

FRIENDS OF THE HERMITAGE OF BRAID AND BLACKFORD HILL

ANNUAL REPORT 2002-2003

The fourth AGM of the Friends of the Hermitage was held on Thursday October 24th 2002, when 35 people attended at the Cluny Centre in Cluny Drive. The meeting was opened by Convener Rob Elton. Cllrs Walls and Sleigh were in attendance, as well as Countryside Ranger Fergus Cook. Fergus gave a summary of work carried out during the year by the Rangers' Service, which is chronically underfunded and understaffed, leading to enforced closure of Hermitage House on approximately one Sunday every month. The meeting then received a briefing from Barbara Richardson on the biological research undertaken by her and her husband in the Puerto Rican jungle. Unfortunately, there was simply not enough time for as long a talk as our members would have liked.

The following office-bearers and committee members were re-elected :

Rob Elton (Convener), Jeff Maguire (Vice-convener), A.J. Mullay (Secretary), Susanna Dunbar (Treasurer). Brian Smith, Mark McInnes, and Andrew Coates were elected to the committee, but with a number of places still unfilled, the Chairman invited nominations from the floor. The following were nominated and appointed – Ian Clement, Marian Malloy, and Rui da Costa. They replaced Claire Parrot, Nick Marshall, Neil Young, Deb Allen, David Hadley, Lis Brady, Lyndsay Ross, and Ian Wotherspoon who had resigned during the year. The Chairman thanked those leaving the committee, particularly Deb and David.

During the year, resignations were received from Marion and Rui, who were leaving Scotland, from Amanda Ingram, who was leaving Edinburgh, and from Ian Clement. The committee was particularly sorry to lose Amanda, who was adept at organising events. Co-opted to the committee was Morag Smart, who is masterminding the group's new website. During the year, our colleague Mark McInnes was translated into a City Councillor, but still attends committee meetings when possible.

The past year has seen the view southwards from Blackford Hill changing as the two fields below Braid Hills Drive have taken on some of the characteristics of a golf course. The committee is concerned at the lack of progress – denoting possible failure of the project, with all the questions that would raise for the future zoning of the site. When it was learned that the developer was applying to place portacabins on the site for the next three years, an objection was sent to the Director of Planning, but this has been rejected. As for the Midmar field west of the hill – the committee believes that the owner's application to have Green Belt status rescinded for the site is unlikely to be granted, but nevertheless vigilance is required to ensure that the planning authorities do not have a change of mind.

In January, the committee was consulted by the City Development department about our views on the environmental effects of the Royal Observatory's plans to rebuild its industrial capacity within its existing compound, along with the construction of a new gate. We took the view that, provided the surrounding area was restored to the satisfaction of the Countryside Rangers, we would not object to the ROE's programme to maintain its manufacturing capacity – after all, the work could be done elsewhere, and local jobs could be lost. We were however concerned about the decision to close the ROE Visitors' Centre in September, and are currently in correspondence with the Observatory director about this regrettable decision.

Our last AGM took place on a day when the Rangers were having to pull shopping trolleys out of the flooded Braid Burn. Your committee has been in correspondence with the relevant City officials about future flood prevention plans. As these do not seem to include attenuation measures upstream from the Hermitage, the committee may find it necessary to lodge an objection if the published plans do not appear to offer sufficient protection. As for City fireworks displays in the nature reserve, we raised this matter with the Minister responsible for Scottish Natural Heritage – who funded the LNR designation in 1993, but SNH did not support our objection, despite its being based on SSPCA guidelines.

The Friends have worked alongside the Countryside Rangers in undertaking essential tasks within the reserve. While the new path up to the radio aerials was wholly undertaken by the City, the committee organized three work-days when repairing and resurfacing was carried out on the steps leading up to the hill from near the east end of the pond. Unfortunately, the third of these days in particular was poorly attended, with only your dedicated Chairman turning up! – and it may be that this is not a suitable occupation for the Friends themselves to pursue. For the larger project of relaying the pond round Blackford Pond with compacted whindust (the City would have used tar), the Committee has sought and is confident of obtaining a grant from the Pentlands Local Development Committee for nearly £5,000. (Some of this will also be used to buy a four-way signpost for the Scout Bridge, and seating for the Wetland Patch, as well as funding the new website. We are grateful to Vice-Chairman Jeff Maguire for his work on this).

We are also working with Fergus Cook, local Ranger, on allocating bird and bat nesting boxes in the reserve, as well as planting 'lost' plant species such as primrose and sticky catchfly. Two burn clean-ups were organized during the year, and continue to be reasonably popular. In April, the committee came to a formal agreement with the Countryside Rangers guaranteeing that this group will not undertake work in the LNR without the Rangers' knowledge and consent. This was a formality; although other Friends groups may have occasionally 'forgotten' to tell the City's representatives what work they were undertaking, the Friends of the Hermitage, although formed independently and entirely on the public's own initiative, have never experienced any difficulty in working with Fergus, Duncan, and Fiona, for the good of the Reserve. In connection with this formal agreement, Duncan (Acting Senior Ranger) organized a useful Practical Activity Risk Assessment Workshop for members of Edinburgh's Friends groups, which was attended by your Chairman, Vice-Chairman and Secretary.

