

FRIENDS OF CRARAE
Scottish Charity SC 033244

Minutes of the Annual General Meeting held virtually on Tuesday 16th August 2022.

Present: John Hall (Chairman), Victoria Winters (Secretary and ad interim Treasurer), Alison Hay (Committee Member), Anne Paterson (Committee Member), Abbie McCrae (Committee Member), Robert Carroll (Crarae Head Gardener, NTS), Dilla Patrick (Crarae Visitor Services Manager, NTS), Tim Keyworth (Garden and Designed Landscape Manager, NTS), Jennifer Deane, Keith Potter, Grace Macleod, Lennie McNeil.

1. Chairman's Welcome

John Hall welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Apologies

Kim and Iain Ritchie, David Sillar, Janet Foster, Sally Lovell, Richard Stein, Michiel van Zanten, James Greenfield, Wilf and Barbara Stout, Barbara Service (Committee Member), Fiona Rice.

3. Minutes of the last AGM - The minutes from 2021 AGM were approved. Proposed by Anne Paterson and seconded by Abbie McCrae.

4. Matters Arising – Robert Carroll reiterated his commitment to offer one Friends Work Crew ‘Saturday Club’ per month when staffing levels are such that the volunteer crew can be supervised by a member of the Garden Team.

5. Chairman's Report

This time last year we were emerging from the shutdown resulting from the Covid crisis. As Alison then mentioned in her Chairman's Report, visitors were being admitted to the garden, but the visitor centre remained closed. Robert's gardening team included Derek and Peter (a seasonal worker) and they were starting to deal with a huge backlog of tasks arising from the Garden being untended for most of the Covid shutdown.

Fast forward to today and, as we'll hear from Dilla, Robert and Tim the Visitor Centre has been given a welcome facelift and reopened in the Spring....the coffee and cake and the lunches are excellent by the way....and the team provide a very warm welcome to Crarae. Robert has a growing, enthusiastic, and increasing capable team and with Tim's support they are making a very positive impact on the many challenges (including phytophthora and biblical scale flooding) provided by our 50-acre garden. I'm happy to see that they are also improving access to fascinating parts of the garden which were previously unseen by most visitors.

At our last AGM we discussed the setting up of a Friends work crew to help Robert's team where possible. The Crew has worked all over the garden under the close supervision of Jock on most Thursday mornings through the past year and we've enjoyed rain, wind, midges and, yes, sunshine and the great satisfaction of seeing the fruits of our labours.

Victoria reminded me recently that she and others have been working diligently for at least 5 years to try to get a footpath established between Crarae and Minard. This process seems to

have involved more government agencies than I knew existed but with strong support from NTS, TfS, Cumlodden Estates and Bear we are getting close to getting the job done. My current understanding is that the roadside strip of land is in the final stage of being acquired from NTS by TfS, the trees on the strip have been felled and Bear should be able to put a crew on the job when the dust has settled on implementation of their new 8 year contract with TfS.

Finally, I know Robert and Tim will be providing an update on the condition of the Crarae Burn and its bonny banks. At first sight the damage caused by the recent flood was dreadful to see. However, in the days following the Saturday night flood the gardening team did an amazing job to allow reopening within the week. Happily, the apparent disaster is already leading to lots of attention from NTS management. Some excellent ideas have been considered for the development of new paths and I'm confident that Crarae will get the support it needs from NTS and, of course, from the Friends to make it even more interesting and attractive than ever.

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

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

The overall income remains consistent with past years, with new members joining and older members leaving through moving away or sadly passing away.

Expenditure was at a minimum during the last financial year; the garden was only open in "Winter mode" and progress towards any significant projects put on hold due to the need for an immediate focus on remedial garden work by the garden staff as a consequence of the prolonged COVID closures and weather-related events.

The Friends retain funds in the order of £21,000 to support future Garden Projects. The proposed projects are covered later in the minutes.

The accounts were proposed to be adopted by Alison Hay and seconded by Jen Deane.

Friends of Crarae		Scottish Charity No: SC033244
Income and Expenditure for the year to 28th February 2022		
2020/2021		2021/2022
	INCOME	
1552.00	Subscriptions	1605.00
470.00	Donations	410.00
0.00	Carol concert	0.00
0.00	Grants	0.00
338.40	Gift aid	305.08
343.64	Bank interest	230.03
2704.04	Total Income	2550.11
	EXPENDITURE	
	Donations to NTS	0.00
5022.00	Garden support	24.00
-2312.00	less job retention refunds	0.00
0.00	AGM	0.00
0.00	Events	0.00
0.00	Promotion	50.00
197.42	Website	104.40
84.80	Postage/stationery	0.00
0.00	Insurance	94.34
2992.22	Total Expenditure	272.74
-288.18	SURPLUS/DEFICIT	2277.37
	Balance Sheet as at 28 Feb 2022	
	CURRENT ASSETS	
	Cash on hand	0.00
765.30	Bank of Scotland Current Account	1016.23
10000.00	Hampshire Trust Business Bond - 1.50% matures 21/4/21	0.00
	Hampshire Trust Business Bond - 0.70% matures 21/4/22	12000.00
8000.00	Hampshire Trust Business Bond - 1.00% matures 30/11/21	0.00
	Hampshire Trust Easy Access Account (0.1%)	8080.03
0.00	Debtors	0.00
	CURRENT LIABILITIES	
-5.81	Creditors	-59.40
18759.49	TOTAL NET ASSETS	21036.86
	REPRESENTED BY	
19047.67	Working Capital at 1st March 2021	18759.49
-288.18	Surplus/Deficit for year 2021-22	2277.37
18759.49	TOTAL FUNDS as at 28 Feb 2022	21036.86
	All funds are unrestricted	
	Signed: Victoria Winters	
	Date: 03-May-22	

