



## **Annual General Meeting**

**15<sup>th</sup> March 2023**

### **Chair's Report**

#### **Introduction**

This is my first annual report as Chair of the Friends. Following the limitations of the last couple of years it was good to have the garden open and events throughout the 2022 season. In this report I will highlight the key things we did to help further secure the long-term future of the garden, including working with the National Trust for Scotland to maintain its commitment to invest in the refurbishment of the house, supporting additional projects to enhance the garden and organising a number of events and activities aimed at promoting Geilston as a place to visit and enjoy.

#### **The House**

As you know probably the critical challenge for the long-term future of Geilston as an NTS owned and managed property has been identifying a viable use for the house which could generate some income towards the costs of the garden and thus contribute towards a long-term sustainable future. It is fair to say that this has been an area of some disagreement between ourselves and the NTS in the past, but over the last couple of years we have been working hard together to find a solution. We were able to report at the last AGM that the NTS Board had decided to take forward the plan of Ian McClelland, the Trust's regional manager, to survey the property with a view to renovate and refurbish it for a whole house holiday let. Initial work to test the external and internal structures of the house proved positive in that no substantive

problems were identified which might have led to a review of these plans. NTS has made a significant financial commitment towards a phased plan of work. Whilst this has proceeded at a slower pace than desired partly due to knock on effects of the pandemic and challenges within the building industry, the project has begun to gather momentum and we are hoping to see substantial progress over the next year or so.

The specific configuration of the house in terms of how much will be required for the development of a viable holiday let and how much might be available for the Friends, and perhaps other groups to access and use to support events and activities, is yet to be decided. Our aim is to secure some use of rooms to support our activities.

Again, we would like to thank Ian for his commitment and support in securing the decision of the NTS Trustees to fund this project. Our role over the next while will be to monitor progress and to continue discussions on the development of the project.



## **Events and Activities**

As I said in the Introduction, last season we were able to engage in a full programme of events and activities which helped complement those promoted by NTS. Below are the main events and activities we organised during the season.

### ***Sundays in the Garden***

We ran a number of home baking stalls under this banner through the season and these proved to be very popular. The home baking was supplied by our wonderful team of volunteer bakers and it was not a problem to sell out by the end of the day! To complement these days, we arranged for local choirs *Tartan Harmony* and the *Helensburgh Oratorio* to perform short concerts in the garden



### ***Workshops and walks***

We organised a number of themed workshop activities including painting and willow weaving led by expert tutors. We also ran a couple of guided walks with

a qualified herbologist examining the different herbs that can be found in the garden and their culinary and medicinal properties.

### ***Thai Chi***

Through the season we arranged for a tutor to run regular sessions in this gentle form of exercise, combining the benefits of activity with fresh air.

### ***Tea for Two***

In September we teamed up with one of our baking team, who also bakes cakes professionally, to run this promotion. The idea was that people would purchase a box of cakes and complement this with a hot drink from the Visitor Hub and the Friends providing picnic blankets. The sad passing of the late Queen and the subsequent period of mourning meant that we curtailed this promotion, but hopefully it is something we can run again in cooperation with the Visitor Services team this forthcoming season.

### ***Craft Fair***

In early August we organised our first craft fair which attracted over 300 visitors to enjoy a range of activities for all the family including a garden trail in search of Geilston's *Glorious Gardeners*, mini archery in the *Robyn Hood Wood*, samba drumming workshop and lots of games scattered around the garden. A big attraction were the craft stalls including crafters displaying knitted, crocheted and felted goods, ceramics and glassware, jewellery, art and local honey. The feedback from the crafters after the event was very positive. Again, the Friends home baking stall provided sustenance throughout the busy day.

### ***Apple Day***

The other big event of the season was the Apple Day at the start of October. This was after an absence of 3 years, but clearly the popularity of this event was reflected in over 500 visitors who came to enjoy the day. The garden is well known for its orchard and the day showcased this heritage and produce in a variety of ways. We had an *Apple Trail* with interesting Apple Facts. The *Apple Man* provided entertainment and fantastic freshly squeezed Apple Juice. We had a wildlife trail with families collecting items to bring back to our activity hub where they transformed them into treasures to take home. Soup was donated by the *Ginger Breadman* from Helensburgh and again home baking supplied by our wonderful Baking Team. Various wildlife



groups had stalls providing information and advice on how to protect and promote wildlife in our environment.



### *Community group visits*

As part of our objective of seeking to attract a diverse range of people and groups to the garden, we successfully applied for grant funding from the MEB Charitable Trust to support organised visits. This project was specifically targeted at reaching out to local groups which had not previously accessed the garden. So far, our oldest visitor has been 97 and the youngest a toddler. To date 129 people have visited under this initiative and we have spent just under £500 to facilitate these visits, primarily by paying for entry to the garden and transport. A number of the FOG committee volunteered their time to help support these visits. Some groups required an indoor space for refreshments or lunch so we made use of Geilston Hall, which is a short distance from the garden. The visits themselves were much enjoyed and we have had very positive feedback. All the groups expressed an interest in visiting again and at least one took out an NTS group membership, resulting in quite a

few return visits to date. Six visitors took out individual NTS membership whilst at the garden.

Groups who visited were: Helensburgh Heart, Stroke and Chest Association; Jean's Bothy from Helensburgh with their Photography Group; Cardross Toddler Group; and Renton Campus Primary 5 to 7. This last group was organised into smaller group visits with in total 69 pupils plus their teachers making the return train journey between Renton and Cardross. They walked from the station to the garden and on the way back stopped at Geilston Hall to have their packed lunches. The children looked around the vegetable garden as well as identifying plants in the walled garden. They also had plenty of opportunities to run around and play. The Renton School visits were facilitated through Ross Macfarlane, the Visitor Services Manager for Geilston, who was approached by the school to consider how some visits could be arranged. We offered to fund the visits, host the children for lunch and guide them around the garden. This has been a good example of joint working between FOG and Visitor Services. We hope to develop on this initial link with the school and organise further visits at different times of the year.

