

FRIENDS OF CRARAE
Scottish Charity SC 033244

Minutes of the Annual General Meeting held virtually on Wednesday 22nd November 2023.

Present: John Hall (Chairman), Victoria Winters (Secretary), Jennifer Deane (Committee Member), Richard Stein (Treasurer), Adrian Curtis (co-opted Committee Member), Robert Carroll (Crarae Head Gardener, NTS), Dilla Patrick (Crarae Visitor Services Manager, NTS), Tim Keyworth (Garden and Designed Landscape Manager, NTS), Derek Shankland (First Gardener, NTS), Kirsten Eadie (Gardener NTS), Grace Macleod, Lennie McNeil, Sally Lovell.

1. Chairman's Welcome

John Hall welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Apologies

Anne Paterson (Committee Member), Fiona Rice, Laura Skelton, Steven and Ella Wilson.

3. Minutes of the last AGM - The minutes from 2022 AGM were approved. Proposed by Jennifer Deane and seconded by Grace McLeod.

4. Matters Arising – None – VW commented that a red squirrel feeding rota between the local Friends will need to be established in 2024.

5. Chairman's Report

“May you live in interesting times” was thought to have been a Chinese curse but is more likely to have been first used by the British politician Sir Austen Chamberlain. Whatever the origin, the past year at Crarae has certainly qualified as “interesting times”.

We were all excited at the start of the year to observe the great work of Bear as they built the path connecting Minard village with the Garden. Set back from the A83 and adorned by the beautiful dry-stone walls built by Lochgair's Kenny Reive, the path provides safe access for people from the village to and from the Garden and the neighbouring graveyard. My thanks to everyone including Transport for Scotland, NTS, Bear, Lady Cecilia and Cumlodden Estates, the Minard Community Trust, the West Loch Fyne Community Council, local Councillors and other supporters for helping to make this happen and to those, especially Victoria and Bob Bruce of Bear, for driving the project through its many frustrating challenges over the past six years.

The Garden itself faced many challenges in the Winter and the start of the year. Severe flooding in July 2022 had weakened the bridges and eroded the bed of the burn to a significant extent and access to the East part of the garden severely restricted. NTS started to work on the surveys necessary to construct new bridges whilst the garden team assisted by Friends worked to develop a new path to the top bridge.

No sooner was this path in place and being enjoyed by the growing number of visitors enjoying the Garden and the Visitor Centre when an additional storm hit in October causing significant water erosion, land slippage and flooding of the lower garden. This resulted in the

garden being closed for safety reasons and the team is currently working to ensure that Crarae opens on time in 2024, Tim covered this in more detail (below).

The Friends have been unable in recent weeks to work on site but are looking forward to getting back into the swing in the New Year and extra hands and feet will always be welcome.

My thanks again to all those who support the work of the Friends in so many ways including membership and physical and moral support. Crarae is a wonderful place that can be enjoyed in so many ways. We look forward to the opportunities presented by the recent floods to reinvent the Garden and to provide improved access, for all abilities, to its important collection.

6. Treasurer's Report and approval of Accounts 2017/18

The Treasurer, Richard, gave a verbal report for the past year's accounts.

The overall membership income remains consistent with past years, with new members joining and older members leaving through moving away or passing away. Donations are lower due to one previously very generous donor passing away.

There is no Gift Aid included in this financial year due to admin issues with permissions on the HMRC website. Subsequently to the end of the financial year, two years worth of Gift Aid has been claimed and received.

Because of the floods in July 2022 the project priorities of the NTS changed in the financial year in question and The Friends retain funds in the order of £22,000 to support future Garden Projects.

The accounts have been reviewed and approved by an independent examiner, Chartered Management Accountant Mr Tim Wilcock.

The accounts were proposed to be adopted by John Hall and seconded by Jen Deane and will be submitted to OSCR alongside the annual report by Victoria Winters.

