

Evanton Wood Community Company
Chair Report to AGM of 8th October 2014

November 2013 – October 2014

As a community owned woodland we are now into year 3 of our ownership of Evanton Wood.

The Log Cabin Development

There have been a number of visible developments within the wood over the last 12 months none more visible than the placing of a large blue container in the area of the stacking yard. The board took the decision to clad the container in larch and those who visit the wood regularly will have seen this evolve into the fantastic log cabin construction which is now nearing completion. All the wood used in the construction has come either from our wood or from wind blown larch from Contin wood. All the timber has been milled on site by the volunteers building the cabin and the skills they have developed will be used in future construction projects. It is hoped to be in a position to have an opening celebration for the cabin some time in late October or Early November.

A number of other projects have also been started and these will evolve over the next few years.

Amphibian Habitat Improvement.

The development of a pond area for increased biodiversity and to encourage amphibian habitat has been started with clearing and initial discussion on layout and format with the partnership group in the project, Froglife. The contract for the pond development has been awarded to Water Gem and we had hoped to see the pond construction start next week but there have been a number of teething issues which have meant that start dates have been put back but it is still hoped to get the pond construction under way before the start of the next amphibian breeding season.

Group and Club Initiatives

A permanent orienteering circuit, aimed at the beginner level has been laid out, and there have been a number of orienteering events held in the wood with one planned for later this month.

Mountain biking tracks have been laid out and a number of the younger mountain bikers in the village have helped the adults in the construction of these. These tracks are designed for different degrees of difficulty and there are plans to continue this work and develop further tracks.

Wood Carvings and Information Panels

Ian Chalmers has produced a number of carved seats and these are being sited around the wood. He also produced a "totem pole" carving showing a section through a pond which the pupils from Dingwall Academy helped raise near the site of the new pond construction. Within the next few weeks we should also have Ian's carved board for the welcome panel in place at the core path junctions near the stacking yard.

The welcome panel (as mentioned above) and information panels are now ready and the sites for their position have been identified. A decision has not yet been reached on how to mount the information panels but the board is agreed it should be in keeping with the surrounding environment.

We have also produced an education pack for use by teachers (and others) giving information on the wood. This is available in both book and loose leaf form and contains information from the various surveys carried out to provide the base line data when the community took over the wood. It is hoped to launch the education pack at the opening celebration for the cabin.

Path Improvements

There have been some minor path works done over the year and we have had the path infrastructure surveyed by Highland Conservation with a view to identifying the priorities for path development. We hope to improve access for all users but especially improve buggy and wheel chair access. Path construction is expensive (about £20 per metre) and we have just over 2000 metres of main paths so a table of priorities is being drawn up to ensure a balanced approach is taken. Initially the track from the Chapel entrance to the stacking yard will be improved as this is the access we take user numbers from and there have been over 20 thousand recorded in the last 12 months.

User Groups

The local schools have been involved with the wood over the last 12 months either using it as an outdoor education facility or helping in the development and evolution of the project plan. Voluntary groups have also been involved with implementation of the development plan and have helped with clearance work and tree planting.

The local nurseries and playgroups continue to make use of the wood especially the area at the Dell.

In a new initiative our outreach officer met with two NHS occupational therapists to discuss potential for using the wood to support the health and well being of their client groups. Both were impressed by the wood itself and the developments taking place and are keen to set up a group.

Events

A number of events have taken place in the wood over the last year including:

- weddings (at the area known as Mag's Wood)
- cross country races
- cycling events
- orienteering events
- 6 performances of Embrace, a promenade event over two nights based on the Indian legend of Amrita Devi. Groups were led round 5 installations by a story teller and asked to consider how far they were prepared to go to stand up for their beliefs..

The Future

The immediate goal is to complete the cabin construction. This has taken up almost all the available time inevitably meaning other issues have been put on the back burner.

The board is aware that a number of items need to be prioritized before the end of this year:

- A scavenging licence will be operational in the near future.
- We will be applying for a felling license.
- We hope to begin the construction of a wood fuel storage shed near the cabin.
- The pond and path construction will be progressed over the next 12 months.
- The Saturday volunteer days will continue with the development and maintenance of the general woodland.
- Discussions are at an early stage with Highland Shakespeare Company and it is hoped to bring Shakespeare to Evanton Woods in 2015.

- There will be an official event to mark the opening of the log cabin and it is hoped to launch the education pack at this event.
- Events will be planned for Halloween (hopefully) and Easter and there will be other events through out the year.
- There is an opportunity to become involved in the Northern Periphery Partnership (NPP) and although at a very early stage of discussion this may be a way to source funding to continue the project beyond 2017

Problems faced During the Last 12 Months.

Generally the last 12 months have been very encouraging for the board with positive feedback from the regular wood users on the developments taking place. There have been a number of issues however that I would like to bring to the attention of members and users of the wood.

- Cut stacked timber has been removed without consent and trees in the area of the track behind Knockrash and Ashill have been felled. One of these trees was left in a dangerous position near a path and had to be made safe by the woodland manager.
- When the orienteering posts were originally set they were pulled out and thrown away. This took place immediately before a junior orienteering event took place and if the outreach officer and organisers had not checked the course this could have led to some youngsters being lost in the wood.
- The signpost to the gorge has been knocked over on several occasions.
- A small fire was started in an area of broom and gorse to the west of the Dell. This is the area used by the nursery groups.
- Glass bottles were smashed around the fire pit in the Dell area. The glass was cleared by board members before any damage was done.
- The mill at the stacking yard was tampered with and since this was on hire it could have proved expensive. Luckily no serious damage was done.
- Motorbikes (dirt bikes) are being ridden along the footpaths although there are notices clearly banning their use in the wood.

Generally we have very little vandalism in the wood but it is a concern that areas like the Dell are being vandalized where the results could lead to serious injury to the wood users especially young children in the Dell area. The wood is for everyone's enjoyment and the board would be grateful if incidents of misuse or vandalism could be reported so that action can be taken.

Thanks

Finally as chair I would like to thank the board members for their sterling efforts over the past year, the volunteers who turn up in all sorts of weather on the last Saturday of each month, all those involved in the development and build of the log cabin, Simon Harry for his commitment to his post as Education and Outreach Officer, Adrian Clark for the workload he carries as secretary to the board, Kennie Mccusker for the work he has put in as Woodland Manager, Ronald Munro Ferguson for all the support he has shown the project over the last year, Hector Munro who has similarly supported the project, all our sponsors and especially Forest Education Initiative and the Forestry Commission Scotland without whose support the log cabin would be a much smaller enterprise.

Dave Smith