

# **Holmehill Ltd**

**Annual General Meeting: November 12th 2012**

## **Chairman's Report**

Last year I began my report by apologising that I would be absent at the AGM itself, as also would be our Vice-Chairman, Dave Topliff. I am extremely grateful to Caroline Crawford, who kindly stepped in for both of us. This time I shall be present, but sadly it is unlikely that Dave will be able to make the meeting because, as most of you will know he suffered a stroke last month. Whilst he is gradually recovering, this has been a severe shock to his many friends and family, and our thoughts and prayers go with him and them at this time.

My report last year covered not just the 'official' company financial year, but attempted to bring everyone up to date with matters concerning Holmehill right up to the time of last year's AGM, on 31<sup>st</sup> August 2011. I shall attempt to do the same this year, as there is much to report and continuing activity on several fronts. In particular, we have been addressing the twin ongoing issues of the new proposed Stirling Local Development Plan and the various planning applications submitted for different parts of the hill by Allanwater Developments.

One of the most heartening aspects of this year has been the enthusiasm and support we have received not just from Committee members, but also from other residents and concerned folk who have helped us in our work. And to this list must be added our elected representatives – at Stirling Council, at Holyrood, and at Westminster – all of whom have stepped up to the plate and supported us. Our local representatives did us proud, and the continuing support from Councillors Graham Houston, Callum Campbell and others, combined with the recent support of our newly elected representative, Mark Ruskell has been much appreciated. Willie Rennie MSP wrote in support, as did Richard Simpson MSP, while we hosted visits from our new MSP, Keith Brown in March, and from our long-standing Westminster MP, Anne McGuire in April. This latter meeting was memorable for many reasons. It was a glorious spring day, warm in the sun, cool when the sun went behind the clouds, and we were indoors before it started snowing! We walked over the hill, and Anne really seemed to appreciate what a special place Holmehill is, a green oasis in the middle of the town, or 'the lungs of Dunblane', as she put it. Whilst I was able to point out the various environmental and ecological points of interest on the hill, the undoubted 'star' of our team was young Maeve Topliff, who charmed Anne and told her of dens and friends and playing on the hill. As Libby put it, if you were to ask Anne to recall one person she met we reckon it would be Maeve!

As mentioned above, the two most pressing issues, and those that occupied most of our time this year were, on the one hand the detailed work the Committee and members put in reviewing and commenting on the various elements of the emerging proposed Stirling Local Development Plan; and on the other, responding rapidly and comprehensively to not one, not two, but three different applications put in by Allanwater Developments. A key element of both activities was, as ever widespread and transparent consultation, well-attended open meetings and ensuring the wider

public and community of Dunblane were aware of the facts, and encouraged to respond themselves.

During the year, we made detailed and constructive comments on the draft proposed Stirling Local Development Plan, copies of which were placed on our website for anyone to view. Our position was developed following public meetings, as well as Committee meetings held through the year. In our letter and detailed comments of 15<sup>th</sup> December 2011, we welcomed and supported the Council's recognition of the importance of the whole of Holmehill to all the community of Dunblane, and the need for its continued protection. We stressed our commitment to encouraging the sustainable use of the hill by the local community, as well as by visitors to Dunblane. We raised concerns as to the Council's own proposals relating to that part of the hill they own adjacent to Bogside.

As I write this, the current position is that Stirling Council approved the Proposed Plan on 26 September 2012. The Plan is now published and is available to view on the Stirling Local Development Plan webpage at:

<http://www.stirling.gov.uk/services/planning-and-the-environment/planning-and-building-standards/local-and-statutory-development-plans/local-development-plan>

This next stage in the Plan process signals a more formal period of consultation. The period for making representations on the Proposed Plan and any of its supporting documents runs for 8 weeks, and all representations must be with the Council by 10th December 2012. Although we made detailed representations to the Draft Proposed Plan in 2011, we shall need to do so again in relation to the Proposed Plan, and we shall submit a new representation in early December. After this, any unresolved objections to the Proposed Plan will be sent to the Scottish Government Directorate for Planning and Environmental Appeals for consideration through an Examination process.

The other main set of issues that occupied much of our time this year was a 'rush', or a 'rash' of planning applications submitted by Allanwater Developments, undoubtedly timed so as to attempt to get them through before the new Local Development Plan was finally approved. The first, in December 2011 was for 19 houses on the area referred to as Braeport Meadows, with access off Braeport; and the most recent was for outline planning permission for a large office development with car parking and access road on the top of the hill, with access off Smithy Loan, which was submitted in August 2012. In between, an application was submitted and then almost immediately withdrawn for houses on Perth Road.

The application for 19 houses on the Braeport Meadows (one below the number that would have required the addition of 'affordable' houses in the mix!) would have opened up and destroyed that whole side of Holmehill, with access being proposed up the Braeport along a ridiculously narrow street. We were encouraged by the support we received from others locally and from further afield, including the Scottish Wildlife Trust in our opposition to this development. Our own submission on February 8<sup>th</sup> was boosted by similar comments from some 80 other respondents, as well as excellent coverage in the local press. We were delighted when, in the face of this overwhelming opposition to the plan, the application was eventually withdrawn in July 2012.