Friends of Crarae		Scottish Charity No: SC033244
Income and Expenditure for the year to 28th February 2023		
2021/2022		2022/2023
	INCOME	
1575.00	Subscriptions	1585.00
440.00	Donations	200.00
0.00	Carol concert	0.00
0.00	Grants	0.00
305.08	Gift aid	0.00
230.03	Bank interest	97.43
2550.11	Total Income	1882.43
	EXPENDITURE	
0.00	Donations to NTS	0.00
24.00	Garden support	24.00
0.00	less job retention refunds	0.00
0.00	AGM	0.00
0.00	Events	0.00
50.00	Promotion	50.00
104.40	Website	105.68
0.00	Postage/stationery	52.80
94.34	Insurance	91.86
272.74	Total Expenditure	324.34
2277.37	SURPLUS/DEFICIT	1558.09
	Balance Sheet as at 20 November 2023	
	CURRENT ASSETS	
0.00	Cash on hand	0.00
1016.23	Bank of Scotland Current Account	22594.95
0.00	Hampshire Trust Business Bond - 1.50% matured 21/4/21	0.00
12000.00	Hampshire Trust Business Bond - 0.70% matured 21/4/22	0.00
0.00	Hampshire Trust Business Bond - 1.00% matures 30/11/21	0.00
8080.03	Hampshire Trust Easy Access Account (0.1%)	0.00
0.00	Hampshire Trust Easy Access Account (0.1%)	0.00
0.00	Debtors	0.00
	CURRENT LIABILITIES	
-59.40	Creditors	0.00
21036.86	TOTAL NET ASSETS	22594.95
	REPRESENTED BY	
18759.49	Working Capital at 1st March 2022	21036.86
2277.37	Surplus/Deficit for year 2022-23	1558.09
21036.86	TOTAL FUNDS as at 28 February 2023	22594.95
	All funds are unrestricted	
	Signed Richard Stein	
	Dated 25-Jul-23	

7. Garden & Visitor Centre Report

Dilla began the NTS feedback with her Visitor Centre report. She described a positive start in March with all the staff who finished in October 22 returning and some new faces joining the team. This gave continuity and a lot of confidence for the coming season.

Visitor numbers slightly increased (3%) by the 7th October 23 when the garden suffered considerable storm damage and had to close early. The team were on target for a 5% increase to 12,600 visitors, the number of members visiting had increased by 10% but the number of paying visitors had decreased.

Catering and retail also saw increases this year with catering up by 5% and retail was up by 38%.

The catering offer of more local plates, weekly specials and homemade scones was very popular as well as the good coffee helped towards an increase in local and passing trade and increased spend per visitor by 6%

The new layout of the shop and Café as well as increased range led to an increase in retail spend per visitor of 42%. Victoria and John confirmed the excellence of the scones!

The team held a low key Easter hunt (not NTS sponsored) it was still well received. The Easter hunt will be sponsored by MOO Free (vegan friendly) next year, the event will be on Easter Saturday and Sunday.

The Walking theatre Midsummer Night's Magic was very successful and popular with Locals and Visitors. Will plan another walking theatre for next May.

Unfortunately, the Halloween event was cancelled due to the storm damage and garden closure, but the team does plan to run the event next year. The team did have a wedding in the garden this summer and will explore this avenue for events in the garden in the future.

There will be an Archaeological dig in front of the Cairn in August next year with an evening lecture.

Dilla summarised that the year had been quite challenging for VC team, explaining the constantly changing routes and the path/bridge closures in the garden whilst keeping a positive spin on the experience. Despite the challenges the team have retained Visit Scotland 4*, scored 92% in BVA mystery shopper visit and also been awarded a Trip Advisor Travellers Choice Winner.

The enforced early closure due to storm damage to ensure people kept away from the property for safety reasons was a sad end to an otherwise positive season.

They currently plan to open the visitor centre on 13th March next year.

Robert Carroll gave his garden report, a few highlights are mentioned here, the full Garden report is appended to the minutes for more details.

Early in the season Robert and Derek were upskilled in digger driving and this has helped increase the amount of path maintenance and creation that the team can achieve in house. The new path to the top bridge that the whole team (and Friends) worked so hard on was the only path to make it through the storm damage unscathed!

