



Astley Ainslie Community Trust Progress Report 2021

Introduction

The AACT has achieved a huge amount over the past 12 months on a wide variety of fronts.

Highlights include the following.

- A survey of visitors to the Astley Ainslie with the support of our membership
- Completing and publishing the Feasibility Study
- Applying to become a charity
- Online talks from a variety of speakers
- Engagement with stakeholders and organizations such as the City of Edinburgh Council and the Million Tree Project
- Taking part in a variety of online and in-person events, including the Climate Change Festival and the London Urban Tree Festival
- Community engagement through tree befriending, tree quiz
- Articles in the Guardian, Edinburgh Reporter, Edinburgh Life.

These (and more) are described in the sections below.

This represents a quite colossal amount of work on the part of the Executive Committee and the various Sub-committees, which has been completely made up from volunteers since early summer when our funding for a Development Officer ended.

On behalf of the membership, I'd particularly like to thank Maggie, Tim, Sara, Bill, Mike and Nathan for their huge contribution to the AACT over the last year.

The biggest change over the year was information that the NHS does not intend to move any further services from the site in the short or medium term. As well as ensuring use of the site for rehabilitation for the near future, this provides us more time to build the capability identified in the Feasibility Study by engaging with the NHS and looking for projects we can do while they remain on the site.

Stuart Buchanan, Convener AACT

Governance

The AACT is currently an unincorporated association. This means that the trust has no regulatory oversight apart from a light-touch review of our financial statements by an external expert (in our case Chiene and Tait). But, although this may sound ideal, our unincorporated status generates some important risks. For example, the directors of an unincorporated association bear personally and without limit any liabilities that the association cannot meet with the resources available to it. This is not something that every potential member of the board is prepared to take on. Also, many philanthropic organisations will not consider applications for funds from bodies that are not charities and therefore are not regulated by the Scottish Charities Regulator. This has severely constrained our ability to raise funds to support the appointment of a permanent member of staff. The work of that post has either been farmed out to members of the board or has to await an appointment of a member of staff. This is clearly not a tenable position.

The board has therefore prioritised taking the steps necessary to put the Trust on a sounder footing to be a credible applicant for a land transfer. Good progress has been made with this in 2021.

After taking legal advice, and a detailed debate within the Executive, it was unanimously agreed that the Trust should apply to the Office of the Scottish Charities Regulator (OSCR) to be registered as a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO). This is a legal form unique to Scottish charities. It gives the Trust the ability to enter into contracts, employ staff, incur debts, own property, sue and be sued. It also provides a high degree of protection against liability. It has the advantage that regulatory oversight is solely by OSCR, whereas a company would be regulated by Companies House as well as OSCR.

Our application to be registered as a SCIO was lodged in October 2021. We await OSCR's response, but this is not likely to happen soon because of the backlog of work caused by the Covid pandemic.

A key part of the application is the draft Constitution. OSCR requires a document with more detail than the original constitution adopted in 2019. We have therefore substantially revised that document. Once we have OSCR's confirmation that it satisfies their requirements, we will seek formal approval of the final version of the revised constitution from the membership.

The Executive has taken two other important steps to strengthen the Trust's governance.

The first is to develop a detailed job description for a permanent member of staff. This means that as soon as OSCR has registered the Trust as a SCIO, we will be in a position to seek funds from philanthropic bodies and then make an appointment. This will be a key development, which cannot come soon enough.

Second, we have reviewed the risks the organisation faces and our preparedness to manage or mitigate these. Assessing our appetite to take risks, and our preparedness to handle any risks that may arise, will be an annual exercise for the Executive.

There is still more work to do to ensure that the governance of the Trust is as good as it needs to be for us to be successful in securing a land transfer. However, good progress has been made in 2021.

