

FRIENDS OF EASTER CRAIGLOCKHART HILL

Annual General Meeting

Tuesday 16 July 2024 at Meggetland Sports Complex

1. Welcome and Apologies

Jim welcomed everyone to the 25th AGM of Friends of Easter Craiglockhart Hill. There were numerous apologies in advance of the meeting and Jim acknowledged them without reading names individually.

2. Minutes of Last Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 3rd July 2023 are available on the FECH website and, unless there are any points to be raised, are taken as read and approved.

3. Chairman's Report

Jim began by thanking all the attendees and also everybody he has met and spoken to on the hill over the last year. People speak very positively about the hill and the role that FECH plays in looking after our local nature reserve. He advised that if anyone has anything they wish to ask, then please him or one of the other trustees at the end of the AGM and we will be very happy to talk through anything you might want to ask.

Role of FECH

Jim then went onto outlining how he saw the role of FECH, what the charity was responsible for within the 35-acre Nature Reserve and its interaction with Edinburgh Council (EC) who own the land.

In essence FECH are the eyes and ears on the ground for Edinburgh Council and can manage certain aspects of the hill using volunteers but this is mostly conservation work, monitoring and small maintenance tasks.

What is equally as important is what FECH are not responsible for:

- Checking the safety of trees for the likes of Ash die-back. For example, a tree at the end of the Meadowspot path was removed recently by the forestry team of Edinburgh council. FECH had no prior notification of this.
- We don't remove any fallen trees – although we're often on hand to report

and remove smaller branches from paths, we must rely on the Council to remove any large trees especially if there's a safety issue.

- We do not fix or install paths – we're not trained, we do not have the tools or the expertise to do this. However, we do trim back foliage and scrape paths when we get help from our members, and we can report hazardous things like loose steps etc.
- We have very little authority to deal with anti-social behaviour. If you do discover anything of this nature, then we would encourage you to contact the council or police as necessary.

Projects over last year

Jim covered the small projects FECH have worked on over the last year and some of those intended for future action.

A ***welcome area*** at the end of Craiglockhart Terrace has been completed, using a small grant from the national lottery and hundreds of person hours from our volunteers. This includes a pair of seats amongst a set of raised planters containing native flora which are intended to attract pollinators and provide a sensory experience.

There's a new area of ***wildflower meadow*** which has matured into a haven for bees, moths and damsel flies. Thanks to our planting team and all the volunteers who helped make this happen.

Plant Sale - the most recently completed project was the plant sale in June 2024 which raised a total of around £1,300 profit. A tremendous achievement and Jim expressed his gratitude to everybody who helped with the planning and grew plants at home as well as the volunteers who made the day so successful, and of course the many folk that came and spent their money at the event. We have spent a little of this money on planting lilies in the pond, some wildflowers on the meadows and refreshing parts of the welcome area.

Swamp Area - with the help of the Lothian Conservation Volunteers, we're trying to improve the swamp area for wildlife by opening-up the bullrushes to provide open water for breeding insects like mayflies and dragonflies and to allow more breeding environments for newts, frogs and toads. Visitors to the area may have seen the doughnut shaped area of shallow still water. We hope to increase the amount of standing water in spring 2025 as per the council's management plan.

The ***meadow areas*** which are flourishing on the hill and providing plentiful pollen for bees, butterflies and seed for birds. He acknowledged that to some people these areas are ‘messy’, however to others they are havens for wildlife and provide food across the food chain. With guidance from Edinburgh Council FECH are managing these meadows for nature. This includes mowing them once a year, let the seed drop for a few days, then clearing the cuttings to prevent the soil becoming too fertile and discouraging grasses.

The meadow areas are an important part of the nature reserve and help us fulfill a major part of the FECH Constitution; ‘Advancing environmental protection and improvement by preserving and protecting Easter Craiglockhart Hill Local Nature Reserve for the enjoyment of members of the public and by conserving and enhancing wildlife and biodiversity’

The aim is to manage the meadows as best we can for wildlife and to increase the biodiversity of the hill. FECH want to help people enjoy these areas more and that’s why we are offering to run sessions on the wildflowers on the Meadow and we are encouraging everyone to take some time to explore these areas and discover the creatures living here.

Jim then discussed ***new plantings*** around the hill. We have introduced several species of native wildflowers and plants which were not present on the hill, but which should be supported here. For example, there are now clustered bellflower, sneezewort, rock rose, restharrow, juniper and heather dotted around the hill. A very small population of these plants have been introduced which we’re hoping to spread further by harvesting seed and growing on.

We’ve also planted areas of the hill with pollen rich plants such as yellow rattle in areas which had previously been dominated by rosebay willowherb to improve biodiversity.

