



Introduction

This is the first annual report of the Friends of Geilston (FOG). It covers the period December 2020 to January 2022 in order to reflect the realignment of our financial year following the transition from an unincorporated charity to an incorporated charity. As this is our first report, it begins with some background to the Friends before reviewing our activities during the year.

Background to setting up of FOG

FOG was established in August 2017 following a decision by the National Trust for Scotland (NTS) to review its continued ownership and management of the Geilston estate in Cardross, Argyll and Bute. The estate comprises a garden featuring woodland and paths by a burn, walled garden and fruit and vegetable garden. Within the estate, which sits just at the western edge of the village of Cardross between Dumbarton and Helensburgh, is a house and various outbuildings including a Doocot. The oldest part of the house dates from mid-17th Century and has been occupied by various families until the last occupant, Miss Hendry, gifted the property to the NTS in 1989. The Trust took over full ownership and management of the estate in 1998 opening the gardens to the public. An endowment was placed in a designated fund and the interest used to run the garden.

In 2016-17 the NTS Board of Trustees took the decision to close the designated fund and transfer the monies into its general account. They decided that the costs of running the garden were no longer viable and began the process of exploring options including sale of the estate. At this point a group of people who had been volunteering in the garden helping the NTS gardeners, began a campaign to safeguard the future of Geilston, organising a public meeting. The group was established as an unincorporated charitable membership organisation with a committee to run the campaign. Initial funding was raised through a membership subscription. Soon FOG had over 500 subscribers.

The basic aim of the Friends was and continues to be to safeguard Geilston, preferably under continuing NTS ownership and management, and to help promote the garden to secure its long term sustainable future open to the public to enjoy.

After some campaigning and several meetings with NTS, it was agreed to set up a joint working group to look at options for Geilston. NTS commissioned independent economic consultants to review and report on options including various uses of the property and its ownership and

management arrangements. This report was submitted to the working group. During this period of review and discussion NTS had agreed to keep the garden open.

The fundamental challenge to the longer- term viability of the estate is the house. It has never been open to the public as part of the visitor attraction of the estate and over the years had lain unused with a lot of the furniture going into storage. There were issues of the condition of the house and likely costs of any works required to bring it back to a usable state. Unless the house could generate an income stream, which could then be used to support the running costs of the garden, then the option of NTS seeking to close the garden and sell off the estate remained the most likely outcome.

The Friends continued on the twin track of public campaigning and seeking to work with NTS to find an acceptable solution. The campaign included making contacts with local politicians and here we would want to acknowledge and express our great thanks to local MSPs Jackie Baillie and Maurice Corry who provided lots of support and advice and helped us in launching a public petition to the Scottish Parliament highlighting the difficulties smaller garden properties such as Geilston within NTS care faced.

In 2021 after some 4 years of campaigning the Friends put proposals to the NTS Board of Trustees setting out a vision for the house and estate which we believed could make it a viable and sustainable attraction. The regional manager for NTS who has been very supportive of our efforts also put forward an option for the Trustees to consider, which essentially was to convert part of the house into holiday rental accommodation with other parts being converted for other uses including allocated space for the Friends. It was this latter option which the Board at a meeting in September 2021 opted to take forward. To this end the Trust has made an initial commitment of £240,000 over two years to undertake surveys of the condition of the house, initial works and then the process of stripping out and re-building work. Provided no major structural defects are uncovered during this period, which could undermine the financial viability of the project, it is anticipated that further investment will be made to convert and fit out the property for holiday letting and space for the Friends to use for events and activities.

At this stage the Friends reflecting on the last 5 years are more cautiously optimistic than for some time that the campaign and work with NTS puts Geilston in potentially a much better place than it has been for some time. But the basic objective of preserving the estate under NTS ownership and management and the gardens continuing to be publicly accessible remains a core rationale for the group.

As the Friends became more established with a stable membership of around 350 members, communicating regularly with the members via newsletters and hosting annual meetings, the committee considered the best way to organise the group. To this end it was decided that the Friends should seek to become an incorporated charity under OSCR regulation (a SCIO). A successful application for this status was made and the newly incorporated Friends came into being from December 2020, subject to approval of the membership at the AGM in March 2021 which was duly given. The funds from the original unincorporated Friends were transferred into a new account opened up by the incorporated Friends. The FOG committee became the original trustees of the new incorporated charity.

What does FOG do?