Other key achievements have been to host the Plants Project where the entire garden was accessioned so in the future the plant collection will be properly catalogued and with the addition of a plant label machine (shared with Arduaine) more of the collection can be labelled.

The new border in the lower garden in the area of last summer's archaeological dig has been dug over and the plants have been ordered.

Robert thanked the garden and visitor centre team for all of their hard work in challenging times.

Tim gave a summary of the garden status following the flood damage from early October. The formal report can be seen as an appendix to the minutes. Tim confirmed that they are in

process of assessing the extent of the damage to the garden and unfortunately the engineers report has been delayed so he was not able to share the contents in the AGM as initially thought.

Tim confirmed that the Trust has a dedicated foot path team expert at accessing hard to reach places and it was the Trusts intention to bring them in to assist the Crarae team in the new path network. They will have a plan in place by Christmas and the garden will open again in March. Not all areas will re-open at the start of the season. Tim confirmed that they are looking at all 120 acres for this new path network. He confirmed that the waterfall bridge, because of its solid foundations, will be replaced on the same site and these works are in the current budget. He confirmed that the top bridge has also had intermediate repairs.

Grace asked if the team had had any contact with ACT (Argyll Countryside Trust) for projects, funding support and Victoria also commented on their current work with the Alliance for Saving Scotland's Rainforest. She shared contact details, which Victoria will confirm by email.

Tim thanked the Friends, garden team and visitor centre team for their work.

8. Election of Committee Members and Office Bearers

The current Committee was proposed to continue by Richard Stein and seconded by Lennie McNeil. Adrian Curtis who had been coopted on to the committee in the summer to replace Abbie McCrae was proposed to join formally and seconded by Jen Deane. John Hall thanked the committee for their contribution to the Friends.

ACTION: Victoria Winters will notify the Trust Members Centre appraised of the formal changes.

9. Any Other Business

Victoria Winters raised several points under AOB and **ACTION:** will amend the standing agenda for the next AGM to include a Secretaries Update.

Membership at the end of 22-23 is 120 paid up members and 13 honorary members.

The Friends of Crarae website had 13,046 visitors in the last financial year, 49,904 since inception.

Instagram followers stand at 361 up 15%.

Twitter followers are at 95 after 2 years. The reach is however at 1,280.

In May of this year Victoria and John joined Jim Dickson from the Argyll bird club to repeat a bird survey of the gardens. This was done through listening for bird song in the early morning and was a magical experience. The results were 18 species (3 more than last year) and 50 birds with multiple territories identified. There were two highlights of the morning a male goldcrest which landed on a branch right next to Jim which raised its crest and began displaying. We were so surprised we didn't manage to photograph it. The second was a female greater spotted woodpecker clearing out a nest high in a larch bole. We watched her throwing old nesting materials out of the hole for quite some minutes. The gardens were

mentioned in an article in the Argyll Bird Club magazine and the records are formally included in Argyll's nesting bird surveys.

Victoria mentioned that the volunteer crew had continued to meet each Thursday (until the floods) and had helped with paths, steps, pruning, weeding, an archaeological dig and zoning the garden for the plant ID crew. She continued by confirming that she has created a Champion tree trail using the ISSUU software and will be able to create a QR code downloadable leaflet once the path network has been confirmed. Tim asked if it is easily amendable and Victoria confirmed that it was, the leaflet (created in PowerPoint) can be edited and a new version uploaded, QR codes don't need to be changed. She could even train a member of NTS staff in the process.

John Hall thanked the group for their participation in the meeting, and the AGM was closed.

APPENDIX NTS GARDEN REPORT



Crarae Garden November 2023 Report

Introduction

Please accept this report by way of an update for 2023. Anything that you would like to discuss further I am more than happy to do so and can be contacted on 01770 302202 or tkeyworth@nts.org.uk Thank you very much for your continual support. Operations Manager Louise Baker is also available on 01436 673 900 lbaker@nts.org.uk & Robert Carroll (Head Gardener) is also available at rcarroll@nts.org.uk 01546 886 621.

Following on from the November 2022 report, please find the following updates for your records.

