

Atholl Estates Newsletter



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Welcome

As always the estate has had a busy winter and I am relieved to say the weather was much kinder than the previous year, although these milder winters come with their own challenges, especially for the hind cull. There is evidence of many more bugs, as they do not get knocked back in the way they would with more frosty weather.

Music has been to the fore this winter, the castle's old Bechstein piano has reached the end of its useful life, we were informed. Music in Blair Atholl (MIBA) came to the rescue and have lent the castle their wonderful Steinway piano on the basis that the ballroom is now available for some of their events – every cloud has a silver lining! The Yehudi Menuhin scholars delighted us in February with a weekend of music. In March the Scottish Fiddle Orchestra held a new event, the Neil Gow Championships under the gaze of that famous fiddler, whose portrait by Raeburn hangs above the stage. We expect both events to be an annual post-Christmas treat.

We now look forward to the Atholl Highlander parade and gathering and wish everyone a very happy summer.

Sarah Troughton.

New faces



Belinda Tindle,
Castle Office
Receptionist



Keren Guthrie,
Archivist



Gavin Morrow,
Works Department
and Relief Caretaker



Martina Manion,
Caravan Park

Julia Sim, Tourism sales & business development manager, see page 6

We say goodbye to ...

Carol Robertson and Louise Fisher from the Caravan Park, Stuart Letford who leaves to go free-lance. Carl Scarborough and Anna Louise Mason who return to Castle Howard and Katy Inglis who left to go to Forbes of Kingennie Country Retreat. We also say goodbye to trainee keepers -Joe Haseley, Sean Mills, Owen Walker and Simon Blagg and Greg Jennings from the works department.

Front cover: The West Grampian Deer Management Group, deer count taken by Ryan Cumming from a helicopter, above Loch Tilt. See article on page 10 & 11.

News in brief



Carol Robertson left the caravan park in February after 4 years fine service, including securing the AA Gold Penant Award for the park, seen on the right of the picture with members of her team pictured here.



Polly organised the annual litter-pick at the end of March stretching from the southern Blair Atholl A9 junction to the House of Bruar, 44 people helped including the school team who covered the recreation ground. A fine start to the summer season.



There are a great many species of bird and mammals across Atholl Estates – and they will likely be joined by the Feral Pig, known to be in Alyth, and recently spotted near Drumbuie at Dunkeld.



The Moderator, The Right Reverend Russell Barr, visited Blair Atholl on the 19th January and then came on to the castle to learn more about the estate and meet some of the team over sandwiches and soup. Seen here with his wife Margaret, Mr. and Mrs. Alisdair Drummond, the Reverend and Mrs Matthew Robertson and Sarah. Jamie was particularly intrigued to see the Moderator's ring given to the ministry by his great great uncle, The Very Rev James Robert Mitford Mitchell, moderator in 1907.



Blair Castle was awarded the CIE Tours Award of Excellence for consistently exceeding their clients expectations.

News in Brief cont.



The River Tilt is the only large river in this part of Perthshire which was not harnessed for hydroelectric power production in the 1950s. It is still very much a wild river. However, this does mean that the footpath that runs from Blair Atholl upstream, right beside the river, leads a precarious existence. Winter floods take their toll, and one part of the path below the caravan park had become dangerously undercut. John Langley carried out the skilled work to bolster the ground under the path with large rocks and gabions. With thanks to the Cairngorms National Park for funding, some smaller path repairs will take place downstream later in the year.



L-R: Donna, Lilian, Karen, Ailsa, Magda, Carl and Andrew

The cleaning and caretaking team dressed for the Christmas Party, a jolly lunch was enjoyed by all just before the castle closed for the Christmas break.

Gamekeeper's Welfare Trust held their annual conference at Blair this year. The trust exists to support gamekeepers, stalkers and ghillies, and their dependents past and present,



by providing financial grants for those experiencing times of hardship, ill health and retirement. Small grants are available for young people making gamekeeping their career. The helpline is a key part of the service providing a confidential listening service with information and support on a wide variety of issues including health, retirement, redundancy, housing and employment issues.



On 28th May 2017 Donny and Christine Stewart are giving up the tenancy at Balchandy and Mains of Pitgur to retire. They won't be leaving the farmhouse just yet though, as they are looking for a property to buy locally and will reside in Balchandy until they find something suitable. The Stewart's have been farming on the Estate since 1954 and have been producing cattle and sheep throughout their time at Pitgur.

Blair Castle International Horse Trials

Directors have gone on to influence the horse world both internationally and at a grass roots level. In addition, our competitors come from all over the world to take on the challenging terrain.