Bill Moyes

Trees

It's been a busy year in terms of all things tree related. Here is a summary of what's happened:

- Interest in the tree befriending campaign has gathered momentum throughout the year and I am pleased to report that nearly fifty trees have now been befriended. Twenty-two of these are illustrated on our website with more tree posters to come.
- The tree page on the website has been expanded to reflect the interest people have shown in the trees. As we are all volunteers there will always be a time lag in updating this page so anyone who is interested in befriending a tree and wants to check if their tree is still 'free' is asked to email trees@aact.scot to enquire.
- I applied to the University of Edinburgh for a Green micro-grant for a project I called "Befriending Astley Ainslie's Rare and Endangered Trees" and was awarded £837.67 (the full amount requested).
- I submitted a Freedom of Information request to NHS Lothian about the various tree surveys and tree related work that has occurred on the site. I am currently following up the limited response I've had to this.
- My tree quiz was well received and the winner(s) will be announced via the next members' update. My thanks to everyone who volunteered to help me to sell these (almost 500 copies were distributed) and everyone who bought one. Quiz money is still coming in but to date we have banked £306. A special mention must go to March Hair for selling a significant number of quiz sheets (30+) and also to the Edinburgh Bookshop and Cameratikis who also kindly took some to sell for me.
- At the request of the local branch of the Scottish Green Party, I led a guided walk around the hospital grounds to showcase some of the magnificent trees. This was very well attended and was followed by a picnic lunch.
- I've met with a local artist and given him a tour of the site and the trees. We discussed the possibility of him producing cards for us next year which would feature some of the trees.
- In consultation with retired Occupational Therapists and some who are currently working on site, I ordered two plaques commemorating significant Occupational Therapy milestones which had been marked back in the 1990's by the planting of two trees behind the Occupational Building. With permission from the site manager we held a small ceremony in October on World Occupational Therapy Day at which these plaques were installed beside their respective trees.
- Following a meeting with another local artist and a tour of the trees on site they kindly agreed to run some tree drawing workshops in November. These workshops booked up within twenty-four hours of being advertised. Feedback has been excellent and we plan to offer further workshops next year.

Tree related outreach activities and media coverage:

- I have used my own Twitter account to network with many tree experts, tree activists and enthusiasts across the country. Many, like me, have been campaigning to save their local trees. Following them has increased my own tree knowledge.

- Provided tree related news/information for the AACT's Twitter account.
- Submitted a proposal and was invited to give an illustrated talk about the Astley Ainslie's trees as part of the London Urban Tree Festival in May. At this festival I also co-facilitated a workshop on Mindful Doodling (with a focus on trees).
- Met with several key Edinburgh based tree experts on numerous occasions this year to increase my knowledge and understanding of the trees on site and the threats they face.
- Invited the Guardian to write a piece on the need to protect the Astley Ainslie and its trees as a green space that could continue to be enjoyed by the local community. This was published in July.
- Written a piece myself on the Pet Cemetery which was published in Edinburgh Life in their July/August issue. Whilst not directly about the trees it did raise awareness of the site to a wider audience.
- Attended the launch of the Edinburgh Million Trees City Project in October and following on from this, I've met with the Project Manager of the Edinburgh Million Trees City Project and given them a tour of the site. They invited me to join the Edinburgh Million Tree Forum which I have done.
- Met with one of the Board members of Trellis (Scotland's network for therapeutic gardening) to learn more about their organisation and discuss possible collaborations whilst showing them around the site. Have a follow up meeting planned with their Head of Operations and Development.
- Written a piece myself for the Edinburgh Reporter which was published in print and online in November about the significance of Occupational Therapy at the Astley Ainslie, the commemorative trees that were planted in recognition of this and the new tree plaques.
- Through a mutual contact, I have been introduced to someone who is on a similar mission to us in terms of trying to protect the trees and green spaces within the grounds of a former London hospital and we have a meeting planned for December.
- I continue to write (and ask for their support) to various influential people with a known interest in trees to raise awareness.

