

Summary report of FOG AGM 2021

The 2021 AGM was held on 3 March via Zoom, a first for the Friends. Some 62 members attended along with the 12 committee members and we were joined by several guests. We were pleased to welcome several of our NTS colleagues (Ian McLelland, Louise Baker, Rachel Thompson and Allison Farrell) as well as Maurice Corry MSP. There were apologies from 10 members, Jackie Baillie MSP, Simon Jones (NTS) and Malcolm McNeil (gardener at Geilston).

Chair's Report

After setting out the protocols for the meeting, Allison presented her report for the year. We had been looking forward to the 2020 season following a successful 2019, which had seen increased visitor numbers to the garden. But as we all know COVID struck and NTS had to close all its properties and faced a major financial crisis. Things eased in June and Geilston was one of the few NTS properties that was reopened. We enjoyed good visitor numbers and whilst we were not able to hold a full programme of events and activities, we did manage to run our photo competition for the 2021 Calendar and towards the end of the season ran a pop-up café with home baking. Both of these raised much welcomed income for the Friends.

Allison praised Alison Farrell and all the gardening team for the tremendous work they had done in such challenging circumstances.

The major development during the year was the emergence of the Kilmahew Educational Trust as a potential buyer for Geilston. KET had acquired the derelict St Peter's Seminary in the village for a nominal sum from the Catholic Church, but also approached NTS about Geilston. We were very concerned about this and had meetings with senior NTS management including the new Chief Executive, Philip Long. We had looked at the track record of the directors of KET and previous projects and were not reassured that they could manage taking on Geilston alongside Kilmahew. We found some of their projections about visitor numbers and income to be very optimistic. We decided to present NTS with an alternative proposal based on retaining their ownership and management of the garden, but with the house and buildings transferred to a new community trust on a long-term lease. We set up a sub-committee of FOG to research ideas and produce a proposal for how the house could be turned into a commercially viable venture.

Before a presentation from the sub-committee on its work, Allison reported that our application to the charity regulator to become an incorporated charity had been approved and later on in the meeting we would be seeking members approval to transfer funds to the new body and wind up the old Friends.

Sub committee report

Ken and Nicky then presented the outline of the proposals we submitted to NTS. The core vision is to develop the house and buildings for educational use around horticulture and cooking, which would integrate with the garden and in particular the vegetable garden. In addition, craft workshops and facilities for community use would be built into the plans. The main difference between the two ideas presented was that one would focus more on offering residential based courses (a kind of cook school) whilst the other was more based around non-residential uses. Ken thanked the contribution of Sutherland Forsyth to the report.

We have presented our ideas to NTS and have had a positive initial response. We recognise that more work is needed to develop this into a viable business plan so our next step is to apply to the Architectural Heritage Fund for a Project Viability Grant, which is designed to support the costs of

working up such a plan. Grants of up to £10,000 are available and NTS have said that they would provide £1,000 towards the costs which we see as a positive sign of their commitment to work with us on this and FOG will match this with £1,000, which could give us some £12,000 to support a viability study.

We have been told that the NTS Board of Trustees intend to make a decision about Geilston at its next meeting in June. But if we can demonstrate progress in our grant application and working towards the viability study, we are assured that this will be favourably received.

Allison and Ken both emphasised the importance of wider community support for our plans and encouraged people to get in touch to let us know what they think. We also would welcome involvement from members in a number of sub groups we plan to set up to work on various aspects of the project.

Questions and discussion

There followed a wide-ranging question and discussion of the reports. Issues raised included establishing the demand for the facilities and activities we were proposing; scope for linking any project and development with educational and training opportunities; collaboration with others including Geilston Hall, veterans' groups and the Argyll Mackintosh Trail.

There were questions about the potential for enabling development in the grounds of Geilston to generate income for restoring the house, which had been a route that NTS seemed to be looking at. Ian Mclelland reported that a study had been done, but that the conclusions about the potential for such development that would be commercially viable but also meet the Trust's requirements for appropriate scale and sighting had not been met.

There were questions about how the NTS had used Miss Hendry's legacy reflecting continuing local concerns. Allison responded by saying that FOG would agree with such concerns, but had concluded that in the new environment we were now in we needed to look to the future and work with NTS to find a viable future for Geilston.

In the more immediate future, we were pleased to hear from Ian that Geilston would reopen for the new season on Good Friday with the same opening times as last season.

Treasurer's report

Following this, John gave his report on the accounts. Our balances remained healthy with membership holding up well. We had as Allison said not been able to run many fund-raising events or activities but both the calendar and home baking had contributed income. We had used part of a grant from the Miss Bell Trust to produce a series of historical leaflets and were planning some more of these. Our donation to the Garden from last year's AGM had supported new tree planting and we would anticipate making another donation later in the year.

Resolutions

We then moved on to the decisions required for confirming the transfer of funds from the existing unincorporated Friends group to the new incorporated charity. A series of resolutions to give effect to this transfer were put to members in an electronic poll and unanimously supported.

Elections

The final business was election of the new committee and trustees for the new charity. The existing members had all intimated their willingness to become trustees and members were asked to approve their election, which was unanimous.

Allison closed the meeting by thanking everyone for coming and for the discussion and left everyone with a lovely photo she had taken of the snowdrops at the garden and a poem.

Chris Moore

Secretary

13/3/2021