

Helensburgh Heritage Trust

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Newsletter

The Newsletter is edited and published by Kenneth N Crawford 'Ardlamont' 3, Loch Drive, Helensburgh G84 8PY kn.crawford@virgin.net

Contributions and suggestions are urgently required and welcome!

A Hidden Treasure - Geilston Garden at Cardross

www.comet-2012.co.uk

Travelling along the A814 a sign is passed west of Cardross on the land side of the road which reads 'National Trust for Scotland' (NTS) and from the beginning of April till the end of October a further sign 'garden open'. It is amazing however, the number of visitors to Geilston who admit to having passed the entrance but never gone up the drive. When curiosity eventually lures them, they are surprised to find what many describe as 'a hidden treasure'.

The name 'Geilston' is thought to derive from 'ghillieston', 'ghillie' generally meaning a farm servant and 'ton' a farm steading, thus Geilston's origins may lie in the steading of a farm servant. Other derivations have been suggested but this seems the most probable. The first recorded reference to Geilston appears in 1569 when the property along with others in the vicinity was held by John Wood. In the following century, Geilston passed to the Bontein family, descendants of the Woods, who held the property until the early decades of the 18th century during which time they either built the original house or enlarged the existing building. A sasine record of 1729 indicates that the property was inherited by John Buchanan on the death of his uncle John Bontein. Geilston's next proprietor was James Donald, one of Glasgow's elite involved in the tobacco trade with connections to Jamestown and York River, Virginia. He purchased the property in 1757 but only survived four years to enjoy his acquisition. He was succeeded by his son, Thomas, who enclosed the estate, built one of the stable blocks and implemented extensive plantings as shown in the first edition of the ordnance survey map. Geilston was again to change hands in 1787, its new proprietor reselling it eleven years later to Major-General Thomas Geils.

The Geils were a military family with farming interests; five generations of the family resided at Geilston, indeed a descendant still lives in Cardross today.

Throughout the 19th century, the Geils improved the estate and by 1860, when the property was first mapped by the ordnance survey, most of its present-day features were in place including the kitchen garden with its boundary paths, the walled garden, the woodland areas by Geilston burn, the doocot and the other farm buildings that exist today. At this time the estate extended south across the Cardross road to the shores of the Clyde.

The last family to reside at Geilston were the Hendrys. James Hendry, a Glasgow engineers' and export manager, rented Geilston from the Geils in 1907 eventually purchasing the property for £3,000 in 1922. The sale did not include those parts of the estate along the Clyde shoreline. James Hendry was a keen yachtsman and photograph albums record yachting holidays on the *Zaza* owned by William Beardmore, Lord Invernairn, celebrated captain of industry and brother-in-law of Mrs Hendry. Elizabeth Hendry, the elder of the Hendry's two daughters, inherited her mother's passion for gardening. Following the death of her parents, Elizabeth, known as Betty, continued to reside at Geilston until her death in 1989. In her later years she shared her home with her friend, Margaret Bell, known as Madge Bell, daughter of Sir Thomas Bell managing director of John Brown the famous shipbuilding enterprise, who continued to reside at Geilston until her death in 1997. Many will recall events held at Geilston in connection with the Girl Guide movement in which Miss Hendry took a keen interest.

On her death Miss Hendry left Geilston to the National Trust for Scotland on condition that her friend Miss Bell should continue to reside in the property until her death when the whole property became available to the NTS. In addition to this generous bequest, Miss Hendry left £1,000,000, which was judiciously invested by the NTS.

Geilston's total annual running costs are in excess of £100,000 a year by keeping staff to a minimum of a manager with two gardeners to run the property and cover overhead costs such as machinery, plants and building works.

Continued overleaf

This is now the web site to check regularly for details of the events coming up in August. On the 4th a flotilla of small steamships will visit the Pier and on the 10th P.S. Waverley will make a special visit at 4p.m for an evening cruise. The Gateway or Ceremonial Arch has received consent and is anticipated to be erected near to the Tourist Office. It should provide a silhouette against the far shore when driving down Sinclair Street.

Recent Talks

Since the beginning of the year, we have held three very well attended public meetings. The way the activities of the 3rd and 4th Marquesses of Bute affected the architectural landscape of Scotland (and elsewhere). Then a survey of the Drinks Industry which has become international and branched out from Scotland in a remarkable way. Finally, serendipity changed the programme, and we were treated to an investigation of the early days of 'Comet.' Who built what - when - where - and her various passages to and from Helensburgh and around the Clyde.