As stated above the basic objective of the group is to protect Geilston for future generations to enjoy as a publicly accessible garden, preferably within the continued ownership and management of the NTS. The on- going campaigning activities have been about seeking to achieve this goal. As

described above, we feel that we have made some good progress to achieving this, but it remains an on going focus whilst we await further work on the NTS plans for the house.

Alongside this and integral to this objective is to promote Geilston as a special place for people locally and further afield to visit and enjoy. The garden requires a continuing number of visitors and thus the Friends seek to work to help promote this alongside NTS. Such promotion and development of the garden and estate also requires careful consideration to remain consistent with the ethos of the previous owners of the estate and the aims of NTS. The Friends have organised several activities at Geilston with the aim of attracting people to the gardens. The main events have been:

Calendar Photo Competition

Since 2018 we have organised a competition whereby people take photos of the garden through different seasons and submit entries to be judged by an independent professional photographer. The best 12 entries make up a calendar which we use partly for promotion of the gardens but also to sell raising some funds for the group to help support our activities and campaign. This has proved very successful to date.

Workshops

We have organised a number of themed workshop activities including a history day where visitors learned about the history of the house and estate; wildlife walks around the grounds with local experts looking at different wildlife to be found; art workshops where we use the natural beauty of the garden to facilitate anyone interested in painting to have a day of tuition with a local artist.

Apple Day

One of the features and attraction of Geilston is the variety of fruit and vegetables grown in the garden including the apple orchard. We have organised a family orientated day with an apple theme (juicing, William Tell, trails, stalls).

Sundays in the Garden

We have run occasional home baking stalls to help raise funds for the Friends and attract people to the garden. A great group of volunteer local people form our baking team and to compliment these days we have managed to arrange local choirs to perform short concerts.

Monies raised from the above help support our continued campaign and allow us to run further events and activities to keep promoting the garden and attracting visitors.

We also make regular donations specifically to the garden to help support a range of developments supplementing the investment from NTS.

During the past two years all of the above have had to work within the current regulations applying at the time due to the Covid pandemic. Fortunately, as an outdoor venue, Geilston was one of the first NTS properties to reopen to the public and gradually we were able to start organising events.

We have been grateful for the support of the local charitable trust, the Miss Bell Trust, for grant funding for particular projects including the production of a series of historical leaflets about the estate and families who have lived there. The Miss Bell Trust has also contributed towards the costs of purchasing gazebos which can be used when we host events at the garden. More recently the Trust approved a funding application from the Friends to help organise and provide support for visits

to the garden from local community groups whose members might not find it easy to access the garden. The plan is to organise a series of visits over the next year or so.

Governance

As stated above since becoming a SCIO, members of the committee are the trustees of the charity. Members of the committee are elected by the membership at the AGM. Our Constitution is published on our website together with AGM reports and independently examined accounts.

Since the founding of the Friends back in 2017 Allison Hillis has chaired the group. Ahead of our AGM of March 2022 she decided to step down partly due to moving away from the local area. Allison's contribution over the year to the Friends has been immense. I agreed to succeed Allison subject to approval at the AGM.

The committee of the Friends has up to 12 elected members. There are designated positions of Chair, Vice Chair, Secretary, Treasurer and Membership Secretary. The committee meet regularly through the year. During the COVID restrictions and guidance and on- going concerns about face- to face meetings, these meetings were mainly via Zoom as was the AGMs.

Occasionally sub groups were set up to look at particular issues such as proposals for the future of the house, events and wildlife projects. We have a team of volunteers from the membership who help out at our events.

In September 2021 we set up a new bank account for the incorporated Friends. Our financial year runs January to January.

During the 2021/22 year the Friends membership was around 540.

Future plans

The Friends plan to continue working with the NTS to preserve the long- term future of Geilston and to promote the attractions of the garden to visitors from the local community and beyond. This includes continuing the range of activities outlined above. As indicated above with the support of the Miss Bell Trust, we hope to be able to facilitate access to the garden from local community groups. We will continue to contribute funds to the garden to support particular projects which enhance the beauty and attractions of the place for visitors.

We are pleased that NTS has continued to invest in the garden including hiring new staff to enhance the fantastic gardening team.

We have our own website which contains information about the group and where key documents including our accounts can be found. We publicise events and promote the garden via a Facebook page and hope to continue to enhance these and other social media channels of communication including Instagram over the coming year.

Chris Moore

Chair, Friends of Geilston

29 July 2022

Scottish Charity 50608

