

The Friends of the Hermitage of Braid and Blackford Hill

Minutes of the 8th AGM held at Cluny Centre, Morningside, on 26th October 2006 at 7.30 pm

Welcome: The Chairman Rob Elton opened the meeting by welcoming those present: Committee Members Elaine Abbot, Jo Doake, Jeff Maguire, Moira Stevenson, and Goff Cantley (minuting), plus 20 ordinary members. He particularly welcomed City of Edinburgh Council Ranger Service members Fergus Cook and Jessica Morgado.

Presentation: There followed a presentation by Fergus Cook, looking back over recent years and the previous year in particular. His responsibility had changed during the year to looking after the City Park at Craigmillar and he had now handed over the Hermitage and Blackford Hill LNR management to Jessica Morgado. In spite of being short staffed, 33 patrols had been undertaken during the year and in the half-year to date, 30 school groups had visited Hermitage House, where the facilities are particularly suitable for such groups. Fergus listed some of the main practical tasks undertaken during the last year. These included:

A scraping of the main drive.

A sleeper barrier formed at the bottom of the Hill path from Observatory Road.

The two cuttings of the wildflower meadow.

The removal of most of the sycamore saplings from the top of the Hill.

The planting of 15 Rock Whitebeam trees.

To facilitate access for all, kissing gates had been removed throughout the reserve.

Cala Homes had paid for the Blackford Pond island to be reconstructed at a cost of over £11,000 with his department paying the balance of around £1,100.

Blackford Pond area was being increasingly carefully tended by the Tuesday volunteer Des with a total of 45 day's work being undertaken – a total that made a remarkable contribution to the LNR.

Two burn cleanups had been undertaken.

The steps up from Blackford Glen had been created and other steps repaired.

The resources of the Friends, the BTCV, pupils from George Heriot's School, and the Greenteam had all been involved in these works.

The stable toilets had been renovated.

A successful project had been undertaken by Susanna Dunbar to introduce more primroses.

Edinburgh Greenbelt Trust had carried out cutting of laurel bushes.

The gorse survey had been carried out by the Friends confirming that 25% of the Hill was now covered and recommending a number of courses of action that were still to be followed up.

A grassland survey had been undertaken identifying 37 vegetation communities in the reserve, 5 of which were of particular interest due to rarity of some grassland species, notably *Festuca*, *Hieracium* and *Thymus*. These three plants dominate the reserve but in total 123 species have plant had been identified with 7 of interest, including the nationally rare spring cinquefoil. To preserve this balance of habitat, Fergus expressed the view that grazing by cattle would be ideal, this being likely to lead to an increase in diversity, although this would be subject to the actual grazing level. He also expressed his view that more mixed woodland scrub and woodland would be beneficial for the reserve, and that loss of gorse areas would be acceptable.

Jessica followed on from Fergus' talk confirming that she would carry on with the work that he had been involved in, but then giving her views on how she would like to see the reserve and its management proceed in the years ahead. The first issue in which she had been involved was the illegal use of Blackford Quarry for raves, and she detailed many of the aspects of this problem. There is now a permission system in place. Members were encouraged to report any illegal use of the quarry to the following locations:

Howdenhall Police Station: contact Tom Galbraith: 658 5224

Environmental Health and noise nuisance: contact Pamela Baker : 469 5733

Ranger Service at Hermitage House: contact Jessica Morgado: 447 7145

Jessica outlined projects that she would like to progress in the years ahead:

Hermitage Wood – a volunteer strategy was required including the work of Des and Graham.

Provision of more picnic tables. Members were invited to suggest locations but this produced no quick responses.

Bird and bat boxes to be scheduled and checked.

Two barn owl boxes to be sited.

Fence in front of house to be replaced.

Butterfly survey.

Closure of desire lines through parts of the reserve.

Change location of benches around the Pond to align with views through edge vegetation.

Keep willowherb out of the Pond area.

Flush the outlet of the Pond, following advice received from Richard Doake.

Arrange monthly waterfowl count perhaps from January onwards.

Initiate control programme on Himalayan balsam.

Re-open gorse fire-breaks.

Assess options from the Gorse Survey and undertake control work.

Replace viewfinder on the Hill summit.

Jessica confirmed in conclusion that key issues were: more volunteers, Balsam control, ensuring achievement of objectives and progress of the management plan for the LNR.

Both presentations were well received.

Questions were raised on the increasing vegetation around the Pond's water edge, a desire for increased reed bed at the inlet end of the Pond, the bird count – one member already doing this, suggested fencing to reduce desire lines, issue of rats affecting bird breeding, and use of glyphosphate to kill H. balsam. Jessica stated clear preference for pulling of plants to avoid any chemical input to the reserve. In reference to the future of the doocot, she expressed a desire for clearance of vegetation around the structure and re-establishing a tree nursery in the former walled garden originally laid out in front of the doocot.

Business of AGM: The Chairman then proceeded with the business of the AGM:

Apologies: Committee Member Sandy Mullay, plus Wilma Elton, Mike and Barbara Richardson, Maggie and George Heatley, Mike Macdonald, Christian Thin, David Land and Daphne and Lindsay Walls.

Previous Minutes: The minutes of the previous AGM held on 27th October 2005 were approved.

Matters arising: None

Annual Report: The Chairman presented the annual report for the year prepared by Committee Member Sandy Mullay, making particular reference to the recent change in Ranger, the changes to the Committee during the year, the successful events held, the continuing publication of "Hill and Hermitage" and a new coloured trail leaflet to be published shortly. Comments were invited on the work of the Committee at all stages. In response to questions, the Chairman confirmed with Fergus Cook that no problems had been experienced with any contaminated run-off from the new Hermitage Golf Course, or with cyclists proceeding through the Hermitage or going over the Hill land, following the changes permitted by the new access legislation.

Audited Accounts: The Chairman drew members attention to the audited accounts circulated with the meeting papers. Particular mention was made of one bequest of £500 made during the year and also a gift of £100. These funds are to be used on specific projects which are yet to be identified. One possible project is being considered, namely the replacement of the stolen viewfinder from the Blackford Hill summit. The Treasurer clarified that the variation in subscription levels was due to the 2004/5 year capturing a significant proportion of two years subscriptions due to late payments, as compared with the more normal level of subscriptions shown in the 2005/6 year. The Treasurer stated that he felt the Friends' financial position was sound. He encouraged all members to ensure that they had signed the Gift Aid declaration, since he was able to recover income tax paid to increase the value of the funds. Fresh subscriptions were invited and a number received. The accounts were approved without dissent.

Elections: The Chairman advised that there was, once again, no nomination for Vice-Convener. There being no other nominations, the following persons were elected;

Rob Elton – Convener (Proposed G. Cantley, seconded J. McGuire)

Goff Cantley – Secretary (E. Abbot, J. Doake)

Paul Mooney – Treasurer (R. Elton, A.J. Mullay)

Ordinary Members of Committee: Elaine Abbot, Moira Stevenson. Jo Doake. Harry Henniker agreed to join the Committee, having been nominated by Goff Cantley and seconded by Rob Elton.

Anticipated Members to be co-opted to the Committee: Jeff McGuire and Sandy Mullay. Also Helen Garnder who expressed willingness to join at the end of the meeting.

Auditor: The Chairman confirmed that Lindsay Walls had examined the year's accounts and was willing to do so again. No alternative action was proposed.

AOCB: No issues raised. The Chairman then invited the assembled company to partake of the refreshments available.