

FRIENDS OF THE HERMITAGE OF BRAID & BLACKFORD HILL ANNUAL REPORT 2005-2006

The seventh AGM of the FoHB was held on Thursday October 27th 2005 at the Cluny Centre, with a turnout of more than 30 – better than in previous years. This may have been in response to a scheduled address from a senior City official rumoured to be in favour of unlimited cycling in the Reserve, but in the event, the speaker was unable to attend. One City staff member who did, was the ever-popular Ranger, Fergus Cook, who presented an interesting portrait of the year at the Hermitage. In July 2006 Fergus swapped jobs with the Craigmillar Ranger, Jessica Morgado, who now brings her Gallic charm to committee meetings!

Fergus' AGM talk was followed by the formal business of the evening, with Rob Elton and Paul Mooney being re-elected unanimously to the positions of Chairman and Treasurer respectively. No appointments were made to the Vice-Chairman and Secretary posts, although during the year, Goff Cantley volunteered to undertake the second of these roles. Three new members joined the committee – Elaine Abbot, Jo Doake, and Moira Stevenson – joining Jeff Maguire, A.J. Mullay, Andrew Coates, and Sandie and Lindsay Ross. Brian Smith, Morag Smart, and Cllr Mark McInnes all resigned from the committee at the AGM, and during the year have been followed by the Ross sisters and Andrew Coates. Nevertheless, the committee has worked well during the last twelve months, meeting seven times, with only one meeting inquorate.

With the City Council planning a children's playpark at the eastern end of Blackford Pond, recreational aspects of the Reserve have occupied much of the Friends' attention. The need for additional toddlers' facilities is recognised by everyone, although it seems a pity for the City to break the conditions of its own LNR designation of 1993 to locate a playpark in a protected area. Apart from that aspect of the proposals, we have pointed out that Charterhall Road/Cluny Gardens thoroughfare is notorious for speeding – as the presence of a speed trap outside the park gates last November indicates – and we have asked for the safety of pedestrian approach to the new toddlers' site to be looked at again by traffic officials. Effectively, the LNR is being used by the City for recreational purposes – the Hogmanay fireworks policy prompted questions at the AGM about the effect on owl populations – and this weakens the City's case in barring the use of Blackford Quarry for unlicensed 'raves'. Barriers placed in the way of ravers' vehicles have been destroyed, and we are concerned about the sanitary questions that overnight camping can inevitably raise.

Blackford Pond has been a source of worry for the Friends for a couple of years now. The chronic inefficiency of the drain at the pond's east end has worsened this year, resulting in flooding sufficient to cut the island in two, and force the resident pair of swans to nest elsewhere. Fergus spent some time with drainage contractors battling the problem, which lessened as summer went on. Since then, the Friends have asked a hydraulics expert (who happens to be married to committee member Jo Doake) to advise new Ranger Jessica on the problem, and we are hopeful this will not recur. All this was happening at a time when CALA Homes offered to rebuild the island, complete with duck nesting shelter. This is the second time the company has sponsored the rebuilding of the island, undertaken using Andesite foundations, and supervised by Fergus. We thank CALA for their generosity, and have made their locally-based Managing Director an Honorary Friend! Meanwhile, the swans nested on the south bank for the second year running, but did so too late for the four eggs to be fertile. We hope next year will be less traumatic for them.

Above the pond, Blackford Hill has had an eventful year. We commissioned a survey of gorse colonisation, and the resulting report is summarised in HH 7:4. Contractors cleaning up after the reconstruction work at the Royal Observatory sowed 'alien' grass on their former construction store site, and we know the Rangers' Service are watching this carefully. Having been consulted about the planning application some three years ago, we believe that the restoration is not what we could have expected, and we have offered the Rangers our full support if any 'chasing' up is required on this. In July, hill fires were so bad on the north-east corner of the hill that the Fire Brigade required to attend for 24 hours.

In the Hermitage itself, more primroses have been sown by Susanna Dunbar, taking care to avoid alien strains, and a 50% success rate at the time of writing is very satisfactory for a wild site. Meanwhile, the doocot is looking better than it has done for years. Our new Secretary Goff Cantley has kept a close eye on repairs necessary to make the structure windproof and watertight, and we are grateful to Cllr McInnes for keeping the officials on their toes. More needs to be done internally on the doocot, and it could be that this group could help with necessary interpretation. Another feature which could do with some TLC is the Agassiz Rock. We recognise that there are technical difficulties in fixing a notice here, but we are keeping up what pressure we can, and have had assistance on this from Cllr Mackintosh, and offers of help from Mike Pringle MSP and Nigel Griffiths MP.

The Friends kept up our full programme of events. The most important are the clean-ups, held on March 19th, April 23rd and June 25th. Attendance levels are as unpredictable as the weather, but generally have been higher this year than last. The exception was the middle of these three, when only dedicated Jeff Maguire turned up! Few volunteers turned out to help build steps into the filled-in quarry area from the Glen path, with the Chairman and Secretary undertaking most of the work. We purchased hardcore surfacing for this, and the Rangers are welcome to use any surplus on other projects.

In February we had a talk from Fergus on the 'Buildings of the Hermitage', but his interesting and beautifully-illustrated discourse was poorly attended (we have since decided that February is just not appropriate for evening talks). In the following months, Helen Brown talked to us about the work of the Water of Leith Trust, revealing the existence of such fascinating denizens as a 5 foot-long dog otter and a pike fallen 65 feet down from the canal aqueduct! Also, her critical comments on the City Flood Prevention Plan rang a bell here! In May, Fergus conducted an enjoyable Dawn Bird Watch, and in August Natalie Taylor once again gave 25 of us a glimpse of the world of bats. Conditions at the pond were the best in years, with relays of Daubenton's strafing the water while Pipistrelles wheeled overhead. September may have ushered in less settled weather, but our Geology Walk with Cliff Porteous was well attended by 17 of us, all of whom managed to avoid trampling on the toad which chose the wrong moment to emerge on to the path from the Wetland Patch!

The Friends were asked to comment on a number of Council Planning documents, in particular the Draft City Local Plan. We welcomed in general its positive attitude to 'green' issues, but were critical of some details, and quite alarmed at some of the casual mapping, particularly of flood precautions. We have asked Planning that no change be made, in years to come, from a southside 'collar' Green Belt to a radial configuration without extensive consultation. We objected to a change of use proposal for the Blackford Lodge (as this could result in the loss of garden; in the event, the application was withdrawn), and continued our objection to housing on GB land in agricultural use at Liberton.

Members of the group were kept up to date on all this through our quarterly newsletter Hill & Hermitage. This has been edited very professionally for two years by Andrew Coates, although he has since stood down and the editorship is presently in a transitory stage. Andrew has also looked after our website up to now, and your committee is taking steps to keep up this useful means of communication. Another literary product from the Friends is a colour leaflet illustrating walks in the Reserve, edited very ably by Elaine Abbot and currently being costed. In conclusion, we once again record our thanks to Ranger Fergus Cook and wish him well in his new appointment, while welcoming Jessica Morgado to the Hermitage. A case of 'Au revoir' and 'Bienvenu'.