

# Hill & Hermitage

Newsletter of the Friends of the Hermitage of Braid & Blackford Hill  
Winter 2005      Volume 7, Issue 1      ISSN 1470-9945

## To clear or not to clear - that is the question.



Removal of a sycamore sapling

It is also a question that was answered long before the Friends arrived for the practical workday on Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> October. A practical workday that has to be, so far one of the most well attended. It has however also become perhaps the most controversial, raising queries and criticism from members of the public and also members of the Friends group, both on the day and since.

So why were we removing Sycamore trees from the top of Blackford Hill?

Those of you who attended the workday or were at the AGM will have heard the explanation given by Fergus Cook the reserve's ranger. For those of you who were not I will attempt to paraphrase.

The nature reserve contains a variety of different ecologies, habitats and amenity uses and it is the ranger's responsibility to manage and maintain these. Part of that process is the creation of an approved management plan. The plan identifies areas of the reserve that are of particular importance and require special protection and / or action. The grass on top of Blackford Hill is an area identified in the management plan which requires intervention to be preserved. What is so special about the grass and how does removing sycamore saplings help preserve it?

There are three main reasons why the grassland has been identified for preservation:

**Ecological.** The grassland is a time capsule; it has not been cultivated for approximately 3000-4000 years. This means that the soil composition and microbes are, from a scientific point of view extremely rare, interesting and worthy of preservation.

**Amenity.** The top of the hill offers fantastic views around Edinburgh & the Lothians, as well as space to fly kites, play rounders or enjoy other outdoor air activities.

**Safety.** The open aspect of the grassland gives an increased feeling of security to walkers. This has been commented on, particularly by women dog walkers who feel they can see who is coming as well as being visible to other walkers.

If the sycamore saplings are left unchecked they will mature and spread across the hill altering the landscape and the amenity and scientific value of the hill. Their removal is not solely because they are a non-native species, as a large percentage of the trees in the reserve are non-native; it is because they will irrevocably change a landscape that has existed for thousands of years and is worthy of preservation in its own right.



## Friends AGM reviews the past and looks to the future

The seventh AGM of the Friends was held on Thursday October 28<sup>th</sup> at the Cluny Centre, and it started in what has become the customary way with a presentation by Countryside Ranger Fergus Cook. Using PowerPoint to good effect, Fergus covered topics as varied as the problems with Himalayan balsam, the work needed on the island at Blackford Pond and some unexpected and unwelcome mammal species to be seen in the LNR (mink at the Scout Bridge and rats at the Pond!). He also gave an impassioned defence of the current policy on sycamore control, which had been questioned following the recent Friends workday clearing saplings on the Hill. In the enforced absence of the new Countryside Ranger Supervisor Duncan Monteith, Fergus also spoke about cycling in the LNR, and reassured the meeting that the new rights of access now allowed to cyclists were circumscribed by an obligation to behave responsibly, and that there was no plan to introduce new facilities to encourage cycling. After a number of questions to Fergus the business part of the meeting followed, and the evening ended with refreshments, supplied on this occasion by Andrew and Victoria Coates. Continued on page 2

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Rob Elton and Paul Mooney were re-elected as Convener and Treasurer respectively, but we still have no Vice-Convener or Secretary in the absence of any nominations. Jeff Maguire, Sandy Mullan, Goff Cantley and Andrew Coates remain as ordinary members of the committee, and are joined by new members Elaine Abbot, Jo Doake and Moira Stevenson. The committee hopes to come up with some new and interesting initiatives, and we look forward to using your subscriptions to support a varied programme of practical and social events, talks, newsletters and campaigns.

## HILL & HERMITAGE

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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.

**10th March 2006**

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**  
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The views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of the Friends of Hermitage of Braid and Blackford Hill

## Letters to the Editor

Sir,

Only a few weeks to go and World War Three will break out in the Hermitage of Braid Local Nature Reserve. Military mortars will rock the ancient hillside at New Year midnight, and low-level rockets will strafe the terrified wildfowl of Blackford Pond in the annual 'Seven Hills' fireworks.

