

FRIENDS OF BLAIRS LOCH (SC048921)

TRUSTEES REPORT

for

Year ending December 31st 2024



The year in summary

2024 was another highly successful year for Friends of Blairs Loch (FoBL). The popularity of the loch and its surroundings continues to grow with both the local community and visitors to the area.

Feedback from local groups and organisations using the Boathouse Bothy & Stable room facilities has been excellent. We have a number of regular users of the facilities (outdoor activities groups, wellbeing groups) and the venue is becoming popular for small family events (eg children's birthday parties).

The number of visits by school groups has been disappointingly low. Those schools that have visited, for example Hythehill Primary school in Lossiemouth that brought over 60 children on one trip, have said that they had a wonderful time. Unfortunately, however, the school budgets available for transportation of the children to Loch of Blairs are highly restricted. The Trustees will continue to explore funding options to assist schools in getting to the loch so that they can use the facilities.



Financially the charity remains in a stable position. Maintenance and fixed overhead costs for the year were fully covered by income from room hire and small donations, and the work of the volunteers on new developments continued to be supported by grant-giving organisations.



We were also very fortunate to receive a substantial bequest in the will of a local resident, Mr Colin Lipscomb. Colin was a long-standing supporter of FoBL who had made a vitally important donation at the start of our work. Whilst there were no restrictions placed on the use of the bequest, the Trustees feel it is important to mark Colin's support in some lasting way and will look to find a legacy project to fund.

The objectives of FoBL continue to be supported by the hard work of a small, but hugely committed, group of volunteers. In addition to the ongoing maintenance of the buildings and footpaths at the loch, the volunteers also organized 2 community events during the year – An “*Easter Bunny Hunt*” and a “*Christmas Elf Hunt*”. These proved to be very popular amongst families with young children and will undoubtedly become regular annual events.



The volunteers also worked on two new projects during 2024. The introduction of Grass Carp into the loch and the construction of a workshop and secure store. These are described separately below.

Improving the water environment

One of the key objectives of FoBL is the restoration of the loch to a “good water quality” which will be beneficial from both an environmental and recreational perspective. Over many years the loch became excessively rich with nutrients that lead to strong aquatic weed growth. In addition to creating an unbalanced ecosystem in the water body, this also made the loch unfishable for anglers.



In 2019, with expert support from one of our volunteers, FoBL successfully applied for a Controlled Activities Regulations license from SEPA and carried out careful spraying of surface weed with an approved herbicide. This exercise was very successful and significantly reduced the amount of surface weed across the loch. It could not, however, help with the excessive growth of sub-surface weed in the loch.

Work on controlling the sub-surface weed is unfortunately much more problematic. Mechanical removal of the weed, using a “Neptune Rake”, has been carried out by the volunteers to great effect. It is, however, extremely labour intensive and is limited to certain parts of the loch that are accessible for the equipment. Whilst this technique will continue to be deployed, we wanted to supplement this with a biological approach.

Again, with expert advice from one of the volunteers we applied to the Scottish Government’s Marine Directorate, and NatureScot, for a license to stock the loch with a species of fish called Grass Carp. These fish feed on aquatic weed and have been used in other water bodies to help with the control of the weed. This is the first license of its type to be granted in Scotland.

The fish introduced to the loch are Triploid (cannot breed) and screens have been installed on the inlet/outlet of the loch to prevent their escape. How successful the fish will be in controlling the weed is still to be seen and, given that the fish will be subject to natural predation, we will probably need to re-stock at a future time.

Trout fishing has restarted on the loch, providing another recreational activity for the local community. It will take many years for the ecosystem to return to a natural balance, but the journey towards that has started and is progressing with the help of the FoBL volunteers.



Workshop & secure store

Previously, all maintenance and construction work carried out by the volunteers had to be completed in the car park area and was dependent upon clement weather conditions. Also, the only storage facility for maintenance equipment was an old,

insecure, wooden boathouse that the volunteers converted into a shed. As the usage of the meeting room facilities increased it became apparent that there was a need for a purpose-built workshop area, away from the main buildings, which should also incorporate a secure storage facility. It was important that the design of any new development was aesthetically sympathetic to the woodland setting and did not detract from the Boathouse Bothy & Stable building which house the main venue facilities.



A covered workspace, incorporating a shipping container as a secure store, was designed and constructed by the volunteers. The

Trustees wish to record their thanks to Altyre Estate for permission to fell a number of Douglas Fir trees for use in the workshop's main frame, James Jones & Sons Ltd for donating timber for the fabrication of structural support beams and the Gordon & Ena Baxter Foundation for the grant which covered the cost of groundworks, the shipping container and other construction materials.

The completed Workshop & Store have received much praise for both the visual appearance and utility of the project. To celebrate the completion of workshop the volunteers organized an "Open Day" giving the community an opportunity to try their hands at various crafts, woodwork and outdoor activities on and around the loch. The event was a big success because, as well as providing lots of fun activities for the children, it demonstrated to parents the quality and range of facilities available at the loch.



Future plans

As well as providing an excellent workspace for the volunteers, the new workshop will be used to expand the range of activities available for community groups. With small grants from the *Rotary Club of Forres*, and *Tesco Stronger Starts*, we were able to purchase a range of specialist tools, and fabricate two traditional pole lathes, to establish green woodworking activities at the workshop. The funding will also cover the cost of a training event in March 2025 in green woodwork & outdoor crafts for teachers and youth group leaders.

Further work on improving the accessibility of the loch and surrounding areas for disabled visitors is being supported by a grant from the Co-op Community Fund. This work will be carried out during 2025 and reported on in due course.

The Trustees, and the Friends Volunteers, will continue to devote their efforts to creating and maintaining the established community amenity at Loch of Blairs.

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