KNC

A Link with the invention of Television

A Hidden Treasure - continued

Probus Magazine Spring issue 2012 carried a report of Bliss (Chipping Norton) Club hearing a talk by their oldest and life member, 98 year old Andy Andrews. He worked for John Logie Baird and was part of the team working at Crystal Palace when it burned down. Indeed Andy sounded the Fire Alarm! As well as his recollections of the experimentation, Andy gave a technical description of TV as:-

“the transmission by wireless communication of visual representations of images and their reproduction at a distance.”

Andy who is determined to reach the magic 100 in August has donated a copy of his talk to the Trust. Our President, Malcolm Baird, describes it as ‘very lucid and vivid.’ In turn, he has sent a picture of the 1938 staff dinner of Baird Television Ltd to see if more faces can be identified. Watch this space!

Helensburgh Heritage Centre

Is coming to pass! 16 years after our incorporation, you should very soon hear of an opening date! Within the Library in West King Street works in anticipation have been carried out, more lighting points, enhanced security, and a re-arrangement of the Local History Book collection to enable continued research and use. Our new showcases are now at a convenient viewing height and have been allocated to members to design displays. It can be expected that subjects covered will include military and entertainment connections, views of the area shown on Mauchline ware, historic bottles and Clyde Steamers related to the town, and of course, our most famous son, John Logie Baird. We hope that the displays will be of public interest and will be refreshed and changed at appropriate intervals, as subjects, materials and volunteers present themselves to your Board. Once opened, the Centre will become available during normal Library hours. *KNC*

The income from Miss Hendry’s bequest is essential to supplement the funds raised from admissions and the sale of produce from the kitchen garden which alone would fall far short of what is necessary to finance Geilston. The house is gradually being restored as and when funds become available but it will be some time before the NTS is in a position to open it to the public.

The hidden treasure lies in the gardens developed by Geilston’s various proprietors over three and a half centuries. The property is approached from the main road by an avenue, lined with red-twigged lime trees, which passes through fields, part of the Geilston estate let out for grazing. The level area in front of the house and farm buildings comprises lawns divided by driveways and paths. The driveways and general landscaping were all in place by 1831 as indicated by a watercolour of that date. The lawns before the house are a succession of spring colour beginning with snowdrops followed by crocuses, then daffodils and finally bluebells.

The walled garden lying to the north side of the property and to the rear of the house was laid out in the late 18th century. It comprises a large sweeping lawn sloping to the west with a magnificent Wellingtonia dating from the late 19th century. The north wall of the garden is covered with fan-trained apple trees while further east a glass house abuts the north wall. It was erected by the noted builders of glass houses. Mackenzie & Moncur, and was completely refurbished last year. Two carronades, claimed to have been brought back from action in the battle of Corunna in 1809 by a member of the Geils family, are located by the path running along the east side of the lawn by the magnificent herbaceous border which provides a splendid spectacle of colour in mid summer. The dedication with which Miss Hendry tended the walled garden is indicated by the stipulation in her will that it should be kept up to its traditional standards, a stipulation conscientiously observed by the NTS.

The woodland is formed by a glen through which the Geilston burn flows crossed by three footbridges. This part of the garden has a delightfully secluded atmosphere of privacy surrounded by magnificent rhododendrons and azaleas, which provide a riot of colour and fragrance in late spring and early summer. The burn has two weirs built by Miss Hendry to aid sea trout swim up the burn every autumn to spawn. A well situated at the south-eastern corner of the woodland bears the date 10 March 1863 beneath which are the initials IJJTG HEG referring to Joseph Tucker Geils and Hester Elizabeth, his second wife and may relate to the couple’s courtship.

The west of the estate comprises a kitchen garden, which includes an orchard and is the largest kitchen garden in the care of the NTS. The dipping tank in an incline toward the north of the kitchen garden contains a small water channel. These were features of kitchen gardens as early as the 15th century, the one at Geilston probably dating from the 19th century. It is planted with various moisture-loving plants including hostas, astilbes and primulas. A large variety of vegetables and soft fruit are grown and available for purchase throughout the summer.

For a great many years Geilston has participated in Scotland’s Gardens Scheme with an open day in May. This year, however, it is planned to hold the open day on **Sunday, 5th August** when the kitchen garden is at its most productive. Advice on fruit and vegetable cultivation will be given and cooking the produce from the kitchen garden will be demonstrated with some of the results available for consumption. Teas with jam made from Geilston’s fruit will be served and to encourage a day out for the family there will be entertainment for younger visitors. If you have yet to discover this hidden treasure, come and see for yourself. If you are a regular visitor, you will appreciate what delights await you with not only the spirit lifted by the beauty of Geilston’s garden, but the body fed from its produce.

Nigel Allan

STOP PRESS! *Opening 7.30 May 1st by*

Provost William Petrie OBE JP DL