Directors, Tim Hadaway and Alec Lochore have gone on to shape equestrian sport on a global scale at the London 2012 Olympics and latterly Rio 2016. Alec in particular is a Technical Delegate all over the world, including at three of the six CCI4* events worldwide and the World Equestrian Games.

Other Blair team members have gone on to work at international events such as Aachen in Germany and Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire. Alec has also worked as an International Technical Official and International Sports Specialist at events such as the Beijing Olympics (Hong Kong) and Doha Asian Games.

The event has been and continues to be a springboard for international riders and their horses too. Popular British Rider Nicola Wilson, and her horse Opposition Buzz won at Blair in 2010, before going on to Team Gold at the World Equestrian Games in the USA later that same year and in 2012, Team silver in London.

Antipodean riders have historically also launched impressive winning streaks at Blair. New Zealander, Tim Price, won the CCI3* in 2013 on Wesko, and followed it up with a win at the CCI4* in 2014 at Luhmühlen in Germany.

2017 should also be an exciting event, drawing in many top international riders for the Event Rider Masters competition. The top 40 FEI ranked riders will compete at the penultimate leg of the 2017 series, for the £50,000 prize fund. The roster of riders for the 2016 series had plenty of British riders, but also covered Ireland, France, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Portugal and Italy, as well as the ubiquitous Australian and New Zealand riders. We are hopeful that we might event tempt some of the Chinese, Japanese or Brazilian riders to Blair to partake in the fierce competition and warm Scottish hospitality.



Tim Price Wesko 2013 CCI3



Nicola Wilson and Opposition Buzz winner 2010



ERM Podium 2016

Sales and marketing at Blair Castle

We have a new team at the castle in our Sales and Marketing department, Julia Sim has joined the castle team as the head of sales and marketing. Julia has moved back to Perthshire to take up this role, she is originally from the area and has been working away with Marriott in Edinburgh and latterly in Wales.



Suzie Crerar has been appointed as the marketing and operations co-ordinator, Suzie has been with the castle for 3 years in various roles and her family have been involved with the castle for many years, her father and two of her brothers are Atholl Highlanders.



In March 2017 we launched our new look website, it's a fantastic interactive modern looking website which is mobile friendly. With the increase in technology usage on mobile devices it was imperative that our information is easy to access across these platforms so our visitors can access information on their travels. Please have a look at the new website at www.atholl-estates.co.uk and I encourage any feedback to be directed to JuliaS@blair-castle.co.uk

Did you know that 30% of time spent on the internet is spent on social media channels these days? The average person is spending up to 2 hours a day on social media. We have now launched our Instagram page showcasing all our lovely grounds and goings on at the castle. It's a fantastic way to be nosy and keep up to date! Our tag name is Blair_castle_atholl_estates so follow us and share all your wonderful pictures as well. Facebook continues to be an excellent platform to reach our customers and friends around the world with amazing interaction and people sharing memories of the castle. You will find us at Atholl Estates and Blair Castle on facebook.

The Keepers of the Quaich is an exclusive and international society that recognises those that have shown outstanding commitment to the Scotch Whisky industry including enrolling them as Keepers and Masters at Blair Castle, where they hold their induction ceremony twice a year, followed by a banquet with fine whisky and music. Seen here is the Fear an Tigh Robert Lovie entertaining the guests. Sarah Troughton is currently the Grand Master.



Castle News



After a successful recruitment programme with many familiar faces returning, an 'Induction day' was held at the end of March to prime the team for the open season, seen here enjoying a well-earned lunch



A nice surprise was a telephone call from Colin Sandeman saying he had a present for the castle, a beautiful clock he made out of broom wood to join the other items of broom wood furniture in the Derby Dressing-room. Colin is the great, great, great grandson of the original cabinet maker, George Sandeman of Perth.



Stairs to attic dressed to show the old lath & plaster.

As always the winter is a busy time in the castle catching up with maintenance – the Banvie Hall roof underwent much needed repairs and Davy Smith did an excellent job in patching up some of the interior paint work.



New curtains in the Blue Bedroom made from handblocked material from the Rosebank Collection using original Victorian blocks.

Dunkeld and Birnam Golf Club

Future developments

The club was founded in 1892 on the initiative of the Birnam hotel proprietor Mr Edward Cesari and was located not far from the hotel at Birnam Terrace on ground owned by Murthly Estate. It was designed by the renowned St Andrew's golfer Tom Morris. During the First World War it was taken over by the military for manoeuvres and food production, making future use for golf impossible. The club house however is still in use as the fishing hut for the Newtyle beat on the river Tay, at the east end of Birnam.

