

Ailie's Garden – A Natural Space

'Environmental Education and Awareness has never been so important. Ailie's Garden provides an exciting hands on facility ideal for learning and enjoyment, every village, town and city should have one!'

Eileen Reynolds, Committee member, Friends of Stirling Smith Art Gallery & Museum

I don't remember ever seeing such a variety of habitat, history, art and play in such a relatively small space without feeling cramped and overwhelmed. Quite what it is about the setting of Ailie's Garden which gives you a feeling of spaciousness and peace is hard to say. It feels almost as if you're in the well-kept grounds of an old country church, not in suburban Stirling. Not even the local council digging up the road nearby detracted from the feel of the place.

And it seems I'm not the only one who feels how special it is. The garden hosts bridal photos, golden anniversaries and recently someone even asked to be married there. But that's not all. One minute a place of peace, the next full of school children, buzzing and bubbling with enthusiasm for learning and discovery – doing a school workshop or straight out of the museum and just letting off steam. This is all a long way from the unused, half acre plot of grassland which lay behind the Smith Art Gallery and Museum six years ago.



The project to make better use of the site which is now Ailie's Garden, grew from the Friends of the Museum's desire to improve the museum grounds. The trouble was that designing a garden is a very personal project and original thoughts covered everything from a wildlife meadow to formal flower beds. The coherence of committee thinking was heavily challenged. But after much discussion, with lots of outside help and an effort not to lose sight of the overall aim, the design for a wildlife garden was finally settled upon. 'Remembering Ailie herself, who was such a great activist, did help'.

Who was Ailie?

The garden is named after Ailie R Maclaurin (1913-2000) of Stirling Homesteads, where biodiversity and sustainability were practised in the early twentieth century. Ailie was a great gardener and lifelong Friend of the Smith.

Ailie's Garden has already become so many things.

- A place to breathe - people take time out from busy lives, parents, office staff, teachers.
- A space to play – but without swings and slides – here there's a mini labyrinth, willow tunnel, giant xylophone pipes and musical wood set in the ground – adults find it hard to stop playing on this!
- A place to learn and create – schools and groups from far and near use the different themed areas in the garden and its storytelling area to learn a little – or a lot, about nature. The wonderful compost demonstration area could provide enough material for another story in itself.
- A place to meet and share – for the public, to relax, perhaps play with the outdoor chess set; and for the band of gardening volunteers who help the part-time head gardener in the running and maintenance of the site.
- A outdoor art gallery – with wonderful sculpture, mosaic and drystone work
- A centre for a very successful year long series of popular nature-based workshops



Events and workshops

Once the garden was up and running, the next challenge was how to really make good use of it.

'My dream was always to have a biodiversity garden in a public space to use for education and Ailie's Garden was just sitting there waiting to be used.' June Waley, former director of FEL.



books of leaves. Leaves?

'One is made from leaves inscribed with environmental messages in many languages and scripts and which decorated the Tree of Faith and Hope at the Tree Dressing Event. The other is made from leaves inscribed with sayings and poetry about trees. These leaves were tied to trees around the garden at this event.' They are kept in the FEL library.

'You need to market to the community as a person not a bit of paper'

Throughout the fun stuff though, there has to be a backbone of fund raising, administration and marketing.

The Friends committee put much of the success here down to understanding your audience, and a bit of ingenuity. Between them, they are the inspiration and the organisation. Marketing of the opportunities the museum and grounds offer is done through careful targeting and trickle press. They look, for example, at what schools are studying and tie in with it, but are sensitive to bombarding people with excessive repetitive information. You need to market to the community as a person not a bit of paper and take a very outgoing approach to who the friends are and what they are doing.



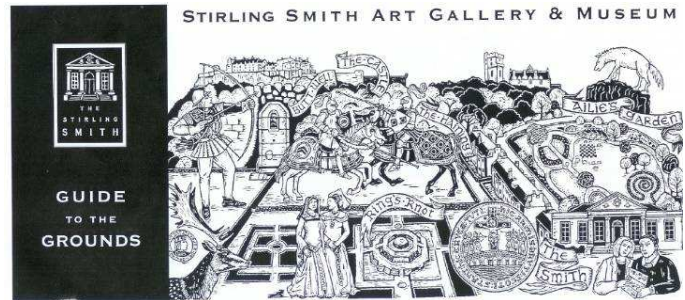
The Friends have around 800 members, mainly local, but with some spread throughout the world. Membership fees and specific activity support provides 'bread and butter' cash, while larger projects are funded via grant applications.

The committee's dedication seems to come from sharing the challenge, enjoyment and the satisfaction of contributing something lasting to their community – 'we know where we want to go with this but we have to take a small section at a time and there are some golden committee rules – no controversy, no politicising'.

