

Hill & Hermitage

Newsletter of the Friends of the Hermitage of Braid & Blackford Hill
Winter 2004 Volume 6, Issue 1 ISSN 1470-9945

Pie in the Sky

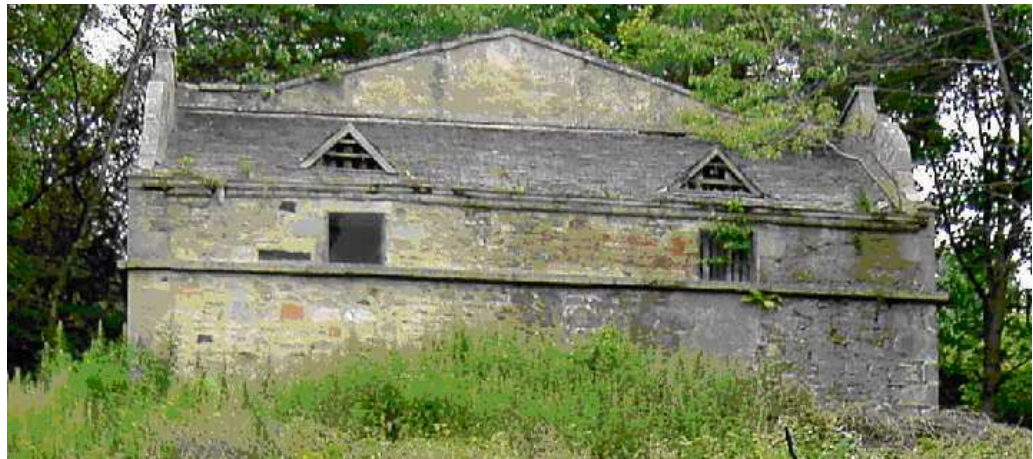
In the old days wealthy landowners assured themselves of a tasty change from mutton, beef or pork by keeping pigeons. The resident of Hermitage House could have as many as 1,965 of them. That is a lot of pigeon pie.

The birds would not be so popular with the tenant farmers of the area. The pigeons would assure themselves of a tasty change from wild flower seeds by eating the farmer's seed corn or crops.

The days of divisive doves are done. The period of pigeon protest is past. The avian arguments... yes

gutter needs cleaned and the internal (modern) down pipe checked to ensure that it is not leaking. To this end we are having the gates, which have been welded shut, cut open to allow a full survey of the structure to be carried out. Padlocks will be fitted in the meantime.

The question then remains, "What to do with the building in the long run?" It seems that cement (as opposed to historically correct lime mortar) has been used to patch the walls. The internal compartments for the pigeons have collapsed in some cases. Are the pointed dormer



The Dooocot. Photograph provided by Fergus Cook, CEC Ranger Service

alright, I'm sure you get the message. Anyway, we are left with The Dooocot in the hermitage woods. It has been dated to the 17th century and so is older than the house and most other buildings for miles around.

Last year the trees in front of the doocot were felled to recreate something like its historic setting. We began to consider what steps to take to conserve or make use of it. Some weeks ago a hole appeared in the corner of the roof. After initial examination it seems there are a number of issues to be dealt with.

One is the soundness of the structure. The hole in the roof must be fixed and the timbers surveyed to see if the rest of the roof timbers are free of rot. The

structures in the roof original and if not should they be removed. There were five stone urn shapes on the wall around the roof. Could they be replicated and replaced?

The ranger service would be interested to hear people's views on what to do with the doocot and would welcome any assistance that the Friends could offer in terms of grant applications etc. You can call me, Fergus Cook, on 447 7145, e-mail me at

fergus@cecrangerservice.demon.co.uk, write to me at The Hermitage of Braid, 69a Braid Road, EH10 6JF or why not send your pigeon to Window Ledge, North of the Front Door, Big House in the Woods.

Come Festive Wine tasting with the Friends !

We are holding another wine tasting event in conjunction with Henderson Independent Wine Merchants, the best independent wine shop in Scotland according to a recent retail competition. The tasting will take place in the back room of the shop on, like last time, on Wednesday 15th December 7.30pm to 9pm and for £5 a head Friends members will be able to sample a range of quality wines and prepare for the festive season in the company of our host and shop proprietor David Henderson. Strictly members and guests only, first come, first served. Contact Jeff on 447 3314 jeff@jmaguire53.fsnet.co.uk to book a place or for further information.

HILL & HERMITAGE

All correspondence, including articles, letters to the editor, advertising enquiries and competition entries to:

Andrew Coates
Tel. 0131 447 0370 or email:
andcoates@blueyonder.co.uk

We are always seeking writers of articles.

Have you been to one of the Friends events and would like to air your views? If you want to have your article considered for the next newsletter be sure to send it before the next copy deadline

11th March 2005

For information about paying your annual membership by **Gift Aid** or about **joining** Friends 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

Do you own or run a business in the South Edinburgh area? Have you thought about advertising in the Hill and Hermitage? We offer very competitive advertising rates. Please contact the editor for further information.