The present course, situated in its spectacular setting above Dunkeld with views of Craigiebarns and up Strathbraan, was originally 9 holes. Up to the 1990s, in common with many other courses, it had a full membership and healthy waiting list. This led to expansion plans; when the long-time tenant of Fungarth Danny McDougall retired more ground could be rented from Atholl Estates and a full 18 holes created. In 2001 a new club house was designed to replace an old wooden hut, with a flat for a couple to act as Steward and chef to expand the catering facilities.

However, since then there has been a substantial change in social habits and all golf clubs have suffered from a reduction in members. Reasons include the 2008 recession, the expectation on younger men to play a full part in family life, rather than heading for the golf course at weekends, and especially the ever stricter drink driving limits which make socialising in the club house after a round less attractive than heading home or



back to a hotel before relaxing with a pint or dram. Thus the new club house with its expanded facilities has not fulfilled its potential to contribute to the finances. Costs of maintaining a course are heavy, 2 people are employed full time to cut and maintain the greens, helped at times by volunteers but fees cannot be raised when many clubs are competing for fewer prospective members.

In response to these changes the club has risen to the challenge by deciding to develop the flat at the club house for holiday accommodation. The beautiful location, not far from all amenities, will provide an ideal holiday, not only for the keen golfer having his sport literally on his

doorstep, but also for those wishing to explore the wider Perthshire area. Plans have been made to franchise the catering operation, which ranges from bacon rolls on an average morning, to lunches for small groups, to full meals for 50-100 people on competition days. This refocussing on their core business of providing excellent course facilities for a healthy and accessible sport, with a business-like and forward looking approach to developing their assets should hopefully see the club thrive and be of benefit to the community for another hundred years!



Golfer's Loft for holiday lets.

Farming for the Environment

The Agri-Environment Climate Scheme (AECS) promotes land management practices which protect and enhance Scotland's magnificent natural heritage, improve water quality, manage flood risk and mitigate and adapt to climate change. A total of £350 million will be available between 2015 and 2020 to fund a range of activities that help to maintain and enhance Scotland's rich and varied natural environment.

Both Home Farms have applied for the AECS scheme, and in 2016 Balachallan were accepted into a scheme that contributes to the management of the hill for Black Grouse, including predator control and heather burning. There is also retention of winter stubble for song birds included in the scheme.

Move forward to 2017, and Balanloan has been accepted into a scheme that will plant approximately 3km of hedges around the castle policies, create wader scrapes for birds and start to tackle the bracken on the rifle range. Work will start on this scheme in the near future.



Red deer and the importance of habitat monitoring

One of Scotland's most iconic species is coming under increasing scrutiny from a range of different bodies including Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) and the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA). The red deer known as being synonymous with the Highlands of Scotland is being portrayed as a "wrecker of habitats" and having a population that is "out of control". This is definitely not the case, but to show this a system of robust monitoring must be in place.

Red Deer have a significant role in recreational activities and rural economics across the country. Yet the management, notably of red deer, is a contentious topic due to the acknowledged impact that deer have on different habitats, especially woodland and heather moorland.



