

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

### **ANNUAL REPORT 2006-2007**

The eighth AGM of the FoH was held on Thursday October 26th 2006 at the Cluny Centre in the presence of 25 members. The main items of business were talks by both outgoing Countryside Ranger Fergus Cook and his successor Jessica Morgado 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), Goff Cantley (Secretary) and Paul Mooney (Treasurer) were elected as office-bearers but the post of Vice-Convener was left unfilled. Sandy Mullay and Jeff Maguire retired as committee members, but Moira Stevenson, Jo Doake and Elaine Abbot remained on the committee while Harry Henniker was elected as a new member and Helen Gardner was co-opted after the meeting.

This new and active committee was able to continue with many of the regular activities of the Friends, as well as bringing in some new and exciting initiatives. Production of the quarterly newsletter 'Hill and Hermitage' was taken over by Harry, who brought out four excellent issues over the year with a varied and entertaining content, and maintenance of the website has continued with the help of Stuart Hamilton. A good selection of events was also organized throughout the year, although we have a continuing shortage of active members outside the committee itself, and this has meant that some ideas that we have considered for action are still on hold, including the installation of a Barn Owl box and small bird feeders in the Hermitage and a replacement for the interpretation board at the Agassiz Rock.

There was an emphasis on outdoor events this year, with only the one indoor evening talk, on Gardening for Wildlife given by Aileen Fox of the RSPB in February, which was most enjoyed by the regrettably small number of people who attended. The dawn bird watch in May was taken over by volunteer Ranger Graham Checkley following the tradition established first by Duncan Priddle and then Fergus in past years, and a select group of early risers saw or heard a total of 33 species of birds (and 6 species of mammals) in a most successful morning's observation. Other outdoor events included a walk guided by Jo Doake on the local Rights of Way both within and adjoining the LNR, and a repeat of the moth night first held last year, for which the expert guidance of Duncan Davidson was invaluable and which resulted in over 20 species of moths being captured, identified and released alive the next morning. The most recent event was a well-attended and enjoyable fungal walk hosted by Mike Richardson. Some 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, Friends volunteers were involved in two sessions clearing Himalayan Balsam over the summer, braving the attentions of wasps in some of the locations, and we also had two days earlier in the year stripping the protective coverings off the young trees in the Community Woodland east of the Hill. There was just one burn clean-up, in February, but we certainly intend to continue with this important activity next year. Members of the committee also helped with tree planting in the Hermitage, supervising pupils from George Heriot's School in clearing Japanese Knotweed at the Wetland Patch and helping to clear the broken concrete base from a vandalized bench on the north side of the Hill.

The year also marked the successful launch of our new guided walk leaflet, illustrating many aspects of the history, geology and natural history of the reserve. Most members of the committee made some input to this major project, but most credit must go to Harry and Elaine for their leadership on the design and production of the leaflet. A grant from SNH allowed us to print 5000 copies, which have been distributed to many outlets in the south of Edinburgh including Hermitage House, libraries and the Observatory. We were also funded to purchase a stock of red and blue waymarkers, which were installed by committee members over the summer and are intended to reassure walkers that they are following the map correctly on the two routes. We believe that this leaflet will have something new and interesting to tell even regular habitués of the Hill and Hermitage, and are proud that the Friends have been associated with such a positive development for the reserve.

Another project which is making use of Harry's design skills is our plan to replace the missing viewfinder at the top of Blackford Hill, which disappeared last year, presumably at the hands of vandals, and was never found. We are currently exploring sources of funding for a new circular metal design indicating many of the most prominent landmarks to be seen from the Hill, and are also prepared to commit Friends' funds to this if necessary.

Thanks to a bequest from the late Brian McManus, we were able to fund the purchase of a picnic bench for the wild flower meadow at the western end of the Hermitage. This is made from sturdy environmentally friendly Plaswood and has been a feature of the meadow since late spring. Friends' funds were also used to renew to improve the Midmar Drive entrance to the paddock adjoining our reserve, where new surfacing and a replacement gate were installed over the summer.

On the publicity front, Rob wrote an article on the Friends for the local free magazine 702Gazette and also gave a talk to Braid Rotary Club. We have also been active in monitoring developments that may impinge on the character of the reserve, including the new play park at the Pond and developments with the Core Paths scheme.

As always, we have worked in close liaison with the Countryside Rangers, and the transition from Fergus to Jessica as our first point of contact has been extremely successful. The Friends marked Fergus' departure at the turn of the year with the gift of an engraved quaich, and we have many good memories of his time with us, but we have already built up an excellent relationship with Jessica that we hope will help us to continue to achieve the objectives of the Friends in future years.