Operational Update

Crarae enjoyed a largely successful season this year with visitor numbers remained consistent, the café once again proved popular, and the planting was the star of the show even though the Rhododendrons at Crarae didn't flower as well as expected. However, on the 7th of October extreme weather events caused by a months worth of rain falling in a day caused widespread disruption and damage across Argyll, unfortunately the gardens at Crarae suffered significant damage through erosion and landslips, causing an early end to public opening for the year.

Staffing

- Joseph Hardy left the gardens team and was replaced by Gardener Kirsten Eaden, who had been a seasonal gardener at Crarae the previous year. Kirsten has a fantastic eye for detail and is an asset to the team.
- Andrew Hay has been employed as a seasonal Groundsperson from June-January. Andy has previously worked as a gardener at the property and his knowledge of the gardens past is proving invaluable.
- Both Robert and Derek are still in post maintaining the garden.

Staff Training & Development

- Tim Keyworth became a professional tree inspector (PTI) this year which means that assistance can be given to Robert to help carry out more detailed/advanced tree surveys as and when required.
- Excavator training to allow the team to use a mini-digger was completed in January 2023, this will enable path maintenance and easier removal of invasive plants. A mini digger has also been purchased for the South and West region and it will be much used in the coming months.
- A first aid course with the forest operations training was completed in January 2023.
- Eco plug pesticide training (PA9) has been organised for November 2023 which will mean that invasive species can be more easily tackled next year.

New Purchases

- As well as the new excavator purchase that Crarae will benefit from a new trailer has also been purchased to help operations.

Plant Heritage (NCCPG) & National Collection of *Nothofagus sp.*

- There continues to be concern over the suitability of this collection to the site. An assessment will be conducted in conjunction with our Curator of Plants, Dr. Anna Florence, who is also responsible for NTS Plant Heritage National Collections. We have been in dialogue with our (NCCPG) co-ordinator, Katrina Clow, and in the coming months

we will be in a better place to make a judgement call on the collection status and therefore suitability to Crarae garden.

- By way of additional explanation and information, it should be noted that the garden is managed in an extremely wet East facing hillside and in order to get most plants to grow, the water is managed by a series of ditches running off and down the hill. This wet situation coupled with the micro-climates created by the plant collection serves up the perfect recipe for wet loving woody pathogens such as honey fungus and Phytophthora sp.

Update post storm

- On 7th of October extreme weather events caused by a months' worth of rain falling in a day caused widespread disruption and damage across Argyll, unfortunately the gardens at Crarae suffered significant damage.
- Due to the devastation caused by the storm, the garden will be closed to the public for the winter months. The damage is a combination of flooding from the burn but also excessive path washout with runoff water from the hillside.
- The gardens team and specialist geological surveyors are now in the process of assessing the damage and starting to put in place a plan for the team to work to in the coming months. Our priority at the moment is safety, primarily the safety of our gardens teams and of contractors who may be on site to carry out work.
- Much of the garden has now been assessed for the damage caused and we are awaiting a specialist engineers report, before taking decisions on the visitor journey for next year and the path network of the future. We hope to be able to form a clearer picture of this in the coming weeks, as and when it is safe to do so. Some of the Forest garden remains off limits and will be assessed in due course.
- Much of the garden infrastructure has been damaged due to a combination of landslides from further up the site, flooding and erosion caused by the Crarae burn bursting its banks. Many of path networks throughout the garden have been badly affected with the woodland garden being of particular concern, with many unstable slopes, in particular a large crack in the main entrance path to the woodland is of particular concern.
- On a positive note- Initial signs are that much of the planting and the collection, which is so important to the garden remains largely intact, which is a positive in what is an incredibly difficult time for all of those connected to the garden. It was a very sad way to end what had been a positive opening season for the property.
- Initial repair work has been focussed on the rebuilding of the forest track, which will allow access to the wider site but also allow for the drainage ditches and culverts to be cleared.
- A hydrological engineering company has been engaged to produce a report on the condition of the garden infrastructure and path network, we are still awaiting this report before taking further decisions on the visitor route throughout the garden for 2024. We will also be engaging with NTS specialist footpath team to see if internal advice and expertise can be sought from within the organisation to advise on and to help with the repair of paths in the garden.



