



# Hill & Hermitage

Newsletter of the Friends of the Hermitage of Braid & Blackford Hill  
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## Changing Woods

You may have heard of the make-over TV programme "Changing Rooms." It is a show where designers and trades people assist in changing the rooms of some one's house.

Well, we have done our own version in the Hermitage Woods. During the last winter we spent one day a week for several weeks felling trees in the conifer plantation at the westward end of the south woods. That is the wood on your right as you come in from the Braid Road entrance.

We concentrated (if you are still with me) on the eastern end of the conifer woods, which means that where we were working was more or less opposite the red brick building we call The Stables.

Previously this wood had been planted up in the 1970s. Before that it had been a derelict field. Perhaps there was some idea of treating the plantation as a cash crop. Since then, and the declaration of the site as a Local Nature Reserve it has been determined to convert this plantation into semi-natural woodland.

First of all, this means thinning out non-native species of trees. The trees would have had to be thinned out anyway because it is always the practice to plant more trees than you intend to

have as the final crop. What we have done is to take out the western hemlock, lodge pole pine, sitka spruce and sycamore.

This leaves us with a tiny number of oaks, and a fair bit of cherry, larch and scots pine. Future thinnings in decades to come should target the larch and perhaps reduce the scots pine numbers to give space for oak to be planted.



Fergus 'Llewelyn-Bowen' meets Duncan the ranger

In the mean time ash and elm will seed themselves into the wood - as they have already begun to do - because of the increase in light that our felling has allowed to reach the woodland floor.

The analogy with the TV programme was suggested by the fact that previous to our efforts the wood had

reached that stage where, walking through it was like walking through an unfurnished room.

Apart from the well-spaced stems of trees the woodland floor was a flat carpet of needles with little - or more often no - ground vegetation. We have left all the felled trees, hardly cut up, and allowed in light. This has the effect of furnishing the wood with cover for invertebrates, small mammals and birds, including potential nest sites, as well as introducing plants as a food source for all of the above.

We hope you like it.

## Flowering Plants in the Hermitage of Braid

A sunny Friday evening at the Hermitage of Braid provided the setting for a pleasant walk investigating the local plant life. We were lucky to have the local expert botanist and naturalist Jacquie Muscott leading the walk and demonstrating her identification skills and botanical knowledge.

We started off in the woodland close to Hermitage House and quickly discovered specialist woodland species including Sanicle, Wood Speedwell and Dog's Mercury, all of which are considered 'ancient woodland indicators'. The fern flora was particularly rich in the woodland with Male Fern, Lady Fern, the glossy green Hartstongue and the splendid Golden-scaled Male Fern all identified during the walk. In one clearing there was Sweet Cicely, a low growing Hedge Parsley look-a-like, whose leaves smell of aniseed when crushed and which, we learnt, was traditionally stewed with Rhubarb.

Further into the walk, down past the scout bridge, there was a lovely display of pink-flowering Hawthorn. This shrub, planted by the council some time ago, is an introduced species which probably has less nature conservation value compared to the white-flowered native Hawthorn. Another species growing on the banks of the Braid Burn in this area is Butterbur (also called Wild Rhubarb). Its huge rhubarb-like leaves were used for wrapping butter in the days before refrigeration. There are actually two species here, both the native Butterbur and the Giant Butterbur introduced from Japan. It was first recorded at near Dreghorn barracks and has gradually worked its way down to the Hermitage.

I have mentioned a small selection of the plant species that we identified over the course of a very enjoyable guided walk. For those interested in similar events, there is a programme of field excursions throughout the summer organised by the Edinburgh Natural History Society. For a copy of their programme please contact Pete Matthews on 0131 466 2392.

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For information about JOINING Friend's of the Hermitage of Braid and Blackford Hill, please contact ROB ELTON (Membership Secretary) on 0131 667 4079 or email: [rob@robeldon.demon.co.uk](mailto:rob@robeldon.demon.co.uk)

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### Forthcoming Events

Event	Date	Time	Venue
Talk by the Scottish Rights of Way Society	Thursday 24 <sup>th</sup> June 2004	7.30pm	Hermitage House
Badger Watch	Thursday 15 <sup>th</sup> July 2004	tbc	Corstorphine Hill (please book in advance)
Bat Talk and Watch	Tuesday 10 <sup>th</sup> August 2004	7.30pm	Hermitage House
Geology Walk	September 2004	tbc	tbc
Burn clean-up	Autumn 2004	tbc	tbc
Wine Tasting	October / November 2004	tbc	tbc

## **"The Rights and Wrongs of Rights of Way" – a talk by the Scottish Rights of Way Society**

**Date:** Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> of June 2004

**Time:** 7.30pm

**Venue:** Hermitage House

Come along to a fascinating talk and slideshow on the rights of way in Scotland and discover what affect new rights of way legislation may have on the Hermitage of Braid and Blackford Hill. The talk will be given by Alistair Lawson of the Scottish Rights of Way Society. No booking necessary, just turn up on the night.

