

FRIENDS OF THE HERMITAGE OF BRAID AND BLACKFORD HILL

ANNUAL REPORT 2007-2008

The ninth AGM of the Friends was held on Thursday October 25th 2007 at the Cluny Centre in the presence of 17 members. The main item of business was a talk by Countryside Ranger 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. The rest of the committee comprised Moira Stevenson, Jo Doake, Elaine Abbot, Harry Henniker and Helen Gardner, with Sarah Muirhead also being co-opted after the meeting.

The year since then has been a relatively quiet one for the Friends, although we have been able to maintain most of our important regular activities of the Friends as well as some new initiatives. Harry has continued his editorship of the quarterly newsletter 'Hill and Hermitage' to the customary high standard, and this is distributed to all members as well as to several South Edinburgh outlets such as libraries. The website has been taken over by Sarah, who has given it a thorough overhaul resulting in a great improvement in the presentation and accessibility of the material, and we are hoping to develop this further to allow current issues of Hill and Hermitage to be placed on the site for easy access by a wider readership. We are also interested in the possibility of distributing the newsletter by email, although this will be limited by the fact that our membership is not particularly well connected to the internet by modern standards!

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 limited the scope of our activities. The emphasis on outdoor events noted in the last report has continued, as we have tended to get poor turnouts for indoor talks in recent times, but an exception was the very welcome return visit in March of our former Ranger Fergus Cook, who entertained a substantial audience with a talk on his new job at Kinnoull Hill near Perth. We also repeated the moth night for a third year in succession, this time earlier in the year, in July, to target a different seasonal spectrum of species was active, and once again we are grateful to Duncan Davidson for his expert and enthusiastic help.

Volunteers from the Friends were also involved with practical conservation activities, which this year included two more contributions to the unending task of clearing Himalayan Balsam from the reserve, as well as finishing off the stripping of protective coverings off the young trees in the Community Woodland and several sessions cleaning up litter in the Braid Burn and on Blackford Hill. We also helped install a Barn Owl box on the edge of the Midmar field as well as a number of boxes for smaller birds in the Hermitage.

Two further Friends projects that were in progress last year came to fruition in 2007-08. The plaswood picnic bench in the wild flower meadow at the western end of the Hermitage was funded by a bequest from the late Brian McManus, and was inaugurated in October with a brief ceremony in the presence of members of his family. The replacement viewfinder at the top of Blackford Hill was designed by Harry, who also organized the manufacture and installation of this sturdy metal plaque, which was finally unveiled in March. This was funded partially by a grant from SNH but also by a generous response from many of our members to an appeal, and we hope it will provide a useful guide to the views available from the Hill and will be as vandal-proof as possible.

An important initiative that is scheduled to start in October 2008 is a new membership drive, using the revised recruitment leaflet that we have recently had printed. It is planned both to carry out door-to-door deliveries of this leaflet in the areas surrounding the reserve and to target visitors to the Hermitage, Hill and Pond with teams of volunteers. We hope this will be successful in increasing our membership, and especially our active membership, making it possible to expand the activities of the Friends.

Some projects discussed by the committee during the year are still not implemented, but we intend to make progress on these in the near future. Among these are a replacement for the plaque at the Agassiz rock which was removed several years ago, and plans for enhancing the bird feeders around Hermitage House.

Finally once again we should record our gratitude to the Countryside Ranger Service, with whom we continue to cooperate amicably in our common aims. In particular, Jessica Morgado as our 'local' Ranger has been a constant source of advice and support to the Friends since she took over from Fergus, and we look forward to a continuing productive relationship with the Rangers over the years to come.