Articles and Letters to the Editor

It looks as if there is a history of volunteering on Blackford Hill. But how many of the current volunteers and Friends knew there used to be a rifle range in the middle of what is now the nature reserve? We have recently received an email from Mr Anthony Crawshaw who is appealing for information about the range and its users.

Dear Andrew Coates,

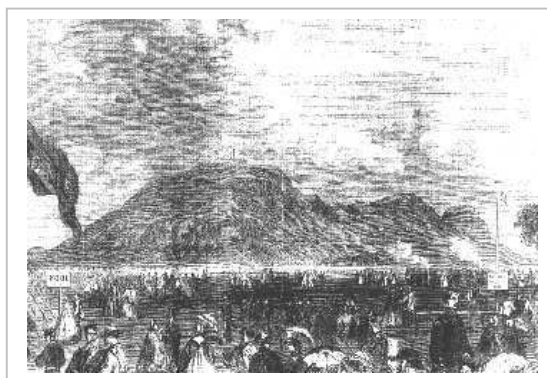
I was recently in Edinburgh for a conference and took the opportunity to look at the site of the Blackford Hill rifle range on the ground. As you may know the range was in use in the Victorian period and features in an illustration in the Illustrated London News from 1861 (from memory). I found evidence of one target site which was not in the position of any of the three targets in the illustration, or at the position marked on the 1st. edition 6" OS map, of about 1855.

The range appears to be an early one, as the Volunteer movement did not get under way until 1859 - 60. My query to you and your group is can you throw any light on the history of the range, please? I am part of a group of four people interested in the history of rifle ranges nationwide and we would be interested in the dates of operation, and any other details, of your range.

Anthony Crawshaw

So all you budding genealogists and historians, are there members of the Volunteers in your family tree, could they have practiced their marksmanship at the range?

Does anyone know if there is a connection with the Volunteers Arms a.k.a. the Cannymans, was it even there in the 1850s?



Print from the Illustrated London News circa 1861

If anyone has any information or advice on where more details could be found Mr Crawshaw can be contacted through the editor.

Poets Corner?

Continuing with the historical theme this newsletter seems to be taking committee member Brian Smith has responded to our appeal for literary references to the Hermitage and unearthed a poem. It is taken from a collection by W Peacock, 1930 and was written by Robert Fergusson 1750-1774.

Verses written at the Hermitage of
Braid, Near Edinburgh

Would you relish a rural retreat,
Or the pleasure the grove can inspire,
The city's allurements forgot,
To this spot of enchantment retire.

Where a valley and crystalline brook,
Whose current glides sweetly along,
Gives nature a fanciful look,
The beautiful woodlands among....

For, lo! Through each opening is heard,
In concert with waters below,
The voice of a musical bird,
Whose numbers melodiously flow....

Oft let me contemplative dwell
On a scene where such beauties appear;
I could live in a cot or a cell,
And never think solitude near.

This may be unfair to Mr Fergusson (different times different tastes and this is my personal point of view) but there must surely be better than that, even McGonagall could fail to be inspired. As editor I feel it necessary to lay down a challenge and encourage you all to either find a more evocative and fitting piece of poetry or alternatively write a masterpiece of your own. Please.

Events



Wine Tasting Evening

Date: Wednesday 15th December 2004.

Time: 7.30pm

Venue: Henderson Independent Wine Merchants.

The perfect way to start the festive period, meet some of the other Friends members and get the chance to sample some excellent wines.

For further information or to book a place contact Jeff on 447 3314 or email jeff@jmaguire53.fsnet.co.uk (be quick this one is popular)

The committee is currently revising the events calendar for 2005, if there is anything of particular interest you would like included or repeated from previous years then let us know. More details will be provided early in the new year.

Friends AGM features both continuity and change

Rob Elton writes:

Foreshadowing the result of the US presidential election a week later (although in a less bitterly fought contest - indeed, no contest at all), our AGM on October 28th saw all the incumbent committee members re-elected. Thus I will be continuing as Convener along with Pete Matthews as Vice-Convener, while Paul Mooney is taking on the post of Treasurer vacated by Morag Smart. Morag will however remain on the committee along with Andrew Coates, Brian Smith and Mark McInnes, while I am delighted to welcome five new members. Former committee stalwarts Sandy Mullay and Jeff Maguire have opted to rejoin us after their mind-refreshing sabbaticals, Lindsay Ross is back with the Friends after a spell away from Edinburgh, and we also have two completely new committee members in Sandie Ross and Goff Cantley.

