

The Friends of the Hermitage of Braid and Blackford Hill

Minutes of the 11th AGM held at Greenbank Church Hall, Braidburn Terrace, on 30 October 2009 at 7.30 pm

Welcome: The Convener, Jo Doake, opened the meeting by welcoming those present: Committee Members: Sarah Muirhead, Moira Stevenson, Helen Gardner, Paul Mooney, Harry Henniker and Goff Cantley (minuting). She particularly welcomed the four members of staff of the City of Edinburgh Council: Jenny Hargreaves - Acting Countryside Ranger Service Manager, Jessica Morgado - Countryside Ranger, Steven Webley – Forestry Officer and Paul Vine – Trees and Woodland Officer. The welcome was further extended to some 17 ordinary members attending.

Presentation by Keith Macgregor: Keith introduced himself as a long-standing member (and currently management committee member) of the Scottish Ornithologists Club and also as an observer of the birds in the Hermitage and Blackford Hill since 1940. His talk focused on “Birds Then and Now” in the Reserve and was illustrated with pictures of birds that were once present in the reserve, some that had arrived in recent years and some to look out for.

We were encouraged to look out for the green woodpecker, the coots and the spotted flycatcher that had been missing recently and to anticipate occasional sightings of goosander, kestrel, redpoll and possibly the nuthatch, the latter having now arrived in southern Scotland. Sightings of chiff-chaff are likely and the song should distinguish it from the similar willow warbler. Keith emphasised the importance of learning the songs of local birds by field visits with more experienced bird watchers, something that could be undertaken with the SOC.

The Convener thanked Keith for his presentation which was well received.

Presentation by Ranger Service: The Convener again 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 introduced her line manager, Jenny Hargreaves, who gave a short presentation on the staffing of the Ranger Service and its role across her 11 sites of responsibility. Jenny explained the recently adopted remit-based system for the rangers, each one having a liaison role for a particular reserve but a specific remit for all the sites. This system is designed to give equal attention to each site. The training of the new Volunteer Rangers was referred to with 9 now in post. There were also now 20 Biodiversity Volunteers and 21 Conservation Volunteers, the training differing for the three roles. Referring to Hermitage House, Jenny highlighted recent improvements to the toilets, the production of a new history leaflet (currently being printed in-house) and the refreshing of the displays in the Visitor Centre to maintain public interest.

Jessica gave an outline of the work undertaken in 08/09 and the planned projects for 2009/10 (subject to funding) under the headings of the Hermitage Wood, Blackford Pond and Blackford Hill, Hermitage Visitor Centre:

Hermitage Wood: Bat boxes had been checked out by a suitably trained member of staff but were found to be empty. The wild flower meadow had been cut and raked at the correct time and was improving slowly. A corporate group were planting some £300 worth of plugged wild flowers but yellow rattle was to be introduced to speed up reduction of the richness of the grass. (The current richness discourages the development and spread of wild flowers.) After much consideration, corporate groups had finally been tasked with renewing the two stiles between the Wood and Midmar Paddock with a bridge introduced to access the west stile. These new stiles had been well received.

Two burn clean-ups had been undertaken and the burn was looking good, however, there had been pollution incidents primarily from silt washing in from ground disturbed during the flood prevention work. Such incidents may still be observed and should be reported to the Ranger Service. The structural survey of the built section of the Braid Burn had been undertaken in-house. This covered the section of the burn from Braid Road to Hermitage House. This has identified the need for the removal of trees that have established themselves in the masonry of the burn walls and the repair of the walls without resorting to unsightly gabions (mesh baskets). The bid to Forestry Commission Scotland for WIAT (Woodland In and Around Towns) funding for the implementation of the Woodland Management Plan had been successful (Paul Vine to cover later).

Future work would focus on the plans for the Doocot Garden Project, action on the burn survey, ongoing work on the wild flower meadow, a butterfly survey, otter survey, and primrose introduction.

Blackford Pond: Flooding was still a recurring problem, requiring regular attention to keep the outfall clear of debris. The outlet was designed prior to the arrival of trees around the Pond with their consequent leaf fall. Algal bloom had been tackled with barley straw with uncertain results. The swans had nested late and unsuccessfully. Frog and toad migration had taken place in good numbers. A grant application had been submitted in partnership with the Friends for the repair of the Pond edge along its north bank.

Blackford Hill: 1000 volunteer hours had gone into balsam control and this was an ongoing battle meeting with some success. Introduction of rock whitebeam trees and sticky catchfly plants was continuing, as required by the City’s Biodiversity Action Plan. Handrails had been introduced at the Howe Dean to Community Woodland steps following a complaint. The first Blackford Hill Festival had been held to entertain and educate members of the public and to get the message across about responsible dog owning. Some 400 people are thought to have attended on a perfect day and it is hoped to repeat the event biennially. The Friends had secured a £900 grant from the City’s Community Fund to cover the cost of the Festival.