Maggie Carson

Communications

The Communications Sub-Committee has been working hard all year to continue to maintain the profile of AACT to the members, the general public and to our important stakeholders. The early part of the year continued to be a challenge during the Covid lockdowns and the obvious restrictions imposed on proactive communications. However, increase use of social media, continued use of our website and regular monthly updates (going out to over 800 people), kept the information flowing. For example, we have seen our Twitter followers go up this year to 351 from 140 in 2020 and we are averaging 10-15 Tweets a month. Visits to the website have also increased by 50% compared to last year.

We have had a big push on increasing our membership this year, giving ourselves a very ambitious target of reaching 1000 members and associates by the end of the year. We are not going to achieve this but given we started the year with a total of just over 300, we have increased the membership by over 80% to 560 – a pretty encouraging result!

One of the big boosts in membership came with the excellent article on the importance of preserving the Astley Ainslie trees in the Guardian in July. The article, initiated by Maggie Carson, not only led to an uplift in membership but also help raise the profile of the site as a unique Edinburgh greenspace and the work of AACT.

We have continued our relationship with the filmmakers, Written in Film, who have made us a new short piece for the Astley Ainslie Voices series that features Dr David Knott of the Royal Botanic Garden who kindly came to hug our Giant Redwood.

It has also had a busy year with community engagement activities. In April we had a very successful talk, with over 60 attendees by Cliff Hague Chair of the Cockburn Association looking at the development challenges facing Edinburgh brought about by the Covid pandemic. In June we hosted a talk by David Seel, chair of the Scottish Ecological Design Association, covering sustainable design for Astley Ainslie and ideas on how we can build it in and what we can aim to achieve.

We also had a stall at the Climate Change Festival which this year was held in August on Leith links. This was our first face-to-face event since the pandemic and it was great to see so many like minded people and discuss the importance of maintaining Astley Ainsley as a greenspace. We had lots of people attend the stall with well over 100 in the first hour alone! We keep engagement up with handing out new leaflets, explaining a large map of the site and getting people to complete a quiz. The event resulted in a number of new members joining. A particular thanks should go to Michele Hipwell for all her hard work in putting together the community engagement programme.

Our second *Leaves* publication is being produced this year which seeks to address questions of nature, health and creativity. It is published by *Studies in Photography*, which is the publishing arm of The Scottish Society for the History of Photography – a Scottish charity. *Studies* has generously put its expert knowledge at the service of AACT, offering us a partnership, which has enabled us to connect specific Astley Ainslie issues with wider, natural concerns, in a publication which is both intelligent and beautiful. The contributors have all allowed us to publish their work without charge, and, in the second issue, this amounts to an impressive 41 individuals.

We are happy to say that the new issue of *Leaves*, designed by Ian McIlroy, is now with the printer, Ivanhoe Caledonian in Musselburgh. Both Leaves 1 and 2, selling at £10 each, should be available at

the AGM on 1 December. *Leaves* is also on sale at the Edinburgh Bookshop in Bruntsfield and directly, through members of the Executive, via the AACT website <https://www.aact.scot/leaves>.

Tim Orr, Sara Stevenson

Feasibility Study

The Feasibility study was commissioned in 2020 to develop the community vision for the Astley Ainslie. That vision was developed into an evaluation of the site, feasibility study and business plan by a talented multi-disciplinary team led by Oliver Chapman

At the start of the year, we published the first part of the Feasibility Study, which considered the whole site, and was partially funded by members. Unfortunately, due to COVID restrictions at the time, opportunities to engage with the wider community were limited. This was followed by a more detailed report on the North West of the site published in November, funded by Scottish Land Fund and the Architectural Heritage Foundation. This distilled the elements of the community vision into what was viable from a financial perspective and identified how the Trust needs to develop to be able to deliver them.

We would like to thank Oliver Chapman, Michael Collins, Mike Harrison, Neil Bancroft and Hazel Allen for the huge amount of work, and innovative thinking they put into the reports.

As COVID restrictions are now lifting, we are planning wide community engagement on the contents of the Feasibility Study, including a full day event at the Eric Liddel Centre on Saturday 5th March 2022.

Stuart Buchanan