

Atholl Estates Newsletter



Summer 2018

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Welcome

I am sure we are all ready for the summer after a very cold winter, which certainly tested some departments as the works team were seen regularly clearing and salting the roads as well as dealing with broken pipes. Jo Harrigan, as the newly appointed head gardener, had a baptism by fire. You can read her thoughts for the future of the gardens on pages 8 & 9.

Generally the estate had a busy winter, with all departments looking ahead to the next three year plan, it will be on our website by August and although a fairly concise document a great deal of thought goes into it.

Finally, I hope all visitors and residents alike enjoy our wonderful power line-free surroundings, thanks to SSE and their contractors Nicol of Skene we can see the landscape around the castle uninterrupted, what a difference it makes.

Sarah Troughton.

New faces



Tom MacDonald
– castle gardener
and caretaker



Karolina Ratajczak
– park reception
supervisor



Colin Chisholm
– rural worker



Ella-Kate Nye
– castle receptionist



Patricia Meller
– park receptionist



Mark Baigrie
– Gardener

We welcome back Carola Brighenti and Zsofia Pinter to the horse trials office.

The lodge housekeeping team has expanded with Brenda Cameron & Janice Wilson at Kindrochet, Janette Cumming at Marble lodge, Joanna McCormack-Fraser at Tulliemet Julie Voules & Rebecca Cantwell helping.

We say goodbye to...

Suzie Crerar, marketing and operations officer, Andrew Turner, the castle caretaker and gardener, Marilyn Brown the Kindrochet housekeeper and her assistant Karen, also Julie Cumming who assisted with the lodges last summer. The game department sees Jacob Heard, Ewen Bentall and Ian MacPhee move on after completing their training.

Front cover: spring lambs at Balachallan Farm

News in brief

Jackie Stones joined us as event's manager last year. Living in Aberfeldy she knows the area well and has made a rapid start to recruiting more weddings and events, even organising a day for couples to come and view all Blair Castle has to offer, with the ballroom fully set up for a wedding dinner.



Jackie Stones with, left to right, Tom, Belinda, Lillian, Donna, Gavin



This summer **Polly Freeman**, the estate ranger, will leave us to take up a job with Cairngorms National Park Authority after 19 ½ years of dedicated work on the estate, opening paths, producing illustrated maps for walkers and bikers, generally keeping an eye on the flora and fauna and above all else engaging with school children through a wide variety of initiatives. Polly has run the estate open days and has had up to 1,000 children attending, 600+ are booked in so far to visit this year on the 30th May. A real achievement in such a rural area. Over the next three months Polly is undertaking a bike ride from John O' Groats to Land's End in stages, to allow time to oversee key dates in our calendar and to start her new job. We all wish you well.



The ranger service have set up a **volunteer group** with Cairngorms National Park, the National Trust for Scotland and Perth and Kinross Council . The volunteers have already done some brilliant work planting a hedge, making charcoal and improving path drainage. If you know anyone who would like to join in, then visit cairngorms.co.uk/volunteers where a list of all volunteer opportunities can be found.



St Brides Kirk is a wonderful reminder of times gone past, sitting in the historical settlement of Old Blair. It no longer has a roof, or any furniture, but it is still used for church business every Easter. The Church of Scotland holds an early morning service on Easter Sunday. A service is also held in July to commemorate the Battle of Killiecrankie and Bonnie Dundee - the Jacobite leader who was mortally injured at the battle and buried at St Brides. Weddings are also held here.

News in Brief cont.



The Christmas Lunch was a special occasion this year and it marked the end of Leigh Dixon's work with Sodexo as the manager of Blair Castle restaurant. She is seen here receiving a gift of two plates from an old Atholl service to remind her of her time at the castle, as if she'd forget! The entire room gave her a great applause, we will all miss her cheerful presence but look forward to working with her successor Allan Chilton.



Blair Atholl school were working with the ranger service in the spring on a project to find out what wildlife was lurking in the school grounds and further afield. Their secret weapon was a trail camera. They got pictures of wood mice, voles, a robin, a cat and red squirrels.



The RSPB kindly invited a team from Atholl Estates to visit their reserve at **Abernethy**. After a talk in the morning and lunch appreciated by all, we walked through their stunning woods, managed for habitat. The Crested Tit obliged by fluttering from tree to tree alongside us, however the elusive Capercaillie was not to be seen, although it was heartening to hear that numbers in Strathspey are increasing, despite a slight decrease at Abernethy, which just shows how difficult it is to analyse and draw conclusions regarding habitat monitoring from the results of data, a subject much discussed during the course of the day.