We’ve used planting to shore up the paths to reduce the amount of material which runs down the hill onto them. Hopefully this will reduce the effort to scrape the paths over the winter.

Tree planting - hundreds of trees have been planted around the hill, some with tree guards but most without. The majority of these are small bush-sized trees but there’s also some larger ones such as walnut and sweet chestnut which were donated by a local group. The tree locations and species are all planted according to the council's management plan and with the consent of the council's natural heritage officer, Andrew Law.

We are trying to improve the health of the trees we’ve previously planted around

the hill – particularly the fruit trees at the Craiglockhart Terrace entrance area by mulching and pruning them. Over 90% of the hedging trees have survived their first year or two and are thriving in their new homes, which is extremely positive.

We have just planted three large native *water lily plants* in the pond – we’ll be checking on their welfare regularly and hope to re-introduce a good population of lily pads like we once had at the causeway end of the pond.

Volunteering – FECH have been running weekly volunteering sessions for nearly two years, and are hoping to continue this into next year, but perhaps fortnightly instead of weekly as we only have a few people to lead the group. These sessions allow us to complete small tasks as they arise.

We run regular *wildlife monitoring surveys* such as a monthly bumblebee count, a weekly butterfly count, the annual RSPB bird count and a pollinator survey each summer. These events feed into national initiatives which monitor these species across the UK.

Removal of invasive species - we're lucky not to have too many problems with invasive species found elsewhere in Edinburgh's wild spaces but we do have a lot of few-flowered leek. Last spring saw an enormous amount of this plant in the woods. Despite the heroic efforts of some people in our group, this plant persists in huge numbers. There aren't any easy solutions to its removal.

We still have a couple of patches of small balsam plants which we have been trying to remove. This summer we've removed about 200 plants – down from 2,000 last year.

The removal of *Ponticum Rhododendron* is ongoing too as we have a few bushes of this tricky plant on the Craighouse side of the woodland. It's been cut back but will sprout again of course.

We want to extend the dead hedge running beside the swampy area to prevent dogs entering the “stinky bit” and protect the insects and amphibians too. Its construction also allows us to remove more of the laurel from the hill which tends to dominate and prevent smaller plants from growing.

We want to run more activities and guided events this year and we'll be asking you all what you'd like us to do later this evening.

Jim also highlighted the continuing challenge of *vandalism and littering*. He personally tries to remove graffiti and would estimate that he picks up 3 full bags of litter each week. Jim urged all users of the hill to be more aware of litter and pick it up where they can.

Volunteers - Jim went on to thank all the volunteers and made special mention of the “invisible” volunteers who help produce the regular newsletter which they aim to deliver 3 or 4 times a year. Please get in touch if you wish to contribute a story or some pictures for a future newsletter. The volunteers also maintain a weekly presence on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook showing what is happening on the hill. In addition, noticeboards on the hill give the latest swan news, an ever-popular poet’s post and a wildflower of the month poster. Thanks to everyone who maintains these for us.

Jim finished by thanking everyone who enjoys the hill and helps to look after it and intimated how proud we should all be of having this natural space to look at and enjoy our recreation time on.

4. Welcome Garden Project Video

A 5-minute video, narrated by Bryce, covering the creation of a Welcome Garden at the site of the old ice rink and showcasing the fantastic results that have been achieved.

5. STV Green Flag Video

A short video of the first Green Flag being raised in 2009/10, originally shown on STV, highlighting the excellent achievement of the hill being re-awarded Green Flag status every year since then.

6. Presentation of Annual Accounts

Bill Troup presented the annual accounts. He noted that we started the year with a balance of just over £16K in the FECH bank account.

During the year there was a positive cash flow of £1,607 from the plant sale, £817 from donations and £242 from grant funding.

Outgoings on charitable duties during the financial year was £13,617, the majority was for the creation of the Welcome Garden with the balance spent on materials for projects such as the DofE volunteer sessions, hosting of events and meeting the costs of community engagement officer.

After these incomings and outgoings, the charity has £5,508 reserves, all of which are unrestricted funds which can be utilised for charitable purposes in line with our constitution.

The Trustees consider that having minimum reserves of between £750 and £1000 is sufficient to maintain day to day operational costs, so we are well positioned financially for the coming year.

7. Re-appointment of the Independent Examiner

Iain thanked Rob Moffat for reviewing the accounts for yet another year and proposed that he should be asked to review the accounts again next year.

8. Election of Trustees and Office Bearers

Iain advised the process for re-electing Trustees. All Trustees at the date of the AGM are automatically re-elected immediately after the AGM unless they have notified the Board that they no longer wish to act in this capacity.