7. Garden & Visitor Centre Report

Robert began his report by responding to the lack of progress on Friends' projects mentioned above including the key one to provide a sheltered seating area within the garden. A wider range of design options and tenders are now being sought.

The recent flood damage (July) has changed NTS and garden spending priorities, the torrential rain rendered the access road to the proposed shelter viewpoint impassable and so this vehicular access will need to be repaired. The flood damage has also meant the Trust's hand has been forced in terms of upgrades to the core garden infrastructure. New trails and bridges are required as a priority to maintain access and the level of interest for future visitors within the gardens. Prices are currently being obtained for "like for like" bridge replacements and for polytimber alternatives (which would have a longer lifespan). Because of the landslip

and bank erosion the team must open up new trails, this has provided the opportunity for new viewpoints. A recent visit from David Mitchell (deputy chair of the National Trust for Scotland) raised the potential of a low-level viewpoint and sheltered seating area at the burn side, possibly commemorating the Horlick's collection Rhododendrons that were lost in the flood.

The replanting of the Himalayan poppy (*Mecanopsis*) in the flowerbeds had been a success, however following the flooding within the lower garden the *Mecanopsis Crarae* varieties will now be moved to the upper (drier) section of the planting area. A further 120 plants will be arriving shortly for planting out. Test digs to track the spread of golden root mealy bug in the planting area and surrounding lawn has proved negative, which is great news.

Areas of the woodland garden will also be identified for nursery planting, so the gardeners can begin to refresh the collections.

Robert mentioned that Derek and Joe had recently reinstated Candida's seat and that the team were actively exploring the older path network to add new routes and areas to explore for visitors.

Robert made further key points from his written report (provided in full below):

The garden has again come through a winter without much damage from winds and adverse weather. The garden had a reasonable flowering season except for those early flowering Magnolias that had their display shortened by a late frost. There have been some wonderful rhododendrons flowering really well including our *Rhododendron cinnabarinum* and *Rhododendron cinnabarinum* subsp. *tamaense* and *RH Cinn var roylei* visible above mill laid at the top of the steps. Group garden tours have returned after two years of Covid restrictions and are most welcome and we grow in confidence that we are beginning to see European and wider a field visitors returning to our garden.

This year we have been able to increase our staffing levels in the garden with Joseph Hardy starting in the full-time post of gardener and two part time seasonal staff, Lynne Maclagan and Kirstin Eadie both local and all at HNC horticulture level. This has made a dramatic difference to our workload. Again this year, many thanks have to be given to our loyal band of volunteers from the friends of Crarae with Victoria and John at the helm, we would be in a much poorer state without them, not only the work they do but the positive attitude they bring each week.

There are, as always, many issues to address in the garden but this year I feel they are being identified and plans are being put in place to address them. These include replacement bridges, new paths and routes, burn repairs, plant health, and the shelter hut and new viewpoints. New interpretation around the garden has also been discussed and plans are in place for the coming year.

Abbie McCrae asked whether a sensory garden could be included in the development plans for the lower garden now that the accessible path network is much reduced. The potential benefits of a sensory garden to dementia patients were raised by Grace McLeod. A discussion about the renewed interest in gardens, open spaces and the combined benefits to mental and physical health ensued. Anne Paterson also suggested that increasing the level of interest for children is also a consideration in any future developments of the garden.

Anne Paterson also commented on how amazed she was by how quickly the team had reinstated the paths in the lower garden and cleared the debris following the flood and that they should be proud of what they achieved in such a short period of time.

Dilla Patrick gave her Visitor Centre report confirming the team are delighted to have the visitor centre back open again, it has had a fresh coat of paint both inside and outside and is looking much better.

Dilla returned as Visitor Services Manager as well as Ealasaid who was also part of the VS team in 2019, new members of the team are Isla, Faye and Mhairi. The team is working hard to provide a warm welcome to all the visitors and locals alike. The feedback is everyone is delighted that we are open again and they are enjoying the new menu and cake selection.

Like the rest of the country, they have had difficulty filling the positions available so have not been able to expand the catering as was intended at the beginning of the season and have had to reduce the offering on some days.