No sooner had this died down, when we received the application for planning permission in principle (PPP) for office development on the top of the hill. We began by writing to the Council in early September arguing that it would not be appropriate for the Council to determine a PPP application for a site as significant as Holmehill for a variety of reasons. In the meantime, we again held open meetings, encouraged others to write in and put in our own strong objection to these proposals on 16<sup>th</sup> September. Again, we were heartened by the support from all quarters, notably the Community Council and the Chapter of the Cathedral. As of the end of October, we understand from the Council that the proposal is still under consideration, and the Council are not yet in a position to determine the application.

In all this activity, our website has been a vital part of our ability to let people know what is happening, share draft letters, and disseminate information. In this respect, I must acknowledge the great work being done by Richard Bland, not only in re-designing and updating the material we have on the web but also, along with our Secretary Libby keeping this all up to date. Similarly, Richard has been instrumental in ensuring that the blog is regularly refreshed, including ensuring that my monthly Wildlife notes get uploaded as soon as possible.

In all this activity, it is important not to forget that other things have happened! - positive and enjoyable events and activities have been organised both on and off the hill at various times during the year. Whilst Allanwater Development continue to show no sign of accepting any responsibility themselves for upkeep or improvement to the environment of the hill, we have endeavoured to ensure that the Core path remains open and in good condition, that litter is collected and disposed of, and that all of the community continues to enjoy Holmehill for the many and varied uses to which they put it. We have also shared our experiences of dealing with the landowners and our attempts at a community buy out more widely, through input to the Land Reform Group

In January we had a visit from an archaeologist who offered some observations on the site. As a large oak tree had recently blown over on the north part of the hill top he was able to satisfy himself that on that part of the hill there had been little disturbance and that the archaeology is likely to be undisturbed. Further down in the Braeport Meadows he commented that the very wet nature of the ground may well help to preserve artefacts that would not normally survive and if the hill top had been in use in past times there may well be artefacts waiting to be discovered. He was also interested in the remains of the tunnel which runs from the edge of the ha ha above the Braeport Meadows towards the site of the old house and suggested that it was older than the 19<sup>th</sup> century house. However exploration would need to be carefully planned possibly with a remote device and using CCTV.

Our Holmehill calendar again proved popular, with photos of both the hill and of other locally important areas of Dunblane, although regrettably it was not a sell out. Along with our cards, our walk maps and the Memories of Holmehill booklet, they represent a key means for us to raise both awareness and funds. All have featured in our presence at the usual round of events in Dunblane this year - the Doune and Dunblane Fling, the annual Blues Night, the Charity Christmas Card Sale, etc.. The Fling day in late May was a wonderful sunny day and along with our material on the hill, our Holmehill marquee hosted a face painter, Pamela. There was always a long

queue for face painting, and while waiting more than 40 families took part in a quiz about Holmehill. To all our helpers at these events, we owe a big thank you – assistance is always required, so if you can help, please do not be shy, we would love to hear from you!

Once again we held our popular *Dawn chorus* event in early May, and this time with much better weather than last year. 5am on Sunday May 6th saw the annual gathering of those hardy folk ready to swap their beds for an early morning stroll round Holmehill and the local Dunblane environment in pursuit of the ‘ Dawn Chorus’. Led by two experienced local ornithologists, the 25 or so folk split into two groups and set off in opposite directions around a loop that took in the hill, through the Laighills and along the river, before returning to the Braeport Centre. Here they were treated to the now traditional excellent cooked breakfast, prepared by Debbie, Claire, and Libby, and the reading of the bird lists, followed by more general chat as to what was seen, what missed, and the latest news about Holmehill. As ever, thanks go to Chris and Douglas for leading the bird walks, and the band of regular insomniacs and enthusiasts for turning up so early, and making it such an enjoyable start to the day. For the record, we recorded 36 bird species.

I have continued my regular bird and wildlife surveys again throughout the year, feeding the results into the British Trust for Ornithology’s recording system, as well as to our web site. A notable new record was of a stoat hunting on the top of the hill one morning in August, whilst even more odd was the sight of some 40 gannets flying past at the end of September! We also “discovered” that we played host to two Dawn Redwood or Metasequoia trees. One was planted in 1958 on the area of land given by the Donaldson’s to the people of Dunblane, and now in the ownership of Stirling Council. The other is further up this site virtually on the boundary wall. Given its status as a species unknown to science before the mid 1940’s and for which no seed was available for planting until 1948, these are some of the earliest examples in Scotland outside Botanic gardens. The lower one in particular is a fine specimen and we have drawn the Council’s attention to their presence and are hopeful that it will be subject to a Tree Preservation Order.

Finally then, I must again thank the secretary, treasurer and other members of the Board for their contributions this year. Equally important has been the work and support of the wider membership.

We are always looking for new members of the Board and for new ideas – so please feel free to come and along and get involved.

Professor Chris J Spray MBE  
Chairman of Holmehill Ltd.

November 2012