(l) washout to forest garden track (r) example of erosion on red route



(l) Crarae burn bursting its banks, flooding lower section of the garden



(l) Boulder size of car moved by the storm

Garden Developments

Other Gorge Works – Renovation & replacement of pedestrian bridges-

The three pedestrian bridges that straddle the Crarae gorge are integral to the visitor journey, but all three are in bad condition. Unfortunately during the course of the season the condition of the lowest bridge worsened and this had to be closed to the public due to safety concerns. Post storm this has also started to slip into the burn and needs to be removed from site as soon as is possible to prevent further damage, it will not be replaced imminently as we fear that any replacement will be washed away in due course if replaced in the same position. However, the middle bridge will be replaced in March 2024 and designs and costs for this replacement have been sourced. The foundations for this bridge (which has an elevated position over the burn) are well set back from the burn edge so can be re-used in the making of the new bridge. This will be a tricky build as it will need to be built with contractors using rope and harnesses.

Maintenance work was carried out on the timber of the third bridge which has given a temporary repair, enabling it to play a key role in visitors being able to gain access to the sections of the garden on the other side of the watercourse. However, this will also need to be replaced in the coming years.

Renovation of lower Borders and implementation of new planting

A plan is in place to increase the interest in the lower section of the garden, which is accessible to all and will improve colour in the summer months. A new, mixed border is being created and the existing planting is being renovated, this work will be done in time for the new season.

The Meconopsis (blue poppy) river planting is starting to establish and will continue to be added to in the coming seasons.

Comments from Head Gardener Robert Carroll

Season 2023 has been a mixture of extreme weather throughout the year that has effected the work programme from a very wet spring to summer long lasting drought to autumn deluges of rain washing out large sections of the garden.

The flowering of our collections this year was late and short lived with many of our champion rhododendrons not flowering as abundantly as previous years. Despite these weather events it has been a very productive year. We now have a full team here at Crarae with Kirsten Eadie taking up the full time gardener position and Andrew Hay taking up the seasonal post joining Derek and myself in the garden. We all completed our first aid plus forestry training at the start of the year followed by Derek and I completing our mini excavator training and assessment allowing us to use mini diggers at Crarae to complete larger tasks. One of these tasks was to create 100m new path network which allowed us to keep the garden as open to visitors as we could while rerouting away from storm damaged areas.

At the moment we are working on some redevelopment in the lower garden area creating a new flowering border this has allowed us to engage with the NTS archaeology team who spent a week here digging an area near the cairn and opposite graveyard. Nothing significant was found but our volunteers had a great time getting involved with the dig and was a great fun week for all. For three weeks during summer the plants project got under way here at Crarae and with the plants team we managed to re accession nearly all the plants in the garden to be entered on our new data base system known as irisBG this was only achieved with the full commitment of all garden staff. The friends of Crarae continue to volunteer as a team each week to great effect and additionally we had

a gardener from Crathes join us for a week and a volunteer from Germany a Dr Eva Sholz came for a week's volunteering and were of much help and we are keeping in touch. In other news we have had to take some severe action to address the condition of some off our largest Eucalyptus in the garden with regards to the safety of our visitors the Eucalyptus urnigera in the lower garden had to be dismantled, post a Picus sonic tomographic survey revealed severe rot at ground level, others at Sir Georges seat area were also dismantled due to dangerous lean over paths, a replanting process has begun and we intend to bring in a lot of new plants for next year. Finally, the full team took a field trip to Logan Botanical gardens and met Richard Baines the curator and he filled us with inspiration and talks of some partnership sharing plants and ideas, this was a very beneficial trip as Logan is a very special place that Crarae can benefit from and a return visit is planned.

The new excavator being used to install a new path to the upper bridge, creating a visitor loop in the garden and improving access.



Archaeology taking place on the site of the new border near the visitor centre



We would like to place on record our thanks to the Friends of Crarae for the continued invaluable support to the gardens. It is also great to see the *Minard to Crarae* footpath completed; it has greatly improved access for locals and visitors alike.