

GEILSTON HOUSE AND GARDEN A CASE FOR PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION UPDATE

**The Friends of Geilston Steering Group
28 September 2017**

REPORT 21 AUGUST 2017 AND NTS RESPONSE

The Friends of Geilston Steering Group submitted a report “Geilston House and Garden: A case for Preservation and Conservation” dated 21 August 2017 to the Trustees of the National Trust for Scotland. The report summarised the history of the property during NTS ownership, the conflicting views on the conditions of gift, visitor numbers and use of the financial legacy, and on the state of the house and its collections. The report also made recommendations for the way forward and requested immediate action as follows:

- The NTS will give an assurance that Geilston will remain open to the public under the auspices of the NTS
- The Geilston estate will be preserved and the EC Hendry Fund reinstated to support the property’s future
- A joint working party is established to take forward proposals to ensure that Miss Hendry’s gift and legacy are preserved.

The National Trust for Scotland responded on 1st September 2017 in a letter from the Chief Executive. The NTS confirmed that the garden will open to the public in March 2018 conditional on there being no acceptable alternatives, and also agreed to the formation of an advisory forum/formal consultation process. However other parts of the response re-confirmed that significant differences remained between the NTS and the Friends on a number of areas, including the historic circumstances under which Miss Hendry gifted her property to the Trust, the purpose of the EC Hendry Fund, the interpretation of visitor numbers, costs and how profit and, particularly, loss is calculated, as well as on the value of the collections. These disputed areas have been the subject of correspondence and reports in the local and national press.

MEETING OF THE FRIENDS AND THE NTS

The Friends of Geilston Steering Group requested a meeting with the Chief Executive and the Chairperson of the Trustees and subsequently a meeting took place with the Chief Executive, Mr Simon Skinner, on 20th September 2017, attended by 5 members of the Friends steering group. Mr Skinner set out the financial position in which the NTS found itself and how this impacted on properties such as Geilston. The Friends were critical of the way the Trust had conducted the consultation process whereby Geilston had been continually “talked down”. There were either misunderstandings on the part of the Friends, or poor communication by the Trust, or both. Rather than campaigning against the Trust, the Friends’ preference was to engage with the NTS in a more constructive way, to secure the future of the property.

The agreed outcomes of the meeting were as follows:

- 1) the garden will reopen in the spring
- 2) details of the expenditure and income for the property will be provided
- 3) the NTS will not reinstate EC Hendry Fund as a designated fund. However the interest from the equivalent sum in the General Income Fund will be paid to the garden to cover losses and the capital ring fenced in some way until a decision is taken on the future of the property
- 4) the Trust will be prepared to make a contribution, if necessary, to help secure the future of the house.
- 5) the collections may be inspected and will not be disposed of until a decision is taken on the future of the property
- 6) the Trust will provide details of its criteria for a Friends group.
- 7) A working group will be convened including the Friends of Geilston and other parties to develop options for the future of the property that may be recommended to the Trustees. Richard Williams of the NTS is to initiate this, with a view to holding the first meeting before the end of October with an aspiration to reach a conclusion by the spring 2018.

It should be noted that options mentioned included passing the property to another conservation organisation with the NTS remaining involved with the garden, a developer taking over but not being allowed to build on the front fields (which the Friends would not support) but these were not put forward in any structured way. All of the interrelated issues of future uses, physical solutions, funding and management are still to be explored. However, the NTS's objective was to ensure that properties at least broke even financially, indicating the problems that still lie ahead.

THE FRIENDS' CURRENT POSITION

The response to the campaign has demonstrated that the people of Cardross and the wider community hold Geilston and the late Miss Hendry close to their heart and that there is deep unhappiness about the way that the NTS has acted to date. The Friends, while welcoming the progress that has been made, remain concerned about the future of Geilston, on a number of counts. First is the uncertainty about possible alternative uses for the house and whether they will have an adverse impact on the garden. The second is whether or not the NTS has a long-term commitment to the garden. The third concern, which stems from the way that the NTS makes no direct financial allowance for the number of visiting members to Geilston, is to how can the garden be expected to be self-sustaining, even with the best will in the world and after all possible income streams have been explored. This is where the EC Hendry Fund, worth £2,75m and now in the NTS General Income Fund, has a potentially important role to play: to provide support for the garden through a period of change as well as supporting the Trust's conservation initiatives, as Miss Hendry will have expected. For the Friends these concerns underlie the options appraisal consultation process and will require to be addressed if there is to be a satisfactory outcome.

APPENDIX: The Importance of the garden at Geilston

- Geilston is a good example of a small laird's house that was modestly expanded by subsequent owners connected with Glasgow's tobacco trade in the late 18th century, by military and businessmen in the 19th century, and lastly by middle class Glasgow professionals in the 20th century.
- The gardens and grounds show evidence of all the major changes and developments in Scottish farming practice and horticultural styles over more than 200 years.
- The memory of Miss Hendry, as a benefactor, is important to the people of Cardross and the wider community, and finds its expression through her garden and house.
- Today the property has that rare quality experienced when visiting, as it were, a private garden where the grounds are open to the public but the house has a life of its own, a quality that can be retained with the sensitive development of the grade B listed building.
- The garden is enfolded in the landscape and visitors speak about the its sense of place and protection, and the re-assurance of its continuity.
- Over the last 20 years under the care of the NTS the garden, which probably reached its historical peak in the early 1950s, has been sensitively developed with the restoration of the glass houses, the re-creation of the kitchen garden and orchard, the building of garden structures and play equipment, and the careful introduction of modern styles of planting.
- Geilston is an important part of a developing infrastructure for visitors to this part of the Clyde coast, components of which include NVA's ongoing, creative rebuilding of St. Peter's Seminary in Cardross, the family run Ardardan Farm Shop and Nursery, the NTS's Hill House, the new waterfront and town square as well as the Hermitage Park restoration in Helensburgh, and the garden at Glenarn in Rhu open under the SGS.
- Geilston is a Royal Horticultural Society partner garden. It is also the gateway garden for, and the only lowland garden in the Glorious Gardens of Argyll and Bute, a group of 20 gardens that include the RBGE Benmore garden, NTS gardens at Crarae and Arduaine, as well as Mount Stewart, Inverary Castle and other private gardens.
- Unlike most west coast gardens Geilston is easily accessible for the young, elderly and visitors with mobility problems: an inclusive garden.
- Geilston has a tradition of high quality gardening. It has fostered strong volunteer involvement and, in the past, has participated in the training of students of horticulture, areas that can be further developed for the benefit of the garden and the wider horticultural community.

First Edition Ordnance Survey Map of Geilston 1860

