

FRIENDS OF CRARAE
Scottish Charity SC 033244

Minutes of the Annual General Meeting held virtually on Saturday 24 July 2021.

Present: Alison Hay (Chairman), Peter Hogbin (Treasurer), Victoria Winters (Secretary), Barbara Service (Committee Member), Robert Carroll (Head Gardener), John Hall, Anne Paterson, Jennifer Deane, Keith Potter, Abbie McCrae, Michiel van Zanten.

1. Chairman's Welcome

Alison Hay welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Apologies

Grace Macleod, Kim and Iain Ritchie, David Sillar, Graeme and Jenny Knox, Louise Baker

3. Minutes of the last AGM - The Annual Report from 2020 was approved. Proposed by John Hall and seconded by Barbara Service. The group were reminded that previous AGM minutes are posted on the Friends Website (www.friendsofcrarae.com).

4. Matters Arising - None

5. Chairman's Report

Alison Hay began by stating that she found providing an update report extremely difficult as nothing much from her standpoint has happened in the gardens over the past year.

She went on to confirm that The Friends are making progress with the installation of the pavement extension, but that she is not aware of any other things reawakening after the covid long sleep.

Visitors are being allowed into the gardens, but the Trust is getting no income from them other than from the honesty box as the visitor centre remains closed which she feels was a very short-sighted decision.

Volunteers are finally allowed back to the gardens, but what a task in front of them. As outgoing chair Alison raised her disappointment in the appearance of the gardens. She acknowledged that there have been staff absences and, because they are so short staffed, there are many tasks that just cannot be completed with a single member of staff on site. However, the paths that have been closed show no signs of reopening and present a very poor appearance, and they've been in this state since before covid and she wondered why at least mitigation couldn't have been put in place.

The fact that the visitor centre has been closed for such a long period of time just when it was beginning to show an increase in visitor numbers, is baffling. The impression of lack of resources and commitment by management makes her very sad because Crarae has such potential; her impression is the Trust doesn't care and would be pleased to see it close permanently.

Alison closed her report by saying that she felt frustrated as Chair as she was unable to make any headway on the issues facing the garden and she went on to apologise for not being a better Chair and wishing her successor every good luck in the future.

John Hall mentioned that The National Trust, along with a lot of other large charity organisations found dealing with the sudden change in circumstances brought on by COVID lockdown extremely difficult and not all decisions made at the time, with hindsight, would be considered proportionate.

Anne Paterson commented that the gardens have proved a significant resource for well-being, mental health and sense of recovery following the lockdowns and their importance to the local community remains significant.

Robert Carrol replied to the Chairman's report, he shared Alison's frustration with the difficult situation facing the garden and garden staff over the past year or so. The extended furlough period, loss of the Friends Volunteer worker over the winter period followed by significant difficulty recruiting replacement staff once the seasonal staff budget was finally approved, the extended Visitor Centre closure and significant delays in responding to 2020 flood damage resulting in the SEPA impasse have all had a detrimental effect on the garden. Robert confirmed that currently the Garden has 2 full time gardeners and one part time seasonal worker. Sadly, the full-time seasonal post was not able to be filled, the successful candidate turned the position down. Robert can however only look forward and the Garden Report with some more positive news is included in Section 7 below.

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

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

The income remained stable for the year of 2020, the Gift Aid received was lower than previous year which had included retrospective claims.

Expenditure over the last financial year was chiefly in the support of the salary for the trainee gardener, employed by the Friends and working with the gardeners as a Volunteer. Sadly, the extensive furlough period by the NTS for those with Volunteer status proved too unsettling and he resigned his position in late Autumn.

The Friends retain funds in the order of £18,000 to support Garden Projects. The projects will be covered later in the minutes.

The accounts were proposed to be adopted by Alison Hay and seconded by John Hall.