Deborah Smeaton and Colin Scrimgeour had a son, **Charlie**, on the 13th February seen here making an appearance at the Castle induction day. Clearly early training is in progress.

SSE Powerlines - Removing Overhead Lines from Blair Castle

As many people will have seen, Nicol of Skene and SSE have been busy working from the Sawmill Yard up to Blairachdair, removing the overhead powerlines. The project, part of a £15million scheme to underground 90km of powerlines, was selected for investment as part of an Ofgem funded scheme to remove overhead lines from sites designated within an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). i.e National Parks, National Scenic Areas or similar designated areas which Blair fell into.

All applications are subject to an assessment/ scoring process so unfortunately not all sites are successful for investment. Only those which score the highest during assessment - based on the visual impact of SSE apparatus to the surrounding area - are then proposed for investment. This was originally discussed with SSE in 2015 and following site visits and discussions it was agreed to proceed with the works in 2017.

Fast forward to early 2018, and Nicol of Skene mobilised for a 7 week contract, which was delayed and hampered by the weather (it's not easy to dig tracks when the ground is frozen or covered in snow), but after some initial setbacks (drainage issues and hydro sensor cable location) the works were completed within schedule and with minimum disturbance to the estate.

Before



After



Margo Haggart, retiring shop manager interviewed by Sarah Troughton

Margo remembers starting work in the Blair Castle gift shop as assistant manager on the 5th March 1990, after being interviewed by Brian Nodes the castle manager, his assistant Edna MacKay and May Forrest the shop manager. Formerly having worked in T. Patterson the jeweller in Pitlochry, Margo brought with her experience, a naturally organised approach and ability to get on with everyone. 28 years later she claims that her first impression 'that it was a nice place to work' still holds true. Given that on her first day in the shop she had to climb over boxes of unorganised stock and then get to know the variously and surprisingly located store cupboards where stock languished throughout the castle, it is perhaps a generous memory.

May retired some six years later and Margo stepped seamlessly into her shoes. At roughly this time Jamie and I were tackling the organisational plan for the north end of the castle. Margo immediately saw the opportunity for the shop to acquire some efficient storage space with room for a manager's desk, just! The shop was redesigned and extended ready for the opening of the 1999 season.

The new shop, Margo noted, was now a more open and airy place, it required a fresh approach to its stock. A challenge she embraced with enthusiasm as we went to the Shop Fair in Glasgow and scoured the stalls for good quality items that would appeal to our visitors and sit comfortably in the castle. Murray tartan was favoured and various companies were found that would brand their wares with our logo or illustrations. Fewer lines were stocked giving a cleaner look to the shop, in keeping with its facelift. A good rapport was established with the various reps, all too obvious this year when we were at Glasgow Shop Fair – 'Margo you can't be retiring' was a common lament.

I asked Margo what she enjoyed most about working in the shop and her answer, perhaps unsurprisingly, was getting to know all the young people who work in the shop for a season or two and watching how their careers develop. Many of them she keeps in touch with and they still come back to visit. I say unsurprisingly because it is well known that if someone working in the castle wants to get something off their chest, they go and sit on the stock room steps which Margo recognises is a sign that they need a good chat.

Margo plans her first year of retirement to be a year off, although being very close to her family no doubt grandchildren will beckon, and she hopes to have more time to visit places, the Dundee V & A was mentioned. She has also promised to assist and share her knowledge with the new manager. Margo, you will be much missed, but I am sure everyone wishes you a long and happy retirement.



Margo & Karen with the stock room steps



Margo arranging own brand items

Horse Trials News

Following on from its role as official vehicle partner in 2017, Land Rover has increased its commitment to Blair Castle International by signing a three-year title sponsorship agreement. The event will now be known as the Land Rover Blair Castle International Horse Trials.

Scott Dicken, Jaguar Land Rover UK Marketing Director said: "Land Rover is excited to continue growing its equestrian portfolio in Scotland. Last year we provided a fleet of vehicles to help the operation team and this year we are proud to take title sponsorship. We see the equestrian market as key to our brand, and this form of association is a great opportunity to engage with both new and existing customers."

