

FRIENDS OF CRARAE
Scottish Charity SC 033244

Minutes of the Annual General Meeting held at Crarae Gardens on Saturday 22 July 2017.

Present: David Sillar (Chairman), David Green (Treasurer), Victoria (acting Secretary) and John Hall, Kim Cogan (NTS Visitor Centre Manager), Janet Foster, Anthony and Alison Brown, Jan Alison-Norman, Hew and Barbara Service, Fiona Parfitt (for Doreen Gow), Jason Copestick, Andrew Hay, Richard Williams (NTS Regional Manager).

1. Chairman's Welcome

David Sillar welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Apologies

Simon Jones (NTS), M T Selby, Ann Dodd, Moira Smart, Laura Skelton, a 'Friend' from Lochgair (crackly answerphone message), Romano Zavaroni, Lennie and Catherine McNeil, Maggie Green, Fiona and Peter Rice, Peter and Dorothy Hogbin.

3. Minutes of the last Meeting - The minutes of the meeting held on 23rd July 2016 were approved.

4. Matters Arising - none

5. Chairman's Report

David Sillar opined that the Friends of Crarae is running well as an organisation, in large part due to the efforts of Victoria Hall, Fiona Rice and David Green all of whom, with help from Kim Cogan, have almost completed the reorganisation of the membership lists and the transformation of the public face of FoC into the digital age. 'Almost' because there is still more work to be done to recover the Gift Aid from HMRC. David extended his thanks to the team.

David reported that Fiona and Peter Rice have moved south so much of the Secretarial work has been taken over by Victoria. Fiona is keen to continue her role in the Friends.

David Green has resigned as Treasurer but the Friends committee has been fortunate enough to recruit Peter Hogbin, who lives in Furnace, to take over from him. David Green was thanked for his advice and counsel and it was noted that his experience and good sense have been invaluable over the last three years.

The Friends have made no donations to the Gardens in the last year. There have been no projects to contribute to. The Minard Footpath Project has not progressed beyond the planning stage and the remodelling of the Entrance has not happened either. It would be good if both these projects materialised in the coming year; The Friends have funds available and the A'Cruach Community Support Fund (local Wind Farm) is also a potential source of support. Developments in the Forest Garden will be watched with interest when and if a forest management plan is adopted.

The "Carols at Crarae" was held again last December and although it raised slightly less than the previous year the event will be repeated this year.

The Friends would like to thank Kim Cogan for her help in organising the venue and it was again noted that the visitor centre is far preferable to the midge infested 'marquee' of previous years.

Richard Williams was introduced as the new General Manager for the region.

6. Treasurer's Report and approval of Accounts 2016/17

The Treasurer gave a verbal report for the past year's accounts. The returns are simple this year, FoC did not make any donations in the year ending March 2017, there were no projects to support. He mentioned that there had been a significant over-spend in the preceding year (over £8,000) in bringing the dining area and kitchen up to the standard that we see today. He did point out that it is important for there to be projects to support in the future.

We currently have 160 members and 16 honorary members; the subscriptions are the major income with additional funds raised at the Christmas concert event.

The new Treasurer will continue 'tidying' up the accounts and ensuring that we only have one account, with electronic banking access.

The OSCR report will be posted on the Friends of Crarae website.

There was a discussion on the Gift Aid situation and prior mix up in admin. Gift aid is worth approx. £300 per year to the Friends accounts. The authority to administer gift aid still resides with a prior Treasurer (Mr Reynolds), David Green has discussed the resolution with the incoming Treasurer (Peter Hogbin) and when Peter takes up his post he will alert HMRC and apply retrospectively. A question of back-dated claims was raised by Hew Service and it was confirmed that 5 years should recover all of the as yet unclaimed amounts.

The good news is that the membership records have been cleaned over the last year and are as up to date as possible.

Approval of the accounts were proposed by John hall, seconded by Anthony Brown and passed unanimously.

7. Garden Report

The garden report was delivered in three parts – Kim read the report provided by Simon Jones and supplemented with her own report as acting Property Manager.

Simon apologised for not being able to attend the AGM. He provided an update on the recruitment process for Gardener and First Gardener – the gardener appointment had been made and interviews for the First Gardener were scheduled for the next week. In the meantime gardeners from Arduaine have been working 1 week (man hours) per month focussing on garden checks, paths, weeding and tree work. A local contractor has been doing the grass cutting from the entrance to the visitor centre and this work has been extended into the lower part of the main garden.

The *Acer tschonoskii* near the toilet block has been felled as it had honey fungus and a sitka spruce near the main entrance which has butt rot fungus will also be removed. Simon gave the plan for the new staff priorities:

3-6 mo – garden safety and presentation – paths edges, grass cutting and general winter work.

6-12 mo – general uplift of garden standard and the generation of a 5 year plan.

Simon also apologised for what must be a frustrating time for the Friends, but that the ‘roots’ of a sound plan are being established.

Kim started her report with the significant staff changes at Crarae since the last AGM, mentioning that the Head Gardener/Property Manager left for a new position and the two gardeners left to set up their own business and that the team wish them all success in their new role and business respectively. She also confirmed that she had been asked by the Trust to become Acting Property Manager and that the lack of gardeners has led to difficulties. She mentioned that she is waiting for a confirmed start date for the gardener and as Simon mentioned the interview dates for the First Gardener. In the mean time she is working with Gregor (Head Gardener at Arduaine), Simon and the contractor to try to ensure tasks are managed.