For further information please e-mail [enquiries@fohb.org](mailto:enquiries@fohb.org) or telephone Pete Matthews on 0131 466 2392.



Badger cub courtesy of Trisha Alderson

## **Badgerwatch 2004**

**Date:** Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> July 2004

**Time:** tbc

**Venue:** Corstorphine Hill

A repeat of the successful 2003 event will take place on Corstorphine Hill. Come along for a rare opportunity to see this nocturnal mammal, guided by an expert from the Edinburgh and Lothians Badger Group. Places are limited so please book in advance. If there is sufficient demand we may organise an additional watch.

Dark non-rustle clothing should be worn (no water-proofs) and walking boots are required, and binoculars are useful.

To book a place and for details of meeting time and place please e-mail [enquiries@fohb.org](mailto:enquiries@fohb.org) or telephone Pete Matthews on 0131 466 2392.

## **Bat Talk and Walk**

**Date:** Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> August 2004

**Time:** 7.30

**Venue:** Hermitage House

The Bat Talk and Walk is turning into a regular Friends event, and is proving to be one of the most popular. Natalie Taylor of the Lothian Bat Group is again leading the event which includes a talk and slide show at Hermitage House and a visit to Blackford Pond. No booking necessary, just turn up on the night.

Children are very welcome but no dogs please – bring a torch and keep your ears and eyes open!

For more information please e-mail [enquiries@fohb.org](mailto:enquiries@fohb.org) or telephone Pete Matthews on 0131 466 2392.

## **Other Forthcoming Events**

Geology Walk – learn how Blackford Glen was pivotal in shaping modern geology. This event is planned for September 2004.

Burn Cleanup – help to give the Braid Burn one of our regular clean-ups this autumn.

## Events cont.

Wine tasting – we plan to return to Hendersons Independent Wine Merchants for a repeat of last years social during October or November 2004.

Further details of these events will be advertised in the next Hill and Hermitage newsletter and / or will be shown on the Friends' web site.

## How Can We Protect Britain's Most Endangered Mammal?

Historically a water vole population had been known to inhabit the Braid Burn area, however records were rather sketchy, and dates hard to come by. During the course of a second year study project, two Napier University students set out to discover whether or not there was still a population of the water vole - *Arvicola terrestris*, Britain's most endangered mammal.

Results were inconclusive, however more was discovered than had first been anticipated.

Information from a

member of the Friends of the Hermitage pinpointed the timescale of common sightings up to around 2000, and made some suggestions as to why the population might have disappeared. Further evidence to back this up came from The Fairmilehead Association, who also uncovered some dastardly deeds by the local council that certainly would not have helped the cause of the water vole! Such deeds include:



\* Dredging of the burn with the sediment/sludge simply being dumped at the burn edge - wiping out water vole burrow system entrances and vital food sources.

\* Indiscriminate weed control measures which included spraying of the burn edge with glyphosphate, with the purpose of eradicating Giant Hogweed. The outcome unfortunately eradicated all else, again including vegetation vital to water vole feeding/habitation.

One way forward in conservation today seems to be increasingly to use voluntary groups for much of the work. Funds are just not available (or are not made available) for a careful, considered approach to habitat management, and it is here that organisations such as yours could play a vital role.

\* By educating young people in the area, to encourage an interest in their environment and show them that they can have a key role in protecting native wildlife. To this end youth groups such as Brownies, Cubs etc could be visited to encourage the children to use their locality as part of a nature or environment badge.

\* By taking an active role in protecting the environment on a day-to-day basis. This can include simple measures such as removing hazardous litter such as bottles that can trap small mammals. Scottish Wildlife and the Mammal Society can provide further details.

\* Watching out for non-native species such as mink, which have a devastating effect on native mammals, and reporting all such sightings to Scottish Wildlife Trust.

\* Undertaking mammal surveys in conjunction with the Mammal Society guidelines. Only around 2% of information on wildlife in this area is connected to mammals. This could be extremely valuable, and the Rangers at the house in the Hermitage are happy to advise.

\* Working in partnership with the council on weed control issues. Any enthusiastic gardeners might like to volunteer to paint systemic weed killer on unwanted plants rather than allow the council to continue their slash and burn approach.

\* Put pressure on your local MP or councillor to implement more carefully considered management strategies.

A copy of the full report will be sent to Rob Elton, Convenor of the Society..

Andi Neilson and Lisa McMillan June 2004