

The Friends of the Hermitage of Braid and Blackford Hill

Minutes of the 10th AGM held at Cluny Centre, Morningside, on 30 October 2008 at 7.30 pm

Welcome: The Chairman Rob Elton opened the meeting by welcoming those present: Committee Members Jo Doake, Moira Stevenson, Helen Gardner, Paul Mooney, Elaine Abbott, Harry Henniker and Goff Cantley (minuting), plus 15 ordinary members.

Presentation by Carillion: The Chairman made reference to the Braid Burn Flood Prevention Scheme and introduced Stuart MacKay, Stakeholder Manager for the project contractor Carillion. Stuart gave a short talk about the project and its impact around the Highways depot at the east end of the Nature Reserve. He reminded us of the history of the project from the April 2000 flooding of the Braid Burn to the eventual award of the contract in May 2007. "Hydraulic modelling" (a plan of the ground levels) determined the scope of the project which will "significantly protect" 900 businesses and homes against a 1 in 200 year storm. There are 13 units of work from Redford to Portobello with these mainly comprising clay floodbanks, with their 6 metre-wide footprint, 2-metre high reinforced concrete floodwalls as at Inch Park, and sheet piling, the latter being in progress at the Blackford Highways depot. Work has commenced early on this Jan - Apr. 09 project. The sheet piling work will be followed by a 6-month project to raise the Blackford Glen Road levels, this being a simpler way of controlling the flood water than further piling or wall construction. Flood banks will be formed in areas to control the water flow on the south side of the burn and Stuart gave details of the considerable planting that would be undertaken to the flood banks. Assurances were given that pedestrian and (narrow!) cycle access would be maintained during the works. Jonathan Davies, Environment Officer of Faber Maunsell, Consultant Designers for the project, was also in attendance at the meeting and confirmed that close monitoring of the environment would be taking place during the work. Stuart took questions from the floor on points of interest and detail. He invited anyone with any further concern or query to phone him on 0131 664 8977 or e-mail him at stuart.mackay@carillionplc.com The Chairman thanked Stuart and Jonathan for their attendance which was well received.

Presentation by Ranger Service: The Chairman welcomed City of Edinburgh Council Ranger Service member Jessica Morgado and invited her to give her presentation on the year and her plans for the year ahead. Before doing so, Jessica confirmed that she had now been in post for over two years and that this was her third Friends' AGM.

Jessica gave a PowerPoint presentation in which she highlighted the staffing changes that had taken place over the last year. The Regional Parks Manager, who covered the Pentland Hills and the Edinburgh Countryside ranger Service, had left in June Jenny Hargreaves was now acting Manager for the Ranger Service. One Ranger had left and not been replaced. SNH funding had been granted to pilot a Volunteer Ranger Service Project.

The work undertaken in 07/08 was covered in brief and planned projects for 2008/09 (subject to funding) under the headings of the Hermitage Visitor Centre, Hermitage Wood, Blackford Pond and Blackford Hill:

Hermitage Visitor Centre and surroundings: Projects in 07/08 – new reading room created, new Friends' notice board provided, speed bumps repainted, HBOS volunteers had installed new steps with New Caledonian Woodland. Laurel bushes had been cut back opposite Hermitage House and views opened up from a re-aligned path with new fencing. The front of the doocot had been cleared and resurfaced to keep vegetation back. A Marimba sculpture had been created with the Princes Trust and Craigmillar Art Centre.

In 08/09 new notice boards were planned at entrances and new maps to existing plinths. The 2 historic water rams in the Burn were to be investigated further, plus the spring (?) housing in the wood above the house. The doocot frontage would be kept clear and ideally the front garden area cleared to preserve the view. Clearing the trees behind Hermitage House might be undertaken to restore the grassy area here.

Hermitage Wood: 07/08 – Clearing of storm damage on Braid Road, as well the Burn and paths. Dangerous tree survey completed and trees blue tagged. Some dead wood had been removed from the burn and trees cut back near paths. Four Burn clean-ups had been undertaken. 36% success achieved with reintroduced primroses. 16 bird, 9 bat boxes fitted, plus 1 bat hibernacula, 2 tawny owl boxes and one barn owl box.

The wildflower meadow had been cut and raked in September, the accidental earlier cut having possibly helped clear grass in favour of seeding flowers an improved seed bank.

In 08/09 – Complete a structural survey of the Burn. Develop a maintenance plan for paths and other features. Use Volunteer Rangers to undertake maintenance work. Review work of Task Force Service for the whole park, e.g. regular cutting back of vegetation along paths.

Blackford Pond: 07/08 – Work involved outlet monitoring and algal bloom control with barley straw.

Swans had nested late and unsuccessfully on the island. Toad/frog migration was noted as usual. Benches and litter had been vandalised.

In 08/09 – Outlet and algal bloom monitoring would continue. Volunteer Ranger would ideally carry on maintenance work, and keep vegetation back along Pond edge to maintain views from benches. Vegetation at Pond and Wetland Patch would be reviewed.

Blackford Hill: 07/08 – 1,000 hours of work by 222 volunteers had helped control the H. balsam. No major rave had taken place in the quarry. Planting trials of rock whitebeam and sticky catchfly were carried out. Carpet tiles had been laid (Deliberately! Do not remove!) to monitor for possible slow worm and common lizard species.

