice-convener) and Paul Mooney (Treasurer) were elected as office-bearers but the post of Secretary was left unfilled for the second year running in the absence of candidates. Brian Smith, Morag Smart, Andrew Coates and Mark McInnes remained on the committee, while Sandy Mullay, Jeff Maguire, Goff Cantley, Lindsay Ross and Sandie Ross were elected as new members.

This substantial infusion of new blood to the committee led to the hope that we would be able to achieve more than in the previous year, but several members of the new committee moved away from Edinburgh almost at once, and this coupled with the continuing lack of a secretary meant that the Friends were only marginally less minimalist in their activities than in 2003-04. Committee meetings often had to make do without a quorum, and the core of active members was again quite small, so some of the new initiatives originally envisaged are still not implemented. This includes our ambition to develop liaison with schools as well as to restart previous activities such as the Hermitage House tearoom.

On the positive side, we have again offered a substantial programme of events to our members, in spite of losing our event organizer Pete Matthews to a new career in England and not finding a replacement. The return of Sandy Mullay to the committee has also given a boost to our campaigning, Andrew Coates has continued to produce varied and entertaining editions of Hill and Hermitage as well as taking on the maintenance of the website, and Goff Cantley and Jeff Maguire have also contributed in many ways to Friends activities over the year.

Our events comprised a mixture of regular annual favourites and revivals of previous ones. Fergus Cook successfully took over the dawn birdwatch in May following the departure of 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. We also held a wine-tasting in December and invited back Charles Montgomery for a repeat of his fascinating talk on amphibia and reptiles. Most 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, we held three burn clean-ups over the year, with the usual large yield of bin bags filled with assorted junk, as well as work days in the Wetland Patch and on the Hill mainly aimed at clearing vegetation, and put up most of the remaining bird and bat boxes in the Hermitage.

Although the Friends did not initiate any new grant applications during the period covered by this report, your committee has been concerned this year with the state of the 17th century Doocot north of the Burn and west of Hermitage House. We were informed that this listed building could not be rendered watertight before the coming winter owing to financial constraints. With Goff Cantley leading the way, we have brought this problem to the attention of the politicians, and the intervention of Councillor Mark McInnes has enabled some funds to be identified to carry out immediate repairs. The long-term future of the building is still in question, however, and it would be pleasant if the interpretation of this building could be improved, so we are still considering whether the Friends can make a contribution to this via a grant application.

During the year, the Friends were asked to comment on a number of Planning matters by the local authority.

Friends who have been members of this group since its inception in 1999 will be aware that in the six subsequent years we have made repeated submissions on the South East Edinburgh Local Plan (which includes the entire Green Belt). This year the Plan appears to be complete, and we were delighted to learn that a number of points which we raised have been acknowledged. As far back as the year 2000 we pointed out that the draft plan had 'removed' RIGS status (Regionally Important Geological Site) from the Blackford area, but it was only last November that the City Planning Department acknowledged this omission. Your committee was relieved, believing that our Local Nature Reserve deserves all the scientific protection available.

We then raised with Planning the fact that their published plans of the Midmar area show that the Paddock, whose owners were seeking a rezoning which would permit housing on the site, indicated that this sensitive area has been removed from the Green Belt (GB). Planning have now (somewhat alarmingly) admitted their draft map contains a printing error but have confirmed in writing that the Paddock – whose future was referred to the Scottish Executive two years ago – is definitely in the Green Belt. On that subject, the committee objected to a development proposal for housing in the Alnwickhill area as we believe that this represents a breach of GB conditions.

We have also answered a Planning request for comments on the new City Local Plan (which, unfortunately, lists the Alnwickhill development as if it were a *fait accompli*), and approved the Plan's promise of increased access to green spaces in the city. We felt however that the City Council's commitment to this admirable principle would be enhanced if they staffed Hermitage House on Saturdays, and informed the planners accordingly.

The Committee expressed concern in May about the lack of an interpretation notice for the Agassiz Rock – one visitor had asked “Why is it called the gassy rock?” An offer was made to assist with notice replacement, but in the event, the City's budget managed to run to this, and a new notice was put up in June'. No, the above is not a contemporary comment, but a quote from the 2000 Annual Report, when we bemoaned the lack of attention to the important Agassiz Rock from the City Council. Now in 2005, once again the Rock is 'anonymous' and we now understand that there are technical difficulties in fixing a notice to the Rock without damaging it. We have suggested a free-standing plinth or notice, but we are still waiting for a constructive response from the City. We have also asked if the City has a long-term plan to preserve this Site of Special Scientific Interest, and whether we can offer positive assistance in publicity and/or interpretation.

At our last committee meeting, we discussed the children's playpark proposed for the east end of Blackford Pond. We agree with the Ranger's point that play equipment should look more 'rustic', and we understand that there is a desperate shortage of kiddies' play facilities in south Edinburgh – although whether a nature reserve is the best place for one, is a moot point. What do you think?

Finally, we should once again acknowledge our debt to the Countryside Ranger team, and report that Fergus in particular has been consistently supportive of our efforts to help preserve and enhance our beautiful territory. We will miss Duncan Priddle, who has also been a good friend of the Friends since we came into being, but look forward to an equally productive partnership with his successor Duncan Monteith.