



Hill & Hermitage

Newsletter of the Friends of the Hermitage of Braid & Blackford Hill
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Sundial Unveiled at Hermitage House

Observant visitors passing Hermitage House will have noticed that the stone plinth on the lawn area to the west of the house is now crowned by a magnificent bronze sundial. This was installed in early December on top of the recently cleaned and restored plinth, and was unveiled on Friday December 5th at a ceremony attended by a number of those involved in the restoration as well as other city officials, Friends representatives and members of the public.

This venture was the brainchild of local resident Mr George Russell, who was moved to investigate the history of the neglected stone plinth that he saw on his frequent walks past the house. As the inscription on the plinth makes clear, the sundial had been installed in 1938 to celebrate the gift of the Hermitage to the City of Edinburgh by John McDougal. It turned out that the complicated bronze superstructure, which originally topped the plinth, had been removed or lost at some time during the post-war period and was never replaced. Mr Russell then set out to

raise enough funds to install a new sundial and renovate the plinth, and the culmination of his efforts can now be seen in all its splendour.

The original design was not thought to be suitable for the present era, being too vulnerable to vandalism, and a new design was masterminded by Mr John Bartholomew in consultation with an ad-hoc



Mr J Bartholomew and Mr G Russell
Photograph Ken Macleod

committee comprised of representatives from the Department of Culture and Leisure as well as your Friends' Convenor, and this was implemented thanks to the expertise of Brian Caster from Powderhall Bronze. Although neither Mr Russell nor Mr Bartholomew had

been in good health recently, they were, happily, both well enough to be present on this occasion to see their dream realised.

The bronze design is well worth a closer look if you are passing, as it incorporates a beautifully-drawn set of wildlife pictures created by Owen Kirby, as well as some details of how to use the sundial at different times of year and an attractive gnomon (sundial-speak for the bit that sticks up!) with inscriptions.

The scheme was funded from various sources including private donations, respondents to an appeal (including the Friends, who contributed £110) and the City of Edinburgh through its Local Development Committee grant scheme. The Friends were also involved in negotiating the final major component of funding, a sum of £1000 obtained through the Edinburgh Environmental Partnership from Waste Recycling Environmental Ltd, which distributes money raised from landfill tax to environmental causes.

Ranger Diary Dec. 2003

Blackford Hill is being invaded. The first wave of colonists has been growing there for about 10-15 years. Some are becoming quite prominent. I am talking about sycamore trees. It must be tough for the seeds to penetrate the thick layer of turf, and many are appearing from out of whin (gorse) bushes. But once a few pioneers have created a bit of shade and gone into full-scale seed production it would only be a few decades before the hill is covered in sycamore woodland. There would be no sweeping views of the Lothians and Fife. A land mark hill that has probably been grassland for most of the last 6 thousand years would have changed completely. To show how this would happen compare the view of Blackford Pond in the picture on the interpretation board of the "Friends" patch. At the beginning of the 1900s there were no trees here. Nearly all the trees that have established on the hill overlooking Midmar Allotments are sycamore. The aim of the management plan is to keep the present proportion of trees, grass and whin bushes. We will be removing newly established trees from the hill, some of them this winter.

According to a tree survey carried out in The Hermitage of Braid in June 1971, over a third (37%) were sycamore. They are the single commonest trees in these woods in every age group of trees but especially the youngest and the oldest. ... continued on page 2

continued from page 1 In fact sycamore and beech (13%) together make up half the trees. They are not native to this part of Europe, do not support as many invertebrates and they both suppress the growth of woodland plants beneath them. This is mainly because of the depth of shade they cast. The most successful native tree in the woods is elm (28%). But the mature specimens of this tree are falling prey to Dutch Elm Disease.

At the moment oak and ash, our other native stalwarts are languishing. Between them they make up 12% of the total number of trees. While the ash can be seen seeding itself here and there, the oak is not regenerating. To make the woods as rich in wildlife as possible and to make them more natural in character, we are planting extra oak trees. To create clearings to plant them in we are felling small areas of young sycamore. We hope to encourage the return of spotted flycatcher to the woods as they like to nest in clearings.

1971 Survey: Sycamore 37%, Elm 28%, Beech 13%, Oak 6%, Ash 6%, Other 10%

FRIENDS TAKE PART IN THE RE-INTRODUCTION OF STICKY CATCHFLY TO BLACKFORD HILL

Sticky catchfly (*Lychnis viscaria*), so called because of sticky patches on its stem, is a rare pink-flowered plant which used to be found on Blackford Hill many years ago. When Henry Trotter of Mortonhall sold this land in 1884 to Edinburgh Town Council he was concerned for the future of the species and rightly so. As citizens now gained free access to the hill, within a few years the plants had all been dug up to be grown in private gardens.

The plant, however, still grows locally on rocky ledges in Holyrood Park where, two years ago, a conservation programme was put in place to increase its numbers. Seeds were collected and over a hundred plants were subsequently produced. Those that were surplus to requirements were given to the City Ranger Service to re-colonise Blackford Hill.