We feel that all of the above visits have proved to be a really worthwhile venture, reaching out into the local community around Geilston and enabling groups which otherwise might not find access easy to organise to enjoy the garden, with additional benefits for NTS in terms of projecting into the wider local area. Thanks to Fiona Lockhart who coordinated the visits on our behalf and to Irene Taylor and Jacky Sherwood for helping.

We plan to continue with planned visits in 2023 using the remainder of the generous grant from the Miss Bell Trust.

Looking ahead more generally, we are hoping to promote a range of events and activities once again over the coming season with a mix of established favourites and some new ideas. We intend to offer the *Sundays in the Garden* once the weather settles down to something a bit warmer (being optimistic!) and some themed workshops and walks. We hope to have Thai Chi on offer again. The large- scale events such as the Craft Fair and Apple Day are clearly big attractions but do take a lot of effort to put on, so we need just to review such events before making any firm decisions. One factor we will need to take into account over the forthcoming season will be the progress on the house refurbishment project. At times this is likely to have quite an impact on areas

of the garden with issues of site construction work, so we will be liaising with the NTS team to keep informed of the timetable of the work and likely impacts.

If you have any ideas for events that you think we should consider, please contact any member of the committee.

### ***Calendar Photo Competition***

Since 2018 we have organised this competition whereby visitors take photos of the garden through different seasons and submit entries to be judged by an independent artist/photographer. The best 12 entries make up the calendar which we use partly for promotion of the garden but also to sell, raising some funds for the group to help support our activities and campaign. This has proved very successful to date. This past year we had around 50 entries producing 150 photos to select from. We arranged a print run of 400 copies and have just 20 remaining! Many thanks to the various local outlets which put them on sale for us. So again, a very popular promotion for the garden and Friends and special thanks to Ken Readman and Veronica Davis for organising the competition.

### **Garden projects**

One of the key objectives of the Friends is to help support appropriate development and projects around the garden which supplement the investment of the NTS. In close consultation with Alison Farrell (NTS Head Gardener) and the gardening team we identify potential projects.

We will continue to provide support for such projects through the next season. One particular project we hope to see come to fruition over the next year is providing new mosaic tile flooring for the gazebo down in the woodland area of the garden. We have received an extremely generous offer to support this from Dr John Coggins as a tribute to his late wife Lesley who was a regular visitor to Geilston. We are in discussions with NTS to secure the necessary approvals for the work and hope by this time next year you will be able to enjoy this enhancement to a loved structure in the garden.

### **Geilston Memories**

The idea of collecting and storing the memories of those who personally knew Miss Bell and Miss Hendry is something that we have been thinking about. As time passes, we unfortunately lose these personal accounts. An opportunity to undertake an organised programme of interviews has come about through an

approach from Ruth McKechnie and we plan to support this venture over the next few months. Anybody who has first-hand memories of Miss Bell or Miss Hendry is invited to contact us and we will put them in touch with Ruth who will conduct the interviews.

### **Thank you**

There are always many people to thank for supporting our work and group. Firstly, thank you to all of the members of the Friends. Without your continuing support there would be no FOG. I would like to give special thanks to those of our members who have been able to spend some of their time helping out at the events through the year. It really is appreciated and allows us to organise these activities which might not be so possible without this support.

So, if you are keen to help out over the next season do let me know. As the saying goes, many hands make light work!

Steering the work of the group through the year is of course the committee and I would like to thank all of the members of the committee for their support and efforts through the past year.

Last year we said goodbye to our first Chair Allison Hillis. I think everyone who knows anything about the Friends would recognise her immense contribution to the group and I am pleased to say that Allison has kept in touch and been able to offer her wise counsel.

We say thank you and goodbye to two of our current committee members. Both have been committed to the cause of Geilston since the Friends were formed. John Hanks has been our Treasurer since the start. This is always one of the key roles in any group and John has carried out the duties with all the due diligence and quiet efficiency one would hope for. John steered the group through the process of becoming a registered charity and all the necessary changes to our bank accounts, which was a demanding task. Also, Veronica Davis has decided to stand down. Veronica has brought her tremendous experience of horticulture to the committee and worked tirelessly in helping support the events and activities we have organised over the years. Veronica has also managed our Facebook page which has been an extremely valuable means of promoting the group and our activities at Geilston. Thank you both and I hope that you will keep in touch and maybe help out at events when you can.



Referring to social media thanks are also due to Kenny Lockhart for helping maintain our web page and to Tahira Nasim for developing a new tool to us in our Instagram pages, with some wonderful photos throughout the year.

These social media tools are a really important part of communicating with as wide an audience as possible. So, if anyone amongst you is familiar with Facebook it would be really good to hear from you so we can maintain these pages.

We have continued to receive interest and support from Jackie Baillie MSP which is much appreciated. Thanks also to the continuing interest of the *Helensburgh Advertiser*. Also, thanks to David Hughes and the Cardross Golf Club for hosting our meetings. Thanks to the trustees of the Miss Bell Trust for their continuing support.

Of course, the garden would not be the attraction it is without the work of Alison and all of the gardening team at Geilston. What you do is amazing! As a visitor attraction the welcome provided by Ross and the Visitor Services Team at the garden is really appreciated and makes such a difference to the visitor experience. Thanks also to the continuing support of Ian McClelland, Louise Baker and Rachel Thompson at NTS regional office and Hill House.

Chris Moore,

Chair,

Friends of Geilston

Scottish Charity SCO50608