In 2008/09: Volunteer Ranger would carry on maintenance work, and all volunteer efforts would continue with balsam control. Above planting trials and species would be monitored. A finger post sign would be installed at the Observatory entrance to show the new path route to the Hill.

In conclusion Jessica highlighted key area of her work this coming year as being implementation of the Woodland Management Plan. She highlighted the budget figures required over the ten years of the plan (Total £306,875) 70% of which is required in the first 3 years. The current lack of funding sources was explained and a map of the zoned areas of work was displayed. The Plan is available for viewing at the Duty Ranger's Desk in Hermitage House. The Plan is to be adopted in Spring 09.

Jessica also showed details of the planned new signage for the Reserve and invited comments on its design and content. The design is already in place at a number of sites, e.g. Corstorphine Hill, and invited views on whether the silhouette design should be of Blackford Hill and the Hermitage, or Hermitage House. The sign would have a map, logos, and a place for information. Six locations were detailed and others invited. The proposals would also include replacement of the existing 5 maps to update them to comply with the changes in the 2003 access legislation although the maps were still in good condition.

A short question and answer session followed in which issues around the above topics were discussed in more detail. The Chairman then thanked Jessica for her presentation and for her willingness to work well with the Friends.

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

Apologies: Committee Member Sarah Muirhead. Members, Christian Thin, Judy Cantley, Wilma Elton and Daphne Walls.

Previous Minutes: The Chairman asked the meeting to note that the previous AGM should have been referred to as the 9th and not the 8th in the first line. The minutes of the previous AGM held on 25th October 2007 were then approved by the meeting.

Matters arising: None

Annual Report: The Chairman presented his annual report for the year, (asking that 2006 in first line be corrected to 2007) referring to the work of the Committee and the particular achievements of the year in spite of a lack of active members. The Hill and Hermitage Newsletters had continued thanks to the particular support of Harry Henniker, and the website had been expanded and updated thanks to Sarah Muirhead. The newsletter would ideally be e-mailed to the membership, but only around half have offered e-mail addresses and it continues to be posted to all members.

Events had been mainly outdoor with a focus on balsam clearing, although a Hill-clean had been undertaken, bird and bat boxes installed, and two burn cleaning sessions carried out. Removal of tree-guards in the Community Woodland had been completed and the Chairman thought that the woodland was looking very healthy and attractive as a result.

Thanks were recorded to Elaine Abbott for organising the successful Moth Night event with a significant number of species identified and later released by expert Duncan Davidson.

Past Ranger, Fergus Cook, had given an interesting talk on his new work at Kinnoull Hill in Perth.

Particular thanks were recorded for the successful replacement of the Blackford Hill plaque, designed, project managed and installed by Harry Henniker. A small ceremony was held in March to celebrate the installation.

Looking ahead, the Chairman referred to work on a replacement sign for Agassiz Rock and a replacement for the vandalised direction post at the Scout Bridge as ongoing. There were also plans for bird feeders at Hermitage House.

The Chairman highlighted the membership drive that was now in progress and thanked the members who had volunteered to deliver membership forms in their nearby streets. Some 2,500 houses would soon have received a form and there were plans for further distribution. 20 new members had been recruited to date.

He thanked the Committee members for their contribution and recorded the Committee's appreciation of the good relationship and cooperation with Ranger, Jessica Morgado. He hoped that this would continue since it gave great support to the Friends. The Chairman also thanked those members who had helped at events during the year. Feedback was invited from the floor and points were clarified including confirmation that membership (up until the recent recruitment drive) had been static in recent years at around 150.

Audited Accounts: The Treasurer drew members attention to the audited accounts circulated with the meeting papers. Members were relieved to hear that no funds had been placed with collapsing Icelandic banks or other failing institutions although funds were with HBOS. The Friends' are classified as a Scottish "small" charity although their activities suggested more than this. The Treasurer considered that the financial position was sound with £2,179 of reserves, in spite of a £619 deficit for the year. (Note: three lines in Balance Sheet - General Reserves, Other Assets and Total Assets should be as at 5th April 2008, not 2006 as shown.) Expenses had quadrupled but were for one-off items, not individually listed for brevity. Depreciation had reached final right down figure in previous year. Previous year's Gift Aid represented five years' backlog. Subs were down, just as chance phasing of when they happened to be requested around the turn of the financial year (clarified: subs are due in April and are requested in March Newsletter). The accounts were approved without dissent and Lindsay Walls was thanked for acting once again as Independent Examiner.

Elections: The Chairman advised the meeting that he was standing down as Convenor after several years in post and planned to hand over to Jo Doake, there being no other nominations.

Convenor: Jo Doake. (Proposed M Stevenson, 2nd R Elton.)

Vice Convenor: R Elton. (H Henniker, J Doake.)

Secretary: Goff Cantley. (E Abbott, H Gardner)

Treasurer: Paul Mooney. (W Elton, G Cantley)

Ordinary Members: Elaine Abbott, Moira Stevenson and Sarah Muirhead continuing.

The outgoing Chairman invited other members to join the committee, but no new names were offered.

Anticipated Members to be co-opted to the Committee: Harry Henniker and Helen Gardner.

The Chairman confirmed that office bearers had to be elected/re-elected every year and committee members every three years.

AOCB: Nil. The Chairman then invited the assembled company to partake of the refreshments available.

Goff Cantley, Secretary, 6 Nov 2008