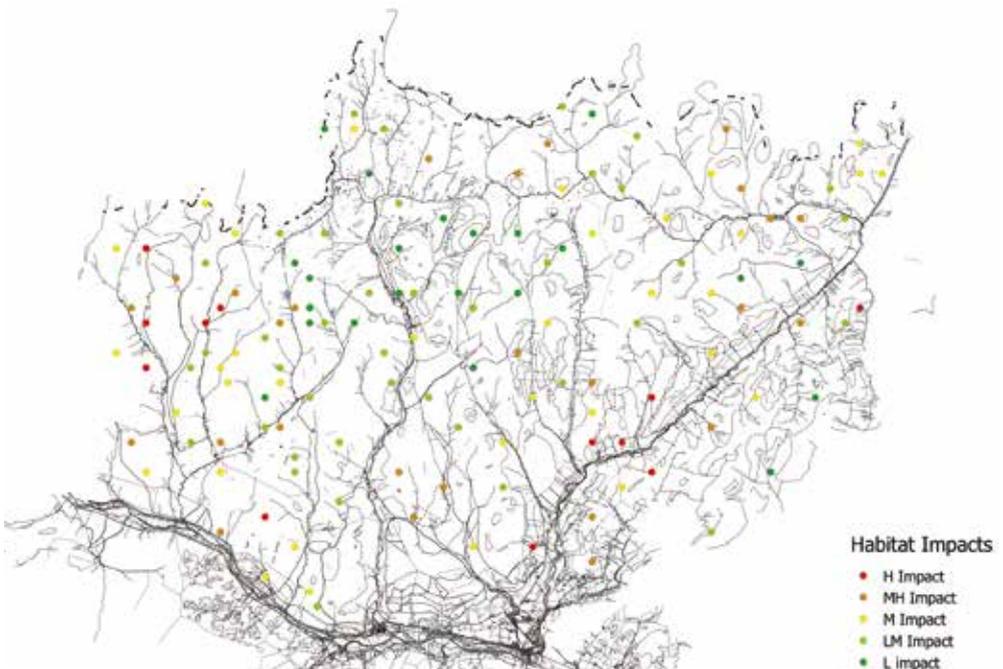
Helicopter Count

In recent years there have been several attempts to address the conflict between deer management and management for other land uses. Most recently the CNPA have issued their new Park Plan for 2017-22 which includes a section on deer management. Within the plan they have an aspiration to reduce deer numbers to 10 per sq. km and work with estates whose numbers are higher than that. It is difficult to see how this can be achieved over a short period of time and it is difficult to work to a set number, as different types of land will have different carrying capacities, and this can be shown by a diligent habitat monitoring regime.

As deer have a recognised impact on different habitats the management required for deer stalking often conflicts with management for other land uses. However, a key milestone in being able to show a healthy habitat is through the use of habitat monitoring. Something which has been done on Atholl for a number of years, and will be repeated in 2017.

A major barrier to the adoption of habitat assessments appeared to be the interpretation of the data once it has been collected and applying uniform habitat assessment methods across deer management was seen as a way to ensure that the Deer Management Group had "greater ownership" over the data.

This year a helicopter count of the red deer on Atholl was undertaken, last done in 2010 it shows a reduction in deer density, a result of a lot of hard work during the intervening period by all the stalkers. The recent mild winters have made it very difficult for hind cull levels to be reached, meaning a lot of long hard days on the hill.



News from Glen Bruar

After a few years of intense activity with the hydro scheme construction, yet another new chapter is opening this year for Glen Bruar with the arrival of Kate and Mike Colling who have taken a long term lease of Bruar Lodge from this summer. Hailing from Hertfordshire, Scotland is like a second home having spent a good part of their free time together on sporting estates, stalking and shooting. When not walking the moors, Kate is a professional photographer and Mike owns and runs a business.



Bruar Lodge (before the hydro scheme was built)

Having fallen in love with Glen Bruar they are investing in the lodge to make it more comfortable in the winter and a little more up to date for entertaining guests. Kate has taken the lead in the renovation work, securing James Denholm Partnership, architects, to design and project manage the contract. Works are due to start in June with a completion target of October.

As well as Bruar's natural charms their passion for stalking and to a lesser extent, shooting has informed their decision. Mike has taken first option on all the stag stalking available at Bruar and as much grouse shooting as possible. Quite unusually, they are also keen on stalking in the snow, so all in all, it seems they and Bruar are going to make a perfect match.

But this is not the only news from that glen. The final and environmental phase of the hydro scheme will take place within the next few months, this includes an area of the pipe route having further reinstatement work, including stone picking across part of the easement and reprofiling and turf stretching of the area to try and promote heather regeneration. Amenity woodland planting has also been



carried out on a number of areas across the scheme, notably around the powerhouse, the intake and beside the river to blend the scheme into the Glen. A mixture of Birch, Rowan, Grey Willow, Pine and Alder have been planted.

The history of larch on Atholl

Larch trees have been a major feature of the Atholl woodland landscape, as described in the last newsletter, they have recently suffered from two outbreaks of *Phytophthora ramorum* and areas have had to be cleared with an accelerated programme of felling for mature trees. This article is a timely reminder of their history on the estate.

280 years ago, in 1737, the first European Larch trees were brought to Atholl by Lord George Murray, brother of 2nd Duke of Atholl. More of the trees were planted at Dunkeld Cathedral the following year. One was struck by lightning in 1906 and made into panels for Blair Castle.

The 4th Duke, known as the planting Duke, started planting larch in commercial quantities from about 1800 onwards, with thousands planted near Loch Ordie and Loch Oisnie. In 1817 construction of the frigate "Atholl" commenced in the naval dockyard at Greenwich, as the 4th Duke encouraged the navy to experiment using larch not oak for ship building. The Atholl was launched in 1820 and continued in service until the 1860s. The following year the Brig "Larch" was constructed but wrecked in the Black Sea in 1827. In 1917 the larch trees at Loch Ordie were felled as part of the need to use home grown timber during the First World War. Thus, although the trees were never required for the navy due to the introduction of steel ships, they had an important national use and provided much needed income for the estate. Since then many more larch trees have been planted, ensuring they remain a feature of the Atholl landscape.