Woodland & Wetland Patch Project

Our ambitious plans to improve the wildlife and amenity value of this previously neglected part of the Reserve have continued apace. If you've been down to the Patch recently then you'll have seen our wonderful new welcome and interpretation boards, produced to a very high quality specification by the Osprey Company. These were funded by SNH as part of a wider grant award which also covered construction of a footpath, boardwalk and dipping platform (the latter two made from plaswood), tree surgery and the removal of the ugly old barbed wire fence from the southern boundary wall. The contracted work was again completed on time and on budget. If you haven't been down to the Patch lately then go and see the improvements for yourself!

We have also been busy ourselves in making ongoing improvements to the site. We published an insert in our December newsletter detailing our Management Plan for the Patch, with proposals coming out of the woodland and wetland survey that nine of us undertook in late October. We have since spent a number of Sunday afternoons carrying out some of the more urgent actions contained in the Management Plan e.g. removing young sycamore to improve the future balance of mature tree species; cutting back highly invasive, non-native laurel and Japanese knotweed, creating 'stepping stones' over the marsh area by sawing up the split branch of willow which required the tree surgery; piling up deadwood for small mammal and invertebrate habitat creation purposes; and generally clearing the patch of rubbish and crisp packets.

Forthcoming developments include siting two recycled plastic benches and putting up bird and bat boxes to encourage appropriate local species e.g. pipistrelle bats, treecreepers and robins to make the Patch their home. We also plan to make improvements to the pond area situated at the back of the Patch, including cutting back surrounding vegetation and carrying out an amphibian survey with Lothian Amphibian & Reptile Group.

Read more about this exciting and ambitious project, including our Management Plan, Key Project Milestones and Wildlife & Flora Logs, on our new website (more of which later) at www.fohb.org.

Events organized during the year included a Fungi workshop last October (being repeated this year) when Gordon Rutter introduced us to the pleasures and perils of searching for mushrooms – as well as their inedible relations. In March we received a lecture from local historian Malcolm Cant on the ‘Rural Southside’ and were disappointed at the poor turnout to hear such a celebrated expert. A talk on local amphibians was better attended, and much enjoyed, as was a repeat of the bat event last held two years ago. This latter event was attended by even more bats than people, and many Pipistrelles and Daubentons enjoyed excellent views of – or should that be echoes of? – some 35 entranced spectators in the August twilight at the pond.

Once again, we organized two well-attended ‘Badger Watch’ events with Lothian Badger Group over at Corstorphine Hill, and were rewarded with excellent close up sightings of adults and cubs this year – we would like to do that here – and the Dawn Birdwatch was once again organized on a bright May morning and was equally well-attended and successful. For the first time, a wine-tasting evening was arranged with a local wine expert and proved so popular that it may well become an annual event.

An exciting new dimension to the work of the Friends is the recent launch of our brand new website – www.fohb.org. The website is designed to complement our regular newsletter *Hill & Hermitage*, and should enable us to reach a wider audience and allow us to present our work and ideas in new ways. The site is very much a work in progress at this stage and contributions and comments are very much welcome as the site develops. Our thanks to Morag Smart for her sterling efforts in making this happen, and to Margaret Nisbet for her work and support in the early stages of development.

Meanwhile, the newsletter *Hill & Hermitage* continues to appear quarterly. We managed to survive the sudden departure of editor David Hadley, although the loss of advertising revenue has been a continuing problem. If ads can be arranged, this can turn the project into profit. With the Secretary standing down from the committee in October 2003, a new editor will be required, and the Committee recommends the appointment of Andy Coates, who has kindly volunteered to slave over a hot photocopier.

A new venture for the Friends this autumn has been the opening of a tea room in the basement of Hermitage House on Sunday afternoons, offering hot beverages, canned drinks, crisps and chocolate bars to the passing visitor. This started on June 22nd and has continued through most weekends for a total of 12 Sundays up to the end of October. The venture has been reasonably popular, with several hundred teas and coffees served so far, and we believe that there have been three main benefits: providing a service appreciated by the public, raising the profile of the Friends among visitors to the Hermitage and making a tidy profit for Friends' funds (well over £100 so far).

However, we have had chronic problems in finding enough volunteers to carry this on, and it is likely to lapse over the winter at least unless more members put themselves forward. Your Convenor and Secretary have between them spent more hours serving teas than all other volunteers put together, and their wives are unlikely to tolerate this for much longer!