Kim mentioned that Victoria (Friends of Crarae) and one of Arduaine’s Thistle Campers who came to Argyll a day early have both given a days weeding (the Thistle Camper in the pouring rain!). There will be Thistle Campers at Crarae in September, supervised by Gregor. She also mentioned that despite the difficulties there are still a lot of positive comments and that she speaks with visitors on a daily basis and most are positive whilst a few are disappointed with the state of the garden at the moment, when the situation is explained most fully understand. She went on to confirm that the lack of gardeners has not affected visitor numbers and that they are up 6% year to date against last year.

2016 YTD 6,716 visitors. 2017 YTD 7,125. With a 10% income increase overall.

Retail up 3%; Admissions up 15%

Catering is up 17% on last year as more people become aware of the facilities. Kim also confirmed that they aim to increase the offering from the café for next season. She has also prepared a ‘mail drop’ for local residents promoting offers at the café.

Plant sales are down -6% but this is a huge improvement on earlier in the season, when plant sales were sitting at -40%. This occurred as a result of poor ordering at the start of the season, but was quickly rectified with the assistance of Highland Lilliums, Fyne Plants and Osbertons who have been a huge help to us. Kim hoped that they would be able to sell more home grown plants next year when the gardeners are in place.

Kim also read out some Trip Advisor reviews.

Trip advisor reviews regarding the garden are still looking good we have had a few negative comments which have been responded to but these were regarding the café not the garden.

Reviewed 1 week ago via mobile

Beautiful gardens

This was our second visit to these lovely gardens which are well managed while still maintaining a feel of magic and mystery. The information about the plants and their fascinating journeys to the garden along the way really add to the experience of the place. Perhaps the thing that we enjoyed most of all is how sensory the experience of Crarae is with

its wonderful variety of nature's sounds, sights, smells, textures and colours. A real sanctuary of beauty and tranquillity. Great wee tea room too!

Reviewed 1 week ago

Garden with a difference!

A range of walks can be chosen from which to see this 'garden' from various angles. I chose a walk of 35 minutes taking me upwards alongside the gorge to admire waterfalls and shear drops. There are trees a plenty from all over the world and even though the rhododendrons were almost finished, there's plenty to captivate. There is a wheelchair friendly walk and good mobility is needed for the other walks. Pleasant café furnished us with soup and a sandwich prior to our expedition.

Richard Williams was invited to comment on the previous reports. He mentioned that that he had been in post for 4 months and that he is responsible for the 12 properties in the area. He also confirmed that there has been a lot of reorganisation at NTS HQ as well as the changes in local personnel and understood the issues and frustrations that have been experienced. He explained that Simon Jones joined the NTS as Gardens and Designed Landscapes Manager – Glasgow and West from a Head Gardener position at Edinburgh Zoo and the Botanics so has significant relevant experience to bring to bear in this new role.

Richard confirmed that because of the difficulty in recruiting garden staff and the declining state of the garden the NTS revised its priorities and focussed on recruiting 2 gardeners ahead of a Head Gardener position.

He did confirm that the current year is project 'light' because of the staffing situation but he felt that this would be rectified in the next 12 m. He confirmed that the Forest Garden is a big challenge and that there would have to be a delay in forestry work whilst the shelter belt at Arduaine took priority and suggested that the Forest Garden is a 3-5 year project.

John Hall asked if the recruitment issues were Crarae related or NTS in general. Richard responded that recruiting to remote gardens has been a challenge in general, some of the areas where one might expect housing to be affordable is not so that has not helped. A pay and grading review has now been applied to these posts to help with affordability. He also thought that they had been unlucky in recruitment.

Victoria Winters also responded as a 'Friend' who visits the garden on at least a monthly basis to take the pictures for the website. The relatively dry, sunny spring ensured that the early flowering azaleas, camellias and rhododendrons held on to their blooms for longer than normal and that the colour in the garden was fantastic throughout this time – particularly in May – she invited the Friends to view the website where there are 2 entries for that month. Unfortunately the very wet spell that followed affected the later flowering varieties. A particular favourite (the bloom on the membership card for this year) was very badly affected. She mentioned that this mystery deciduous azalea is unlabelled – a discussion ensued about the naming and labelling of the plants at Crarae and the database which is in dire need of being updated.

The current state of the garden without full time garden staff was discussed, it was noted that the huge amount of 'invisible' work done by the previous gardeners Jason and Andrew and

the difference they made to the 50 acre site can only be truly appreciated now the weather has warmed up and the weeds/undergrowth have been growing in earnest.

Victoria spent a day weeding in early July, focussing on the herbaceous borders and the areas around the visitor centre to try to improve the first impressions (particularly from a gardener's perspective). During her day on site visitors approached her and their questions ranged from the history of the garden, house and family, features such as the paved river, specific plants to advice on which plants to select for new border in the questioners garden. She mentioned that the Friends could help prepare a 'garden tour' guide for any new garden staff including the history, anecdotes etc. to help with staff interactions with the visitors. She also offered further 'weeding time' as she enjoyed the day.

8. Election of Committee Members and Office Bearers – Victoria Winters proposed Peter Hogbin as Treasurer, seconded by Barbara Service. Janet Foster proposed Barbara Service join the committee, seconded by John Hall, all in favour.

Victoria Winters confirmed that she would continue as acting secretary to assist Fiona Rice.

9. Any Other Business

No other competent business was raised.

Victoria encouraged everyone to visit the website www.friendsofcrarae.com for events, photos, information.

The Chairman acknowledged the work of the Committee and thanked them for all their efforts and for setting up for the evening. The meeting was closed.