The Land Rover Blair Castle International Horse Trials takes place from 23rd - 26th August, featuring CCI1*, CCI2*, CCI3* and CIC3* classes. For the first time, the Scottish Novice and Intermediate Championships will also be decided in the 1* and 2* respectively; Blair has long hosted the Scottish Open Championship in the CIC3*.

Blair will also play host to the Scottish Grassroots Eventing Festival where a British Eventing 90cm and British Eventing 100cm competitor will both be crowned champion. Young and up-and-coming riders will qualify at events across Scotland this year before the top fifty in each section will be selected to compete at Blair in August.

To round out an exciting weekend of sport, Blair Castle will host the final leg of this year's Event Rider Master series; to date it has been the penultimate leg of the annual league. The class has a prize fund of £50,000, attracting some of the world's best riders, with the added excitement that the £30,000 leading rider of the season could also be decided at the event.



Hercules Garden

In October last year Sarah Jo Harrigan, known as Jo, left her job as head gardener at Belsay Hall in Northumberland to take over the running of Blair Castle gardens. She arrived with plenty of knowledge, an eye for high standards and soon began to develop ideas for the future. In keeping with Hercules Gardens' original purpose as an ornamental vegetable garden or 'Ferme Ornee' as it was known in the 18th century, Jo turned her attention to the culinary possibilities that the garden presents. Below she shares some of her thoughts for the future with us.

Garden direction for the Future.

Continue to improve the presentation through Horticultural practices carried out correctly by all staff ensuring that the Historical plans, colours schemes and aesthetics are retained throughout the gardens and caravan park.

Incorporate vegetables and herbs within the planting schemes in Hercules gardens to intensify visitor enjoyment and interaction with staff. Develop the possibility of selling the produce.

Public engagement through workshops, open days, corporate activity days and particularly aiming at student and children interaction.

The greenhouses and polytunnels are a vital asset to the production of plants, raised beds will be built on the area behind and used for surplus plants as plant division and production increases. The main goal is to reduce expenditure and become self-sufficient over a period of time in the production of plants for the estate.

The direction for the future is to work hard, have a positive, enthusiastic attitude which will inevitably over a period of time improve presentation, visitor enjoyment and interaction.

Sarah Jo Harrigan



Scottish Enterprise Rural Leadership Programme - Julian Clarke

This year's Rural Leadership Programme saw 15 Highlands and Islands businesses join 45 businesses from other areas of Scotland for the 13 day programme, through a competitive process to gain entry onto the course. With the deadline for submissions being 11th September 2017, I was filling in my application late into that evening before submitting it and gaining a place on the 10th course to have been run by Scottish Enterprise.

The aim of the programme is to assist rural business leaders to develop the economy through leading, team working, networking, influencing and by being ambitious. It does this by developing the capacity of individuals, building your confidence, widening your boundaries, building industry and parliamentary trust, providing an awareness of rural economic issues and introducing individuals to the wider rural leadership network.

Joining the Highland and Islands group, the very first session held in Strathpeffer was on effective communications, and I was not alone in being nervous in finding out what the course was going to entail. The group of 15 included an airline pilot, dairy farmer, estate owner and a butcher amongst others. The course included 13 full days of training and visits between late October 2017 and March 2018. These sessions included the highlights below:

Learning Journey to Holyrood, Edinburgh

The journey to Holyrood and Edinburgh comprised a tour of the Scottish Parliament, including a visit to the debating chamber when the Scottish budget was being discussed. I realised quickly why no photography is allowed, as a number of MSP's were on social media throughout the session. We had a meeting with Fergus Ewing MSP to discuss Brexit and Beavers, and an evening reception of approximately 30 other MSP's, members of committees and successful lobbyists.



The Highland Group

Learning Journey to Brussels and Westminster

The three day, two night, learning journey to Brussels and London was a highlight of the programme and saw us fly from Edinburgh to Brussels for visits organised by Scotland Europa to gain an insight into the workings of MEPs, the European Parliament and Commission, as well as presentations from several organisations representing Scotland's and the UK's interests in Brussels - particularly interesting considering Brexit. We then travelled to London to visit the Houses of Parliament, meeting the PM, and MPs before a tour of the House of Lords and meeting representatives of the House of Lords.



