

Geilston: Growing a Community

Introduction

The Friends of Geilston (FoG) would like to work in partnership with the NTS to create a vibrant destination which can be enjoyed by NTS members, the local community and the wider population. FoG believe that it would be possible to convert Geilston's buildings into a popular and commercially viable centre for educational and social use. Furthermore, this new asset would enhance the visitors' experience and significantly boost visitor (and NTS member) numbers.

This document briefly outlines the why, what and how of this potential facility, plus the benefits this collaboration could bring to the NTS and the public.

Why? Evidence of Demand

Geilston garden provides an inspiring location for creative, recreational and educational pursuits. FoG has organised several events and initiatives which have proved to be successful; raising funds for FoG, bringing more visitors to Geilston and attracting new members to both the NTS and FoG. These included art workshops, wildlife days, nature walks, a garden history day, an apple festival and photography competitions. The popularity of these activities indicate that there is very likely to be future demand for similar educational workshops and/or residential courses.

There is currently no catering establishment within easy walking distance of Geilston and FoG believe that having a café on site would enhance the visitors' experience and encourage repeat and new visits to Geilston. FoG has set up a pop-up café selling teas and cakes on several weekends and each time it has been well patronised, with the public stating their desire to have a permanent café at Geilston. On each occasion the café has led to more people visiting Geilston, some of whom joined the NTS as new members.

Although not related to the concepts outlined below, it is also worth noting that there is a great deal of local support for Geilston remaining open to the public, as evidenced by 530 FoG members and sponsorship of FoG by local businesses which recognise the volume of customers they gain from people visiting Geilston.

What? Two Concepts for Growing a Community

Based on research and discussions with relevant organisations (see acknowledgements section), FoG believe that either (or a combination) of the two ideas outlined below may offer a viable way forward. Both concepts envisage Geilston House and Bothy being used as a vibrant centre for learning about horticulture, cooking, crafts, nature and wellbeing. Both options also provide a café and function rooms. The main difference between the two proposals is that the first, "Scotland's Home from Home," provides facilities for schools and the local community, whereas the second, "A Nourishing Retreat" is set up for residential courses as well as community use.

"Scotland's Home from Home"

FoG are very grateful to Sutherland Forsyth for his input and inspiring report (included as a separate attachment). Sutherland was the Learning Curator at the Palace of Holyrood House and Community Engagement Manager at the Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh, where he was part of the team involved in rebuilding 'The Cottage'.

His report clearly outlines his vision for Geilston, which includes transforming the Bothy into a café and reception area, the Gardener's Cottage into offices and the whole house into function and teaching rooms, including a Bake Off style cookery school.

Income would be derived from the café, room hire and grants for community projects.

“A Nourishing Retreat”

Residential Accommodation

This option conserves more of the original layout of the house. Indeed, the relatively small room sizes of the house's oldest part inspired the idea that they would be most suitable for single ensuite bedrooms. This could be used to our advantage by offering residential retreats or courses, which usually are attended by singles or friends. The house could be hired out for exclusive use by a tutor, or by small group tour operators using Geilston as a base. Alternatively, courses could be arranged by the property manager and sold individually.

Long Term Accommodation

The Gardener's Cottage would remain as a long term let. It could be converted into additional bedrooms for residential courses in the future if that proved to be more financially advantageous.

Café

FoG have established that visitors to Geilston want a café and a local caterer has expressed a strong interest in leasing a café at the property. The former drawing room (at the south end of the single storey west wing/‘bungalow’) could make an ideal café. A small prep and display area could fit into the piano alcove, or alternatively the adjacent room could be used for this purpose. In time, perhaps the conservatory could be reinstated and used as an additional seating space.

Snack Outlet

The Dovecot could become a small takeaway for ice creams, drinks and snacks. It could be converted in the initial phase of the restoration project to generate income, provide refreshments and conduct market research to establish what foods would sell well in the main café.

Shop

If the room adjacent to the drawing room was not required for food preparation, it could be used as a small shop for NTS products, kitchen garden produce and for goods made by local artisans. There is a local artisan group who might be able to staff the shop on a co-operative basis.

Teaching/Function Rooms

The former morning and dining rooms in the west wing could be used as teaching rooms for residential or non-residential courses. If not needed for courses, they could be hired for private functions or to community groups.

Museum and Film/TV Location

The former kitchen could become a museum and, along with other rooms, be hired for filming.

NTS Offices, Volunteers' Room and Machinery Store

The former laundry, scullery and back part of Geilston could be covered and converted into a machinery store, office and volunteers' room.

Community Kitchen and Function Room

The bothy and current NTS offices could be converted into a large bright open plan space with sliding doors revealing a teaching kitchen at the north end. This space could be separated for private functions (with catering facilities), or opened up for community groups to use during the week and for celebrity chefs to offer fundraising cookery demonstrations with a meal at weekends.

This model could be done in phases and offers various sources of income: private hire and fundraising functions in the bothy and house; residential course fees (£150 per person per night at comparable venues); lease income from the café and snack outlet; rental income from the Gardener's Cottage and location fees.

How? Organisational Structure

FoG propose that the NTS retains ownership of the gardens and wider estate. FoG believe that the NTS maintains the garden very well and would like the NTS to continue to be responsible for managing the gardens and grounds.

FoG propose that FoG set up a new charity with wholly owned trading arms to take on the buildings and to manage the restoration/conversion project, the new centre and its operation.

Grant applications for the capital costs of the project would be made by the new charity. In order to be eligible for grants, the new charity would need to own the buildings, or have a long term lease of at least 25 years.

First Steps

Geilston's title deeds would need to be checked to ensure the proposed concepts are allowed.

FoG (now a SCIO) can apply for a project viability grant (PVG) from the Architectural Heritage Fund (AHF). The PVG would be used to pay for a conservation surveyor and for a consultant to produce business plans for the two concepts outlined in this document.

To be eligible for a PVG, FoG would need a promissory note from the NTS, stating that the Trust is open to the possibility of transferring ownership of the buildings to, or entering into a 25 year lease with, the new charity to be formed by FoG.

Benefits to the NTS and the Public

- Geilston garden remains open for NTS members and non-members to enjoy.
- The garden attracts more visitors under NTS, as opposed to private or community ownership.
- NTS continues to receive income from entry fees and recruiting new members.
- Predicted greater visitor numbers will generate higher income for NTS.
- NTS receives income from produce sales to the public and potentially to the onsite café.
- NTS no longer pays for the buildings' restoration and maintenance, nor furniture storage.
- NTS receives income from long-term lease to new charity.
- NTS retains ownership of the wider Geilston estate.
- Café and workshops enhance visitors' experience and attract more visitors.
- Function/teaching rooms and community kitchen provide a hub for community groups to meet, learn new skills, reduce social isolation, improve their health and nutrition etc.
- Geilston gains an identity, becomes more of a destination and provides a model for NTS and 'friends' collaborations at other properties.

Conclusion

FoG believe there is an opportunity to transform Geilston's buildings into a vibrant venue for learning and recreation, whether that's following the residential or non-residential model. Both concepts fulfil the demand for a café and learning opportunities, whilst also offering the creation of an exciting new community hub.

FoG believe that funds will be available for the capital costs and that the new venue will be commercially viable. A full business plan including costings, projected income and expenditure and company structure would be commissioned as part of a project viability study. Before proceeding to this next step, FoG would welcome a meeting with the NTS to discuss the two concepts and the potential for future collaboration.