Future Hill work would involve more projects, balsam control, whitebeam and catchfly planting, surveys for slow-worms and lizards and gorse control.

In conclusion, Jessica anticipated more close working with the Friends, research for the walled garden project, woodland planting, increasing work with visiting volunteers and corporate groups, lots of balsam control work and hopefully plenty of enjoyment for visiting members of the public.

The Convener then thanked Jessica for her presentation and for her willingness to work well with the Friends.

Steven Webley then gave a short presentation on his new role as Forestry Officer across the City and referred to his three Tree and Woodland Officers, the particular one for South Edinburgh being Paul Vine who in turn spoke of the WIAT grant of some £176,000 which combines with £83,000 from the City to fund the required £259,000 total of the Woodland Management Plan. The delay in funding the Plan meant that 2009 and 2010 work would now need to be combined to achieve the desired completion date of 2012. Paul did face the difficult problem of trying to get tenders now for the three/four years of the plan which had been made a condition of the grant approval.

Business of AGM: After a short break, the Convener then proceeded with the business of the AGM:

Apologies: Committee Members: Rob Elton and Elaine Abbott. Members: Fred Mackintosh, Brian Sandell, Karen Young, Hilary Vandore, Steve and Carolyn Wilson, Lindsay Walls, David Watts and Richard Doake.

Previous Minutes: The Convener invited corrections and comment on the Minutes of the 2008 AGM. There being no changes, the adoption of the minutes of the previous AGM held on 30th October 2008 was proposed by Moira Stevenson and seconded by Harry Henniker. There were no matters arising from the Minutes.

Audited Accounts: The Treasurer drew members' attention to the audited accounts which had been laid out for members. He referred to the Friends as a small but vibrant and financially active charity whose expenditure was modest. Increasing membership had improved subscription and donation income but increased stationery expenditure significantly, particularly for the Newsletter and its distribution. The year end balance was the highest ever. In response to members' questions, it was confirmed that 1) lapsed memberships were not monitored and 2) the Friends had charity status and that gift aid was an important source of revenue, the benefit of which was recovered periodically. The accounts were approved (Proposed: Harry Henniker, seconded: Judy Cantley) without dissent and Lindsay Walls was thanked for acting once again as Independent Assessor. His appointment was approved for the next year.

Annual Report: The Convener presented her first annual report supported with PowerPoint illustrations. She commended the updated website to members and thanked Sarah Muirhead for all her work in setting this up and also for reviewing the current Friends' logo. The current logo is meant to be a clear "HH" for Hill and Hermitage, but few members realise this, far less the general public. The ongoing membership drive had taken numbers from 145 members in 115 households to 237 members in 188 households, a gratifying increase.

New signage had been erected with limited success, the Agassiz Rock sign being quickly broken. The new bird feeders were proving popular with the birds but as yet were not subject to the attention of squirrels. A rota for topping up the feeders was still to be set up by Elaine Abbott and members were urged to help with this task. The bird feeders would need periodic cleaning to avoid a disease currently affecting finches. The Ranger Service was looking to replace their bird box camera and the Friends expect to pay for this shortly to improve the display in Hermitage House. The earlier burn clean-ups had been successful and there was an unusual lack of litter, leading to the cancellation of this autumn's popular clean-up event. Balsam bashes continued to be important to the Friends and would continue. The Moth Night had proved popular, particularly with children in respect of the subsequent inspection of captured species at the Blackford Hill Festival. Three new species had been identified for the area. A full list appears on the website.

Projects being pursued currently include the Doocot Walled Garden work and the re-edging of Blackford Pond where grant approvals are awaited. A grant application has been made for the chemical analysis of the wall pointing to ensure correct repointing work, as required by the City's Planning Department. Comments on this project can still be taken on board.

Finally, the Convener referred to the success of the Countryside Ranger Service's Blackford Hill Festival and thanked them for their work in making this such a success.

Elections: The Convener advised the meeting that there been no new nominations to the committee. She invited anyone interested in joining the committee to get in touch at any time. The existing committee members were thus re-appointed as follows:

Convener: Jo Doake. (Proposed by Rob Elton, 2nd Helen Gardner)
Vice Convener: R Elton. (Jo Doake, Moira Stevenson)
Secretary: Goff Cantley. (Sarah Muirhead, Rob Elton)
Treasurer: Paul Mooney. (Helen Gardner, Goff Cantley)
Ordinary Members: Sarah Muirhead and Helen Gardner continuing.

Anticipated Members to be co-opted to the Committee: Harry Henniker, Elaine Abbott and Moira Stevenson.

The Convener advised that some uncertainties existed in the interpretation of the wording of the Constitution as to when exactly members should retire or be re-elected and this would be examined further during the year ahead.

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