As I indicated in my Annual Report circulated to members before the AGM, the unfilled places on last year's committee have meant a relatively quiet year for the Friends, although we were able to maintain core activities including a full programme of events and our regular newsletter distribution. In spite of our continued failure to find a volunteer for the post of Secretary, I hope that we will be now able to show a somewhat higher profile with the help of our new and energetic committee members. The 25 members present at the AGM aired a number of ideas for the future in response to my report and the excellent talk on the year in the Hermitage by Fergus, and these included developing liaison with schools, a membership drive and resumption of activity on grant applications.

Unlike Dubya we only have a one-year mandate (not to mention a more limited influence for good or ill on the future of mankind), but we look forward to doing what we can during the next year to pursue the objectives of the Friends, and will keep everyone informed via the newsletter as any new initiatives develop.

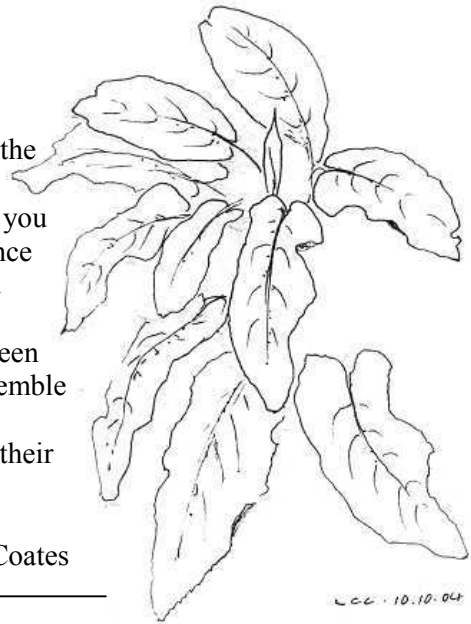
Next time you are stung Sandy Mullay take weed!

Often described as a weed when found in manicured gardens, the dock, or docken as it is known in Scotland comes in several varieties. The leaves are present all year round and whenever you find nettles you are sure to find dockens. This is fortunate, since rubbing a docken leaf on skin where you have been stung by a nettle has long been known to be the antidote.

The flowers of the docken are insignificant pinkish green knot like clusters on tall spikes. When the fruit ripen they resemble crisp red tea leaves.

The leaves of the docken (see picture) are veined and their stems may sometimes be rusty red. They may also have small splashes of rust colour in the leaf.

Liza Coates



Come Back Common Blue

It is a shame really. We are never likely to see some members of the Lycaenidae genus of butterflies on Blackford Hill. The Adonis Blue, the Macedonian Chalk-hill Blue, Higgin's Anomalous Blue (these are real, check out Collins Butterflies of Britain and Europe). What we could see is the excitingly named Common Blue. Except it isn't. Common that is. One was last spotted on the hill about four years ago.

It would be wonderful to have it back. The male is very pretty, being vivid blue on the top surface of the wings. The female is rich brown with orange and black markings. Both have a kind of speckled effect on the underwing surface, which is visible when the wings are folded. They are quite small.

In the current Edinburgh Biodiversity Action Plan it is listed as a priority species.

What it needs is birdsfoot-trefoil, a low growing member of the pea family with lovely yellow flowers. This is what the caterpillars eat. There are a few of these plants on the hill but there would be a lot more if the grass were grazed or cut. It cannot compete with the rank, vigorous grasses that dominate the hill in the absence of grazing or mowing.

One possibility would be to start cutting an area and raking the hay off it - to avoid fertilising the soil with the cuttings. Planting birdsfoot-trefoil would kick start ideal Common Blue habitat. The cutting would have to be done perhaps once or twice a year.

Our volunteer, Des, who lives nearby, is interested in taking this on but especially the raking part would require some assistance. The areas we have thought about are the triangle of ground between the car park and the Observatory, and an area on the ridge west of the Observatory (i.e. up the slope from the Observatory).

Anyone interested in taking part in this front line conservation work involving a couple of days work a year should contact the ranger service on 447 7145, or a member of the Friends committee. Thanks (on behalf of *Polymmatius icarus* - the Common Blue).

Fireworks puzzle

Your committee is enquiring about the renewed decision to hold a Hogmanay fireworks display in two of the city's Local Nature Reserves, one of them being Blackford.

At our last meeting, some committee members were surprised to learn that, following a review of the decision to continue the displays, Scottish Natural Heritage have said that they have no objections.

Newspaper reports that the displays will include 'low level' rockets in addition to those launched from military mortars are causing concern among us mere amateur naturalists, and the committee decided to ask the SSPCA about the animal welfare aspect to all this.

The Friends have protested (in vain) in the past, but the consistent failure of SNH and the RSPB to object has made us wonder if perhaps we are misinformed.

Perhaps the birds at Blackford Pond enjoy the hillside literally exploding into fire and cacophony in the middle of the night! We know that the RSPB have asked the City why their officials are breaking their own Parks Management rules by allowing fireworks in a protected area, but the RSPB have not yet answered our latest letter on the matter. We'll keep you informed if we hear anything from SSPCA and RSPB - we'll certainly hear the fireworks, and the birds will be in the front line!