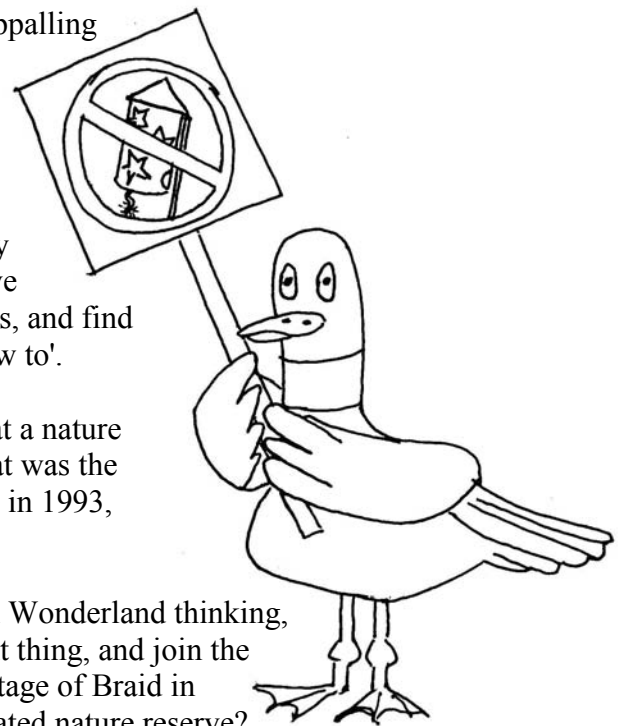
Who will be responsible for this abuse of a designated scientific site? Why, the City of Edinburgh Council, with their firework display to celebrate New Year - something most of us have been able to celebrate perfectly well in years past without this cacophony.

To be fair, the City insists that it has taken scientific advice on the suitability of a nature reserve for a fireworks party - common sense should tell them that it isn't suitable at all, and it's contrary to the municipal bylaws - but apparently some ornithological experts think that this midnight disturbance of roosting birds is OK. I have a letter from the Lord Provost, saying that this disturbance enjoys 'the support of specialist professionals with experience in caring for the natural environment'.

And who is responsible for this appalling 'support'? Step forward, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. Their Scottish Director has advised this group (in a letter dated December 7th 2004) that the fireworks are undoubtedly disturbing, but that birds will leave the nature reserve when it happens, and find 'disturbance-free areas to withdraw to'.

That's funny; I thought that's what a nature reserve was supposed to be! What was the point of designating this site back in 1993, and at the taxpayer's expense?

Instead of displaying this Alice in Wonderland thinking, why doesn't the RSPB do the right thing, and join the SSPCA and Friends of the Hermitage of Braid in condemning an abuse of a designated nature reserve?



A.J. Mullan, Committee Member, Friends, but writing privately.

## Friends Events January – March 2006

### Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> February (Open Door, 420 Morningside Rd, to be confirmed) Talk on the buildings of the Hermitage by Fergus Cook

You will have to keep your radar on as this is perhaps the vaguest Friends of the Hermitage event ever advertised. Fergus has, at least, prepared the talk so we have the who and the what, all you are required to do is check your email\* or the notice boards at the entrance to the reserve for a firm confirmation of the when and the where. Why? Obviously to hear a thoroughly interesting and entertaining history of the buildings of the Hermitage. I've been told that the talk might possibly be accompanied by wine, but I couldn't say by whom, or whether its going to be white or wed red.

\*For Friends members who already receive email notification of events.

### Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> February 1.00pm: Braid Burn clean-up.