The team in Brussels

Rural Innovation Workshop, Airth Castle

An inspiring and creative 2-day workshop focusing on key economic opportunities for growth in the rural sector. We were asked to develop a project idea from conception to implementation that adds value to the energy, tourism or food and drink sectors, which was then pitched to a "Dragons Den" type panel. All 60 participants on the course were involved in this, and we were split into groups

of 6 and each had to come up with an idea to increase revenue for business, which included a dog genetic exporting business and a Scottish theme park to rival Alton Towers.

Effective Communications

The one-day workshop incorporated two key areas – Media and Social Networking. We started with a newspaper journalist and learnt how to use the press to advantage and followed this with a discussion on best use of social media which is becoming an increasingly important business promotion tool. The TV and radio media session was led by former BBC presenter Ken Rundle and included mock interviews for TV and radio providing the knowledge required to deal effectively with the media.

At the end of the course a final awards ceremony was held, with certificates being presented by Fergus Ewing again, and I can honestly say it was a tremendous opportunity and one that has formed lasting business relationships, with the Highland Group already planning various member visits.

Woodland Deer – a different approach.

In 2017 we changed direction with woodland deer control, as a result of vastly increased restocking of wooded areas, which we establish with minimal deer fencing. It was decided to employ contractors to control the deer in the core woodlands as they would be able to provide a quick reduction in overall deer numbers.

Highland Deer and Habitat Solutions run by Roddy Macaskill have over 35 years of deer management and contract culling experience, having previously worked on private estates in a range of deer-related roles and since 1997 operated with Forest Enterprise Scotland culling deer on a contract basis. Roddy recently passed a major milestone, having personally culled over 20,000 deer on behalf of clients.

Roddy has recently started this new business due to an increasing demand for his services, and he now engages a network of self-employed contractors to work with him as required. They are all experienced stalkers on both open hill and woodland locations, with DSC2 certificates. Roddy's team are very experienced, certified and equipped to the highest standard and operate to best practice guidelines.

Roddy has for many years worked in areas monitored by Strath Caulaidh Ltd (SCL) using deer dung counts, and so he has developed a realistic and in-depth understanding of the degree of hard work needed to unequivocally reduce deer densities to an acceptable level for crop protection and natural regeneration. The system developed by SCL to quantify deer densities has been well tested by Roddy and his team, through culling over many years, and the team welcome this system's ability to detect when the deer density in their work areas has reached the target needed. Roddy is one year into his work on Atholl, and the results are showing encouraging signs of success.

The Victoria Exhibition

In 1844 Queen Victoria, Prince Albert and Princess Vicky spent 3 weeks at the Castle and on the Estate. One hundred and seventy three years later, ITV's production of 'Victoria' visited and filmed this chapter of history (episode 7, series 2) using the actual locations that the family had frequented. With this in mind we have organised an exhibition on the top floor of the Castle, bringing together original historical artefacts and costumes from the show.

During her visit Queen Victoria rode our Highland Ponies up Tulloch Hill and Glen Tilt. Prince Albert accompanied her and we have his gun and the game book registering what he shot on display as well as a note of a gratuity left for the keepers with Prince Albert's keeper, Peter Fraser being left £50, a huge amount in 1844. Interestingly in her Highland journals which she later published, Queen Victoria reveals that Albert did not in fact shoot anything, although she notes 'he did run about a lot'. The Queen brought a retinue of 75 with her and we can see exactly who they were, by the listings in the 'House Book' as well as letters between Queen Victoria and Duchess Anne, there is even a recipe for potato salad from the Queen. The ladies remained great friends throughout their lives, no doubt sympathetic to each other as both were young widows with families. In fact one of the items on display is a lock of Prince Albert's hair that the Queen enclosed in a letter to the Duchess.

The costumes on display are the actual ones worn by the cast, including Jenna Coleman (Victoria) and Dennis Lawson (Duke of Atholl). One exhibit is the stunning iridescent green dress worn for the arrival scene at the Castle, along with our own Atholl Highlander's uniforms. If you have watched the episode you might remember Skerrit, Queen Victoria's maid, her dress is on show as well as an original photograph of Skerrit at the Castle from the archives. In the Drawing Room look out for the beautiful deep blue brocade evening dress that Victoria wore in the Ballroom and on the roof with the Duke, as well as his rather natty chequered waistcoat together with many other costumes from the series. The exhibition will run until the 10th June and is included in your Castle admission.