Old organisations can secure new audiences – but volunteer ‘match funding’ is important

Ailie's Garden lies in the grounds of the Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum. Elspeth King, Director of the Museum has noted that this project 'is a great testimony to the power of volunteering ... and the sterling effort of the Friends of the Smith'. One of the things which came over while talking to various members of the Friends was how much volunteer hours can be underestimated and undervalued. Perhaps not by the recipients of their efforts, but by funders, politicians and the general public. The informal 'match funding' contribution of volunteers in organisations like 'the Smith' is enormous.

The Stirling Smith has had a rocky ride over the past 50 years, opening and closing several times, and would have been knocked down altogether if it hadn't been for local people forming the Friends group and raising funds to keep it open. Gradually the management and Friends have transformed both the Museum interior and then the grounds. Ailie's Garden in particular has demonstrated the potential for an old organisation to secure new audiences.



Limitless possibilities

You don't need an enormous space to develop a garden, and you don't constantly need to create extra space to be able to do more things outdoors.

'The possibilities are limitless' says June Waley. 'I'd never run out of ideas for new activities, but we can always do more of the same as well. Old favourites might be old to us, but there are always new audiences, especially with children. There is plenty to build upon. June has ideas for producing DIY activity packs, based on the nature workshop activities, but which any family visiting the garden could do by themselves. She tells us 'Something like this would have revolutionised my life visiting this sort of venue with young children!'

Ever entrepreneurial, the committee is constantly coming up with new ideas on how the site can be used to its limits, forging relationships with local groups and building upon achievements to date. Art workshops feature on the short term agenda. Further environmentally focused workshops in partnership with FEL will play an ongoing part for their value in offering both adults and children great learning experiences.

Other ideas include encouraging other organisations to use the garden for events and meetings, from girl guides doing badges to WRI. All it takes is a bit of integrated thinking. The world is full of storytellers, and of wonderful stories – here there is the magic of an outdoor storytelling area.

One thing that's probably not on the agenda is turning Ailie's Garden into a campsite – which had to be explained last summer to one tourist who pitched his tent there overnight. He'd thought the garden would be a beautiful place to stay.

Overall, Ailie's garden is an inspiring example of what you can do with an old organisation, a small space, enthusiasm and creative thinking. It is a delightful natural space for everybody, which complements perfectly the cultural focus of the Gallery and Museum.

Link to Video clip of both Magda and Martin

Link: "Whats in the garden?"

LINK PIECE 1

A taster of the Garden events

Tree Dressing Day 3rd December 2005

This event was a celebration of trees in cultures around the world. Trees in Ailie's Garden were decorated according to various celebrations that relate to different faiths and cultures. A written guide was available to visitors to highlight and explain the different customs. Activities and displays looked at the variety of trees and explored trees as a practical and spiritual resource for people and wildlife.

- Activities:
- Family Cloutie Tree
 - Tree of Faith and Hope
 - Tasty Trees
 - Tree Stories
 - Origami decorations
 - Willow den planting
 - Willow weaving
- Displays:
- Tree of Faith and Hope
 - Tree Dressing from around the World
 - Poetree
 - Sale of trees



Christmas 2006

The FEL Eco-friendly Christmas event attracted the largest crowd. 270 people turned out to get involved in a diverse programme of activities including 'how to make natural decorations' with materials from Aillies Garden; buy/sell recycled bikes; decorate glass jars as lanterns and of course, drink organic Punch – it was that time of year after all!

Other garden events included:

- Big Garden Birdwatch
- Brrfrostytwignapwinter
- National Science Week
- Flying High
- Plants for Healing
- Bugs, Bees and Bluebottles
- Mammals and man
- Art in the Garden
- Green Gardening for the Beginner

LINK PIECE 2: Letter about events from Chair of the "Friends"

January 2007

Dear Eve,

Here at last are my thoughts on last year's Family Days.
In a word – superb!

In lots more words: our main aim as Friends of the Smith is to help the Museum and our Director in any way we can. The most important of these is to increase visitor numbers but the ways in which we do this are important. We want people to find the Museum and its grounds entertaining, educational, congenial, "Green", enlightening, etc. – and we want them to return.

Your wonderful programme pressed every one of those buttons and more. You helped us to introduce 100's of new visitors and you brought them back, culminating in our "extra" Greener Christmas day.

You would have noticed that the same volunteers (with additions on certain days) returned time after time – quite an accolade. What a great idea, too, to link in with National Days, e.g. RSPB.

While we as friends are really keen to continue under our own steam, I do hope we can work together much more and have many of these popular days.

Sincerely,
Móira
MOIRA LAWSON
(CHAIR)

LINK PIECE 3

What's in the garden?

Woodland area with hedgehog dome, owl box, bird boxes
Upland area with example of drystane dyking
Kitchen demonstration garden
Orchard area
Wetland area enlivened by beautiful mosaics in the 'river' bed
Herb garden – with outdoor chess/draughts board
Compost demonstration area
Storytelling area sculpted from natural materials
Picnic area of comfortable wooden seating
Xylophone pipes
Mini labyrinth
Willow tunnel
Wooden 'caterpillar' tunnel
Musical wooden ?