The litter louts have been busy again (don't they ever take a holiday??), and quite a lot of debris has accumulated in the Burn after heavy rains in October, so we are once more asking for volunteers to come and help keep our environment beautiful. We'll be assembling as usual around 1pm at Hermitage House, and boots, gloves, rakes and bin bags will be supplied although you are of course welcome to bring your own. There will be work on the banks as well as in the stream for those who want to stay dry, and we hope that the weather will be kind - but the hard core of enthusiasts will be there regardless! If you can't make it by one o'clock, look for us later on somewhere along the burn.



Clean-up safety talk being given by Fergus Cook

### Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> March Afternoon: Friends of Braidburn Valley clean-up

'Everything rolls down hill' and rubbish in the stream is no exception. Our upstream neighbours are planning a clean-up in March but if we can help them bag and bin the rubbish then there is less likelihood it will be washed down into the Hermitage later on in the year. The Friends committee is hoping to build stronger ties and coordinate events with the other local Friends groups and this is perhaps one of the ways that members can get together and do that. As above wear boots and gloves.

Just for fun (answer next edition)

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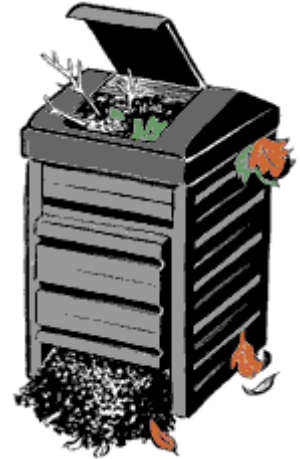
### Do you have a broadband internet connection?

If so would you be interested in receiving a full colour, electronic version of the newsletter delivered to you email inbox? It has been suggested as an environmental, labour and money saving idea that we should trial sending the newsletter across the internet to those people who have a fast enough connection. If you would be interested in receiving an electronic newsletter then send an email to [andcoates@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:andcoates@blueyonder.co.uk) and I can send you an Adobe PDF document version of the newsletter.

## The Beautiful Black Stuff

Do you like getting something for nothing, doing your bit for the environment and having beautiful plants? Do you wonder at living processes and love being outdoors? If so then compost making is for you.

Take some grass cuttings and prunings, a few potato peelings and apple cores, stir to add air and let nature take over. A combination of micro-organisms, decomposers and worms will chomp their way through and turn it all into the beautiful black stuff - or at least usually, if you're lucky. That's where the master composters come in. This is a band of volunteers trained up by LEEP (Lothian and Edinburgh Environmental Partnership) to come and advise where things are going wrong. They are waiting at the end of a phone call to come and look at your slimy, smelly or simple inactive heap and suggest what you should be doing differently. Or for the beginner they will tell you how you can buy a highly subsidised compost bin and help you put it up. If size or space is a problem it is also possible to get a worm bin that lives in any spare corner of your house or landing.



Composting is a process which requires three basic ingredients - compostable materials which provide the organic nutrients (the food), water and air. These must be present in sufficient quantities for the process to be successful. The food should be about an equal mixture of 'greens' and 'browns'. Greens are grass cuttings, kitchen waste, dead flowers and plants whereas browns are prunings, paper, cardboard. The more shredded the materials the faster the composting process. Too many greens and compost could turn slimy and smelly, too many browns and composting will be slow and inactive. It is important to turn and mix together the ingredients to incorporate air and have it moist enough but not soggy. A frequently asked question is how long will it take? Unfortunately there is no precise answer. If you have a large heap the temperature can rise considerably and decomposition becomes quite fast but most normal sized households will probably only generate enough material for a small, cool heap and it will take about a year before you can excavate your first wheelbarrow full. What a joyful moment!

Composting is just a small part of a bigger objective. Reducing land-fill and recycling our waste materials will help make the world's resources more sustainable. There is enough to go round but only if it goes round and round and round ..... Happy composting!

For more information or home visits you can contact LEEP on 0131 538 7957 or email [mastercomposter@leep.org.uk](mailto:mastercomposter@leep.org.uk).

A group talk can also be arranged if a few people show interest.

Elaine Abbot