On a blustery and overcast day in early November, eight of us met to take part in the planting. This group included two members of staff from the Royal Botanic Garden, one of whom, Heather MacHaffie, was our leader, three members of the Edinburgh Natural History Society, two Friends and one partridge in a..... no sorry, a ranger, Fergus Cook.

We climbed the hill and Heather chose eight separate sites, some on grassland and some at the tops of crags. A hole was dug for each plant which was carefully removed from its pot and heeled into the ground. We planted a

total of thirty-one, each site having between three and seven plants in it. Photographs were taken and the grid reference and altitude for each catchfly was noted. As a means of protection from marauding rabbits, Fergus placed cut-down tree protectors around some plants and others were covered with gorse. On retracing our steps we discovered that one specimen had already vanished, presumably dug up and removed by a dog, which had left its mark. We did not expect to lose one after a couple of hours!

Our morning's work was most enjoyable and we hope that at least a few sticky catchfly survive to spill their seeds down the hill where they will be safe from man and rabbits.



Friends of Friends plant Sticky Catchfly.
Photograph: Heather MacHaffie

Latest News On The Midmar Field

The future of the field between Midmar Drive and Blackford Hill is still under consideration by a Public Inquiry into the South East Edinburgh Local Plan. As many local people already know, the owners of the field (AG Laing Trust) have objected to its continued designation as Green Belt land, and wish to see it reclassified to allow housing development. We understand that a very large number of letters have been received protesting about this objection (and hardly any supporting it), so there seem to be grounds for cautious optimism about the prospects for this well-loved field - but as in all such cases we need to remain eternally vigilant, as extremely large sums of money are at stake in these planning decisions! The Inquiry is likely to report around February 2004, so we may have more definite news in time for the next edition of Hill and Hermitage.

Birds, Bats and Boxes

One of the many uses to which Friends' subscriptions have been put this year is the purchase of a number of bird and bat boxes, and some of these were installed in late November by a group of volunteers under the expert guidance of Countryside Ranger Fergus Cook. On this occasion we put up two boxes for spotted flycatchers and two for pipistrelle bats, both along the main Hermitage drive downstream from the House. Flycatchers used to breed in the reserve but have not done so for a number of years, so this is a species that we are particularly keen to encourage back, and a close watch on these boxes will be kept during the breeding season next year. We also put up a tit box at the wetland patch near to

Blackford Pond, where future plans include specially designed accommodation for tree creepers, and several other sites in the Hermitage itself are also earmarked for more boxes later in the winter. In addition to a range of small boxes suitable for songbirds, we also have two much larger ones designed to attract Barn Owls, which do

not breed in the Hermitage at present but might be persuaded to do so if suitable nesting sites were provided. This is an exciting project aimed at making some real impact on the wildlife profile of the reserve, and we are delighted that Friends' funding is now being used to support this kind of development.



From cash box to bird box.
Former Treasurer Susanna Dunbar

Annual General Meeting

The fifth Friends' AGM was held on Thursday October 30th at the Cluny Centre, and the 25 members who turned out enjoyed interesting presentations from Countryside Ranger Fergus Cook and retiring Vice-convenor Jeff Maguire as well as some excellent catering provided by Deb Allen and Susanna Dunbar. There is a fairly new look to the committee following the retirement of several long-standing members. Rob Elton was re-elected as Convenor, while Morag Smart (Treasurer) and Pete Matthews (Vice-convenor) joined him as office-bearers, and Mark McInnes, Andrew Coates and Brian Smith remain on the committee along with newly-elected member Paul Mooney. Unfortunately there were no nominations for Secretary, so other members of the committee will need to share the duties of this post for the present. The many and varied contributions of Sandy Mullay, Jeff Maguire, Susanna Dunbar, Susan Wong and Amanda Ingram will be missed, but it is hoped that they will carry on as active members of the Friends even though they have left the committee. The Friends' finances remain sound after Susanna's stewardship, and we look forward to using your subscriptions to support a varied programme of practical events, wildlife talks, newsletters and campaigns.

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 **15th March 2004**

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

Friends of the Hermitage of Braid and Blackford Hill go Interactive

The Friends of the Hermitage of Braid & Blackford Hill have just launched a brand new website – **www.fohb.org**

The site has been launched to reach a wider audience and enable members and other interested people to have access to a wide range of material and information on the work of the Friends group.

Said convenor Rob Elton, “The website is designed to be easily-navigable, user-friendly and interactive and includes key documents such as management plans, our Constitution, details of all forthcoming meetings and events, all the latest news, articles, minutes from committee meetings, lots of information on the Wetland Patch project and much, much more. We are excited at the possibilities the site gives us for reaching new people in innovative ways through the harnessing of new technologies.”

“We are also very grateful to Pentland Local Development Committee who are funding development of the website under the City Council’s Community Grants Fund.”

The site will be further developed as time progresses, so please let the Friends know what you think of the site at web@fohb.org.

Do your muscles ache at the thought of a burn clear-up or are you just in need of pampering?



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Grant Application!

We have been successful in our application for an Edinburgh Council Local Development (LDC) Grant. This will cover the upgrading of the path round Blackford Pond, a 4-finger signpost to be located next to the Scout Bridge, two benches for the patch (made from recycled plastic - better than timber for wetland locations) and our new website - total £4873.44