Friends of Crarae		Scottish Charity No: SC033244
Income and Expenditure for the year to 28th February 2021		
2019/2020		2020/2021
	INCOME	
1662.00	Subscriptions	1552.00
444.63	Donations	470.00
265.00	Carol concert	0.00
1000.00	Grants	0.00
1140.50	Gift aid	338.40
0.00	Bank interest	343.64
4512.13	Total Income	2704.04
	EXPENDITURE	
	Donations to NTS	0.00
1680.52	Garden support	5022.00
	less job retention refunds	-2312.00
0.00	AGM	0.00
0.00	Events	0.00
100.00	Promotion	0.00
143.88	Website	197.42
46.27	Postage/stationery	84.80
169.44	Insurance	0.00
2140.11	Total Expenditure	2992.22
2372.02	SURPLUS/DEFICIT	-288.18
	Balance Sheet as at 28 February 2021	
	CURRENT ASSETS	
	Cash on hand	0.00
585.55	Bank of Scotland Current Account	765.30
10000.00	Hampshire Trust Business Bond - 1.50% matures 21/4/21	10000.00
9000.00	Hampshire Trust Business Bond - 1.00% matures 30/11/21	8000.00
0.00	Debtors	0.00
	CURRENT LIABILITIES	
-535.00	Creditors	-5.81
-2.88	HMRC PAYE	
19047.67	TOTAL NET ASSETS	18759.49
	REPRESENTED BY	
16675.65	Working Capital at 1st March 2020	19047.67
2372.02	Surplus/Deficit for year 2020-21	-288.18
19047.67	TOTAL FUNDS as at 28 February 2021	18759.49
	All funds are unrestricted	

7. Garden & Visitor Centre Report

Robert provided the garden report; as the Visitor Centre has remained closed, there is no formal Visitor Centre news to share.

Robert began with the welcome news that a third full-time gardener position, plus a seasonal worker has been put forward for next years budget. He also confirmed that the Visitor Centre

is to re-open next year (usually from Easter) and it is his understanding that it is also to undergo a redesign and a review of the café/shop offering.

He confirmed that the feature Mekanopsis River that has lain dormant for the last 3 years will be re-designed, NTS has established a partnership with Kevock nurseries (? To be confirmed correct spelling) and commissioned a 5 year program of varieties of Mekanopsis plants, including Mekanopsis 'Crarae'. 100 plants in 2L pots will arrive first. He will also seek advice on companion planting to ensure the 'river' remains a feature throughout the seasons.

They have also recently designated a rhododendron propagation area in partnership with a nursery in Ardfern and will be designating special plants/varieties for propagation – the resulting plants will be used to improve and protect garden stock and also offered for sale in the plant sales area. One challenge has been the significant delay to delivery of peat free compost.

The steps and handrails are slowly being replaced; the arrival of the back order of timber and use of dedicated joiner will speed this process up.

There are several dead trees to be removed, specialist tree surgeons and heavy equipment are required. Derek the 1st Gardener will have a chance to practice his arboreal work.

Robert was thrilled to report the extent of work done by the new Friends Thursday Morning Work Crew and is identifying further projects to be tackled. He was also keen for feedback on the gardens, good and bad from visitors so he could focus efforts of the work crew and the garden team on areas that would have the most impact on those visiting.

John Hall asked about the Nothofagus collection and the diseased trees, Robert confirmed that Phytophthora serengii was in a specific area of the garden but not widespread through the collection but that he was finding it challenging to engage with Forest and Land Scotland on the issue/resolution. He has reported it to the Plant Network too.

Abbie McCrae asked about possibilities for Volunteers for the Work Crew that could only work at weekends. Robert Carrol confirmed that a Saturday Club (1 per month) could be established, and Volunteers could work either Thursdays (meet 3 per month), a Saturday or both. ACTION: Robert and Victoria to arrange induction and date of 1st Saturday session.

Michiel van Zanten asked about status of the proposed pavement extension linking the village with the garden, particularly with a view to enhance the disabled and safe access to the garden. An update was given by Victoria see point 9.