Iain advised that in the last year one new Trustee has been appointed to the Board, Daniela Polic. Unfortunately, Dani could not attend the meeting so by way of introduction to members Iain gave a brief overview of Dani's extensive experience and qualifications in nature conservation and sustainability and expressed the collective view of all the Trustees that she will be a fantastic addition to the Board.

All other existing Trustees, Paul Duncanson, Bryce Morrison, Jim Heath, Bill Troup, Iain McLeod and Simon Hart were to be automatically re-elected at the close of the meeting.

The Trustees will appoint the Office Bearers for the coming year after the AGM. They are expected to remain as is, with Jim Heath remaining as Chairman, Bill Troup as treasurer and Iain McLeod as Secretary.

9. 1930s' Pond and 2023 Pond Videos

The members were shown 2 videos which showed the transformation of the pond and surrounding areas over the last century.

The 1930s video included some fascinating footage from the period showing how the pond was used predominantly for recreation at that time. The 2023 video highlighted how the pond is used less for human recreation now but is an haven for a wide array of birds of wildlife.

Both videos were thoroughly enjoyed by all the members present.

10. Swan Naming

Jim advised that FECH had organised a competition to allow members and local residents to participate in the naming of the new resident swans. 37 names were submitted, and the winner chosen by one of our volunteers who is a keen swan watcher and produces all of our swan update posters. The winning name suggestions were made by Colin Wilson and were chosen by Wolf; henceforth the swans will be known as Dotty and Eric.

Jim went on to explain the reasoning for the names:

- Dotty refers to Craiglockhart War Hospital where the poet Siegfried Sasson was treated and nicknamed by him as “Dottyville” in a letter he wrote in 1917.
- Eric is a nod towards Eric Riddell who was an Olympic Gold Medallist in 1924 and who regularly trained in the Craiglockhart grounds.

All agreed these were 2 very fitting names for the swans.

11. Volunteering

Dan Rayner started by thanking all the volunteers who had committed time and effort over the last 12 months. He advised that the volunteers were primarily Duke of Edinburgh candidates and a hard core of local volunteers.

He then went onto give a very informative and interesting overview of some of the activities the volunteers have been involved in in the last year:

- Creating terracing and dry fencing
- Planting and maintaining trees
- The plant sale
- Planting of heathland plants on the hilltop
- Surveys monitoring the health of the stream
- Wildflower surveys to help inform pollinator surveys

- General maintenance including litter collection, path clearing, removal of vandalism etc
- Easter Egg Hunt

Dan advised that there has been 954 hours of volunteering work in the last year which in monetary terms would equate to about £12k of labour costs. This is a fantastic achievement and is a crucial element of keeping the hill as a safe and pleasant environment for all.

12. Future Events

Jim highlighted that FECH are always looking for member input as to what they value in terms of member and local events. The Trustees have put together a selection of suggestions and urged all attendees to peruse these at the end of the meeting and input to what they would like to see organised over the coming 12 months.

13. AOB

Nadine, who runs the newsletter, stood and introduced herself to members and advised that she was always looking for new content so if any members had ideas, or even better wished to write something then all contributions are gratefully received.

A question was raised from the floor regarding whether the issue of swan feeding attracting mice and rats had been resolved - Dan advised that the frequency or amount of swan feeding had not changed and that perhaps the increase in vermin a couple of years ago may be attributable to the bin strike rather than swan feeding. It was agreed that this will be watched and if there is a noticeable increase in vermin FECH will notify EC.

A second question was asked as to why some of the wooden furniture had been removed from the woods - For those that weren't aware Jim highlighted that the furniture that was removed, including the children's circle next to the pond, were deemed to be rotten by EC. Jim advised that this was an EC decision and FECH were notified the night before the removals happened. EC have advised that they will replace with council sanctioned equipment but have not yet given a timescale for this. Jim asked if anybody has any ideas as to what would be of benefit for the hill to drop him a note with suggestions.

A further question was raised about the use of the hill by Little Monkey's nursery. Residents in Meggetland Terrace are complaining that they are experience noise from nursery groups for most of the day for 5 days a week and that this is detracting from the enjoyment of using their own gardens. Complaints have been made to Little Monkey's but nothing changes and they don't know what else they can do. Can FECH help?

Dan advised that the EC Natural Heritage Officer is responsible for giving permission to nurseries to use areas of the Nature Reserve and that the assessment are made primarily on child safety. Who uses the hill is not an area that FECH could or should get involved with but it does have a good relationship with Little Monkey's and, as such, Jim volunteered to mention concerns to them to see if there is something that could be done to reduce the volume or frequency of the noise, such as rotating the children around the hill rather than using the same area all the time.

14. Close of Meeting

Jim closed the meeting by thanking everyone for their support and for attending the AGM. All attendees were invited to stay for a while to chat with each other and the FECH Trustees.