One of a fine set of cabinets from larch and Glen Tilt marble commissioned by the 4th duke from George Bullock in 1817.



A larch tree planted in 1737 in the castle grounds at the entrance to Diana's Grove.



A section of larch from a tree struck by lightning in 1906

Atholl Estates – an outdoor laboratory

Many people work on Atholl Estates and many more visit each year. However, less obvious are the many volunteers, students and researchers who carry out various projects and studies on estate land. Some of those taking place at the moment include studying the behaviour of black grouse, peregrine distribution in Glen Tilt and looking at the effects of pony trampling on paths.

Dr Albert Phillimore from Edinburgh University is overseeing a Natural Environment Research Council project looking at Scottish blue tits as a model to understand population responses to spring temperatures. He has a series of nest boxes in woodlands running south to north from Edinburgh to Dornoch. 24 boxes are sited on the estate at Dunkeld, Ballinluig, Calvine and Dalnamein. Timings for the blue tits' egg laying and success of chicks' fledging are compared with spring temperatures, timing of tree leafing and the availability of caterpillars and other insect larvae. A major concern with climate change is that the plants, insects and bird breeding will start to react differently to changes in the spring climate. Birds currently breed at specific times in the spring to make the most of an abundance in insect larvae, which in turn hatch to make the most of fresh leaves and flowers. If this natural alignment gets out of synch, chicks will potentially starve due to lack of protein-rich food.

Helen McCallin from Napier University, seen in the photograph, is just starting a project looking at the effect of scented repellents on red deer. These repellents include putrid egg, blood-based smells and wolf faeces. She is carrying this out in various captive deer populations, including our red deer park at the castle. The other aspect of her research is to find a dispersal mechanism for the repellent that will work effectively out in the wilds. The optimal outcome from this project is to find a method of keeping deer out of woodlands which doesn't involve using deer fencing.



The History of the Atholl Gathering



The origins of the Atholl Gathering lie in the Tilt meeting which had been held at Bridge of Tilt since 1825. This comprised all the traditional elements of a Gathering; feats of stamina and strength such as running and throwing, piping and dancing.

In 1840 the Tilt Meeting was attended by the 6th Duke of Atholl, with his men who had visited the Eglinton tournament. In 1845 the 6th Duke moved the meeting from Bridge of Tilt to Blair Castle to commemorate the presentation of the Queen's Colours to the Atholl Highlanders. The colours, which confer the right to bear arms, were Queen Victoria's thank you to the men of Atholl who provided a guard during her stay at Blair Castle in 1844.

Throughout the rest of the century the Gathering continued in the grounds of Blair Castle, the Atholl Highlander pipers leading the parade onto the ground. Prizes were awarded for the traditional events of tossing the caber, throwing, running, jumping, piping and dancing, the production of homemade tartan and for long service. The evening concluded with a dinner for the Atholl Highlanders and ducal party, initially in a marquee until it was blown away, then in the ballroom in the Atholl Arms hotel and after 1876 in the castle ballroom, built for the purpose.

From the outbreak of the First World War no further Gatherings were held at the traditional time. In 1984, after reviving the Atholl Highlanders in 1966, the 10th Duke decided to reinstate the Gathering which is now held every year on the last Sunday in May after the Atholl Highlander's parade at Blair Castle on the Saturday. For those interested in learning more about the Atholl Highlander's long and interesting history an updated edition of the history of the Atholl Highlanders will be on sale from the end of May in the castle shop.

Forthcoming Events

Music in Blair Atholl's Piano & Violin Recital

Saturday 20th May

Atholl Highlanders Talk & Parade

Saturday 27th May.

Atholl Gathering and Highland Games

Sunday 28th May.

Charity Day – Guide Dogs for the Blind and Scotland's Gardens. Saturday 24th June.

Scottish Chamber Orchestra

Saturday 24th June.

Blair Castle International Horse Trials

Thursday 24th-Sunday 27th August.

Glenfiddich Piping Championship

Saturday 28th October

Castle's summer season ends

Tuesday 31st October

Exclusively Highland's Christmas Craft Fair

3rd to 5th November

Births

Daughter, **Isabella** to Ryan and Lee Cumming

A grandson, **Finlay** to George and Claire Scott

Deaths

Pamela, Andy Jackson's wife, February 2017

Mrs Jess Laing, Garryside, April 2017

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www.blairhorsetrials.co.uk

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