

Hill & Hermitage Autumn 2003

SCARS ON THE LANDSCAPE

There's a lot happening in and around our Local Nature Reserve of Hermitage of Braid and Blackford Hill. So where do the Friends stand on such matters of current concern as

- the application to have **Midmar Field** rezoned for housing?
- the new **golf course** between the Lang Linn and Howe Dean paths?
- and the refurbishment of the **Royal Observatory**?

First, **Midmar Field**. You may have noticed in the newspapers that the owners of the field just up from the allotments, the A.G. Laing 1961 Settlement Trustees, have objected to the site being zoned as Green Belt (and Area of Great Landscape Value) in the long-delayed South East Local Plan. The Friends committee have made three submissions over the last three years to the city authorities about this plan, and in our last letter, on July 5th 2002, we thanked the planners for their vigorous defence of Green Belt status for this very site (see the SE Local Plan Appendix 1, June 2002).

At our most recent meeting, your committee decided that no further response was necessary on our part. Nevertheless we have asked for our July letter to be acknowledged – something which, it has to be said, the planners are not awfully good at doing. They won't admit for example that the Plan 'strips' Blackford Hill of the RIGS status designated by the British Geological Survey. We understand that BGS have reminded the City about this very forcibly themselves. (In case you're wondering, RIGS means 'Regionally Important Geological Site' – there's a poster all about it displayed in Hermitage House).

Secondly, what's happening about the new **golf course** just south of the Hermitage? If you have a short memory, you won't recall that we made two formal objections to this development, which we believed was contrary to the City's own designation of the land as an Urban Wildlife Site, and because we were concerned about possible pollution of the Braid Burn from runoff from such a steep hillside. The City withdrew UWS status as soon as they had suggested it, and as we know, the application was granted. At the time of writing, we are watching with concern the markedly slow rate of progress in the clearance work. With the land taken out of agricultural usage, we wonder if it might, should the golf course project fail, be open to a different type of designation of interest to house builders. The City's curious decision to open a children's course just on the other side of the road has made the commercial failure of this new site all the more likely.

As for the mess around the **Royal Observatory** on Blackford Hill – your committee did not object to this. We have accepted assurances that the site will be restored to its previous state to the satisfaction of the Countryside Rangers. We were also anxious to give the ROE a reasonable chance to upgrade its industrial capacity on site – believed to involve assembling telemetric equipment to assist NASA in a scientific project. If ROE didn't do this here, we reckoned they could take it elsewhere, and local jobs would be jeopardised. As it is, the closure of the ROE Visitor Centre will result in at least one redundancy, and the saving is paltry.

Ranger Diary

The grandly named humming bird hawk moth visited a buddleia in the Hermitage in July. It hovers in front of a flower for a minute, unrolling a huge tongue to drink nectar during the day. Like the painted lady butterfly seen the same day, it has migrated from southern Europe. Its offspring, if it has laid here, will probably not last the winter. Its about 4cm long and is coloured orange and brown.

It was not possible to do another survey of song thrush, bullfinch, linnet and great-spotted woodpeckers this year. However the results of last year were confirmed by observations on patrol which seems to show them in the same areas.

No extensive census methods were needed to tell visitors to Blackford that our swans had a good summer, with six cygnets now almost the same size as their parents. It's believed to be the biggest brood here in ten years. Unfortunately, one of the original seven was lost to an unknown predator, but Nature has a built-in redundancy factor...

Down in Blackford Glen the giant hogweed has been severely reduced by spraying, but one or two individuals have struggled through and will be beheaded and sprayed.

In the coming autumn months we shall be trying to keep up with the woodland work on the 2000-2010 management plan. This is year four. We are ahead with some jobs e.g. cutting back the laurel at Blackford Pond, and behind with others, mainly sycamore clearance and surveys of the ground cover.

Carried over from last year is a lot of work to reduce the spread of sycamore both on Blackford Hill and in The Hermitage woods.

The ranger service is in negotiations with The Friends and Redhall Walled Garden with a view to running a small tree nursery. It is hoped to grow local native trees from seed.

Fergus Cook

OVER THE SUMMER

The past few months have taught us that our members prefer tasting wine and learning about badgers and bats to repairing steps or serving teas! The two badger watches were popular and successful, the wine-tasting evening was fully booked and greatly enjoyed, while Natalie Taylor of Lothian Bat Group gave a packed Hermitage basement a wonderfully entertaining talk on our little furry flying friends before we strolled across to Blackford Pond to see both pipistrelles and Daubenton's bats flittering as predicted in the dusk. The two practical work days were much less well attended, but the six or so stalwart volunteers did manage to clear and repair a substantial part of the steps south of the Pond, and plan to complete the job later in the autumn.