News from around the estate

Over the winter, departments around the estate have been thinking about the next three year forward plan which will be published this summer. The document is the estates' guide for short to medium term objectives and we have found previous editions to be appreciated by staff, community neighbours and those applying for jobs and looking for research material. During periods of great economic, technical and political change, as we are now living through, having clarity over our priorities and ambitions is essential, so we can face challenge and opportunity in equal measure. For the first time Robert Troughton, Bertie, has been involved with the plan as he begins to take more part in the running of the estate. We look forward to sharing the 2018 to 2021 Atholl Estates Forward Plan with you later this summer.



Robert (Bertie) Troughton

The estate supervisor group, led by Nicky Townshend, gives excellent feed back to the managers and one area they have suggested looking at is a review of long service awards. It was also suggested that an estate briefing open to all staff would be helpful, this was held at the end of March and was extremely well attended. On a lighter note some excellent ideas were discussed for making sure the estate barbeque evening is good fun.

This spring we were pleased to hear that planning consent has been granted to the estate to develop eight, two bedroom terraced houses in the field to the east of Blair Atholl Watermill. The houses will have very high energy efficiency by design and will be aimed



Planning consent gained to the east of Blair Atholl Watermill

at the local rental market. The site is heavily challenged with overhead powerlines, soil contamination and a lade crossing among some of the exceptional costs. Without support through the Rural Housing Fund the site would not be at all viable to develop. The next step is to develop plans to building warrant stage which we will be progressing through 2018.

The Atholl Highlanders will have the usual parade and gathering on the weekend of the 26th and 27th of May followed by a ten day tour of European battlefields, more about that, no doubt, in the next newsletter.

Polly has organised an estate open day with already some 600 school children booked in on the 30th May. This has become a popular biennial event, with all departments taking part and demonstrating the work they do in a user friendly way for school pupils. There is even a team race to see who can build a house the quickest! At the end of March Polly organised the annual litter pick, what an improvement that makes to the village and surrounding area, as you can see from just some of the litter gathered.



The annual litter pick



Wattie with lambs at The Milton

The game department achieved their extremely challenging target cull and are to be congratulated for persevering through a tough winter to meet that goal. The farms have seen better lamb prices and Balachallan has broken all previous records. However the spring grass is not as green as it should be for the lambs, we can only hope for a better summer.

Forestry work continues to get on top of the clear fell demanded by the phytophthora diseased larch, with work in the Bruar Falls being especially difficult.



Bruar Falls

The works department and some local contractors are nearing completion on two holiday let units, that can roll into one four bedroomed let, at Clachan Farm House.



Clachan Farmhouse



Two new woodland lodges being installed

They also sorted out a long standing leak in the caravan park's water system and prepared the ground for six new woodland lodges, next to the five already in operation. They have installed two container units behind Hercules Garden, enabling all the gardens to have one central depot, with a welfare unit, toilet, office and lock up machinery and equipment store.



Marc, Jim and Jamie outside the welfare unit with Donnie

2017 was an excellent year for tourism and there is optimism that this will be another successful year. Congratulations to the castle and caravan park for the awards they have won and the enthusiasm they have for top quality presentation and customer care.

Finally a mention for the estate office team for overseeing the co-ordinated running of the estate, the accounts, lodges, the horse trials, forestry, the farms, tenancies, hydro, game departments and much more. Their hard work is not designed to make newsletter headlines, but the estate couldn't run without them.



Castle & Cravan Park Award

Future Events

Music in Blair Atholl

6th & 7th May

Atholl Highlanders Talk

26th May at 11am

Atholl Highlanders Parade

26th May at 2.30pm

Atholl Gathering and Highland Games

27th May 10am

Estate Open Day for School Children

30th May

Charity Day

30th June

Land Rover Blair Castle International Horse Trials 2018

23rd - 26th August

Music in Blair Atholl

29th September

Glenfiddich Piping Championships

27th October

Castle Summer Season Ends

31st October

Exclusively Highlands Craft Fair

2nd - 4th November

Santa's Grotto and Christmas Lunches

9th and 16th December

Deaths

Bill McIntosh, Forestry, 27th November 2017

Marriages

Julia Sim to Sam Onions, 3rd February 2018

Births

To Benjamin Rhodes and Lydia Morrison a son
Edward Morrison Rhodes, 9th January 2018

To Colin Scrimgeour and Deborah Smeaton a
son **Charlie Scrimgeour**, 13th February 2018

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www.atholl-estates.co.uk

www.blairhorsetrials.co.uk

www.blair-castle.co.uk

www.blaircastlecaravanpark.co.uk

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