8. Election of Committee Members and Office Bearers

Alison Hay resigned as Chairman, to remain as a Committee Member. The candidate for Chairperson of the Friends of Crarae, Dr John Hall was nominated by Victoria Winters and seconded by Barbara Service.

Peter Hogbin resigned as Treasurer, he described the role and it was confirmed that Victoria Winters shadowed the role (bank accounts/records etc.) Michiel van Zanten volunteered to take on the role and was proposed by Victoria Winters and seconded by Alison Hay.

ACTION: A series of handovers will be arranged by Victoria Winters.

Abbie McCrae and Anne Paterson had been co-opted to the Committee earlier in the year and were proposed as full members of the Committee by Victoria Winters and seconded by John Hall.

9. Any Other Business

Victoria Winters raised a number of points of AOB.

At the end of February 2021 the membership stood at 150 members and 10 honorary members. After 2020 there was renewed interest in the garden from the local community, 15 new members have joined and there is a vibe of renewal and enthusiasm for the gardens and the future.

Crarae is mentioned in the Top 10 things to do in Holiday West Highland Magazine (through the Friends membership of Heart of Argyll Tourism Alliance).

The website visitors stand at 27,328 since inception, up 1,000 since June (magazine publication), 12,760 web visitors in the FY 2020/21.

Victoria confirmed that @thefriendsofcrarae on Instagram has also been joined by @friendsofcrarae on Twitter, she and Anne Paterson will manage the Twitter account and all members are encouraged to follow and share their thoughts and photos.

Jennifer Deane suggested the Work Crew contribute a blog to encourage engagement and volunteers. ACTION: Victoria Winters to start the blog and to promote new posts on social media.

Looking forward: Bear Scotland and Transport for Scotland held a surveyors meeting in the summer of 2020, walking the route for the pavement extension from Minard Village to the garden, the plans have been drawn up and funds made available in TS budget for October of this 2021. The window of opportunity extends to March 2022 before bird nesting and budgets change. Robert Carrol confirmed that Bear Scotland have been in touch very recently with a view to purchase the land from NTS.

The garden shelter project has been discussed in committee meetings this year and a 'Himalayan style' open sided structure in the vicinity of the Flagstaff viewpoint (Blue walk) would provide a space for quiet reflection with far reaching views in addition to shelter from the rain at one of the most distant points of the walking routes. Robert Carrol is discussing pricing and options with local artisan suppliers and the plans and budget will need to be submitted to the Trust budget process (and agreed by Friends) so that the funds can be transferred at the start of next financial year.

Victoria Winters and Robert Carrol met with Jim Dickson from the Argyll bird club to discuss the bird hide and feeding stations. It was agreed that the bird hide would be best utilised as a red squirrel hide and feeding stations should be set up offering a naturalistic viewing spot for visitors. It was suggested that the Friends could establish a rota to keep the feeding station stocked (using NTS supplied food) to save the garden staff having to add this to their list of daily tasks. Jim Dickson also agreed to conduct a quarterly bird survey, providing photographs and sighting to the Friends for use in social media and on a sightings board to be placed on the Visitor Centre. Jim Dickson also suggested obtaining posters of bird species (RSPB) and annotating them for those seen in the Gardens.

He also committed to performing a nesting bird survey with colleagues in the spring of 2022. All this information will improve the ecological and environmental capital of the gardens and increase the interest for groups or individuals wanting to visit.

Robert Carroll has already moved the bird and squirrel feeders from the visitor centre side to an easily accessible quieter part of the lower garden along with benches so visitors unable to walk through the garden can watch the birds whilst others in their party do the trails or a group can picnic at the end of their visit and watch the wildlife.

Barbara Service mentioned that this approach can also be extended to butterflies etc.

John Hall closed the meeting by thanking the team for his nomination and Alison Hay and Peter Hogbin for their great support and commitment to the Friends during their tenure. It was agreed that the next Committee meeting would be scheduled after the handovers, and within the next month.

The meeting was closed.