May was a very busy month for the gardens as usual which was a good boost to get the season going and visitor numbers were only slightly down on 2019. The rest of the season so far has had its ups and downs with dramatic rain and the dreaded virus forcing us to close on occasion but in general everyone who visits have a lovely time and comments such as “hidden gem”, “spectacular” and “we will be back” are not uncommon to be heard.

She mentioned that they are planning to hold a Halloween event the last weekend of October as a bit of a finale to the season before we close on the 30th.

Abbie McCrae asked if ‘bank’ staff were used, Dilla replied that the Trusts policy was not to use zero hours contracts but to contract to a minimum to fit the staff member’s needs.

Dilla also confirmed that there may be the possibility of opening the Visitor Centre on a few occasions in the run up to Christmas. And that a schedule of events was being worked up for next year.

Tim Keyworth then provided an overview of progress from a garden management perspective. He mentioned that all the gardens managed by the Trust in the west coast area were experiencing challenges, but that they were all different challenges. He committed to ensuring that the garden staffing levels would continue to increase, bringing in additional skills and staff where needed. The garden offering to visitors were also different and should be recognised as such.

He has been working with the team to create a plan with short term (2 years?) and long-term goals towards improving the garden and the visitor experience. He confirmed that the Trust would need to meet the challenge posed by the flood and fund the burn project and new routes, making the required changes to the bridge network, including a vehicular access point and to support the gardeners in increasing the interest for visitors with limited abilities. He wants to capitalise the ‘mindful space’ of the gardens. Victoria Winters commented that during the recent NTS USA visitor tour comments were made about Crarae being the best garden they tour group had been to in terms of being able to truly ‘walk’ and one with areas to lose one’s self in.

Tim raised the challenges of disease in the garden – phytophthora, honey fungus and camellia scale to mention a few and that the plant sales area will need to remain closed because of this. Robert confirmed that a 3-year plant movement moratorium was in place and until that had been lifted the gardens could not supply plants. However, it was hoped that at least those plants with ‘Crarae’ in their name would eventually be able to be sourced from the gardens.

Tim also mentioned that opening the Forest Garden is an ultimate goal and the flood re-shaping of the burn may actually have made this long-term project more viable.

The new database IRIS and the appointment of someone to document the plant collections will have a positive impact on understanding of Crarae's natural capital. Crarae will be surveyed and catalogued in 2023, a rhododendron expert will be brought in to support this work, as much of the prior plant collection data has been lost or is inaccessible to the team.

8. Election of Committee Members and Office Bearers

The current Committee was proposed to continue, except for Treasurer, by Grace Mcleod and seconded by Lennie McNeil. Richard Stein was proposed as Treasurer by Victoria Winters and seconded by John Hall. Jen Deane volunteered to join the Friends committee and was proposed by Anne Paterson and seconded by Abbie McCrae. John Hall thanked the committee and retiring Treasurer, Michiel van Zanten for their contribution to the Friends.

ACTION: A Treasurer handover will be arranged by Victoria Winters and the Trust Members Centre appraised of the changes.

9. Any Other Business

Victoria Winters raised several points under AOB.

Firstly to amend the record from last year. FY20/21 ended with 120 paying members not 150 as mentioned in the previous minutes. Lennie MacNeil asked if this affected that year's financial performance, Victoria confirmed that it did not, it was a typographical error not an accounting error.

Membership at the end of 21-22 is 124 paid up members and 13 honorary members.

The Friends of Crarae website had 14,034 visitors in the last financial year, 37,858 since inception.

Instagram followers stand at 314 – our social media reach is 50% followers and 50% new accounts, so we are being 'discovered'.

Twitter followers are at 57 after 1 year. A plea was made for any Friend with a Twitter account (or Instagram) to follow us and share our content.

Victoria confirmed she was also working with Dilla on the new NTS Crarae social media pages.

In May of this year Victoria and John joined Jim Dickson from the Argyll bird club on a bird survey of the gardens. This was done through listening for bird song in the early morning and was a magical experience. They met at 7 am and walked the gardens, stopping every few minutes to listen and have Jim point out and explain quietly the birds that he could hear. There were over 15 species identified, the best 'finds' were the garden warbler, black cap and redstarts. The gardens were mentioned in an article in the Argyll Bird Club magazine and they will be included in future nesting bird surveys.

Victoria also described her winter project of transcribing records and then physically identifying and tracking down Champion Trees at Crarae from The Tree Register. She confirmed that she identified about 25 out of the more than 130 Champions or Remarkable

trees mentioned in the register and committed to walking with Tim and members of the Friends to share details of a potential trail. She also confirmed that the damage from the flood has not limited access to the 25 trees identified so far, they all remain accessible from the current path network or key viewpoints. A formal waymarked Champion Tree trail would provide interest and background for future garden visitors.

Victoria also confirmed that the upgrade of the secret squirrel hide has been completed with a new trail loop and squirrel feeding stations – a rota will need to be established to keep the peanuts topped up as the storage bins left in the hide were raided by pine martens recently.

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