Another activity that has been carried out largely by the Committee in the absence of other volunteers has been the serving of teas, coffees, soft drinks and snacks at Hermitage House every Sunday afternoon. We would like to maintain or even expand this useful service to the public, but cannot hope to do this in the long term without a wider base of volunteers.

Rob Elton

What does the

Morningside Community Council

do for you?

Date: 9 Oct, 4 Nov &
3 Dec 03

Venue: **Open Door**

... we support local groups

... scrutinise planning applications

... organise *art & photography exhibitions* annually

... help groups such as the *Friends of Craiglockhart Nature Trail* and *Friends of the Hermitage of Braid And Blackford Hill* get off to a flying start

... support local *news-letters* such as this

... but we could do more. Why not come to our meetings, and consider joining in?

Contact Suzi ... on ...
0131 466 0258 ... or ...
Email: ...Sw011c9334@
blueyonder.co.uk

Hill & Hermitage is produced quarterly by the Friends of Hermitage of Braid & Blackford Hill. The objectives of the Friends are:

To Conserve and enhance the landscape, bio-diversity, and sustainable use of the Hermitage of Braid and Blackford Hill Local Nature Reserve.

To engage and involve the local community in environmental issues and action, through information exchange, education, and practical activities. We are a charity registered with the Inland Revenue.

For **FURTHER INFORMATION** or **TO JOIN US**, please contact **ROB ELTON** (Membership Sec.) on 0131 667 4079 or email: rob@robeldon.demon.co.uk

Next Issue Copy deadline:
1st Dec. 2003

We are always seeking writers of articles. Is there something that interests you that you would like to write an article about?

The views expressed within this journal are not necessarily those held by the Friends group.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1 (In case you're wondering, RIGS means 'Regionally Important Geological Site' – there's a poster all about it displayed in Hermitage House).

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ALL ON THE SURFACE

On learning that the City authorities are thinking of laying tarmac round the north side of Blackford Pond, your committee has, with City agreement, decided to seek funding for an alternative whinstone surfacing, as we think tarmac would encourage cycling along a path popular with families and frequently occupied by wildfowl. Vice-Chairman Jeff Maguire is putting the finishing touches to a grant application to the Local Development Committee, with a supplementary request for funding for a 4-way signpost for the Scout Bridge. Here's hoping!

(INTERVIEW WITH JOYCE HOLMS, CRIME NOVELIST – AND FRIENDS' FIRST SECRETARY, 1999).

1: When I moved to Greenbank Lane in the seventies I had been living in the middle of the Cheshire plain for several years and was ravenous for the sight of a hill. Even a pit bing would have been a delight, so the discovery of the Hermitage virtually on my doorstep was amazing. With two toddlers and no car, it was little short of a life saver for me and when, after a spell up north, we returned to the area it was, to a large extent, the thought of the Hermitage hills and greenery that made Grange our location of choice.

2: What I like most about the reserve is its variety. There's something for everyone, from the peace of the duckpond to the high, windy places. I'd find it easier to say what my *least* favourite places are, and those must be the entrances. They are all sadly polluted by dog faeces, particularly the one at Blackford Pond which is, in fact, now listed in "Edinburgh for the Under Fives" as a place to be avoided with children. I am filled with horror when I see children picnicking there, their mothers surely unaware that children are particularly susceptible to the larvae *toxocariasis*, which is found in dog faeces, and which not only causes blindness but attacks the liver. Even loving dogs as I do, I see the need for some sort of separation or control both there, at the Observatory entrance, and indeed all over the reserve.

2: It's obvious from what I've already said where my priorities would lie as regards improvements for visitors - and perhaps the same measures would also improve the lot of ground nesting birds and small mammals. Perhaps a separate dog walking area could be set aside.

3: I'm not the most organised of people and much of the time (my mind being on higher things) I have to depend on my husband to tell me what day it is. It was something of a shock to us both when I found myself Secretary of the original FOH, but I don't think I turned up for a committee meeting on the wrong night more than twice. Or maybe three times.

4: Hermitage would be a wonderful place for a murder. Lots of possibilities for an 'accidental' drowning, poisoning by a rare plant, or even a headfirst dive off Agussi's Rock. Watch this space.

HOT POTATO, the seventh book in the Fizz and Buchanan series, came out in hardback this year and the paperback is scheduled for next July. However, since completing that one I've finished a non-series book which is more of a mainstream novel and is set in Saughton prison. Next on the agenda is another Fizz and Buchanan mystery, which has to be with my publisher by Christmas, so I have an excuse for not taking a more active part in the affairs of the Friends of Hermitage. However, I do applaud those who are doing such an excellent job and wish them every success.