

West of Scotland
Dry Stone Walling Association
Scottish Charity No SCO 39439

Annual General Meeting
Waitrose Community Room, Milngavie
Sunday 27th October 2024 14:00

Meeting

Sederunt: John New, Dave Barber, Jo Overton, John Overton, Russ Liddell, Tam Wadwell, Danny McNaughton, Aileen MacLean, Sean Hayes, Crawford Andrew, Sam Gibson, Gordon Gray, Alistair McGeoch, Aline Nicholson, Alistair Eadie, Anne Winter, Derek Winter, Ronnie Reid, Jeff Hattie

Apologies: Alan and Alison Patrick, Dave Mackie, Colin Nicholson, Brenda Nicholson, Dougie and Margaret Neilson, Mike Thornley

The Chair, John New opened the meeting at 2pm, commenting that it was good to see everyone again and good to see some new faces from courses and people who would like to join the association. We'll start off with the agenda of the minutes of last year's AGM and get those approved.

Russ commented that there were a few typos in the 2023 minutes and listed those (spelling mistakes and item 3 of the finance report (£2,000) should be £20,000). Russ mentioned that John Hendry used to do the van inventory he was willing to do that in the future, and he has a copy of the inventory. John said as he was going through the documents, he was thinking about the van inventory and how we must get another inventory done.

Gordon also commented that if any hand-tools need sharpening – he could work on those.

Russ pointed out a couple more potential typos. Alistair Eadie pointed out the spelling of a name as well.

Agenda Item 1 – Minutes for previous Year

Minutes of the AGM 2023.

Assuming the corrections discussed previously were made, the minutes of the 2023 AGM held on 29th October 2023 were proposed as a true account by Russ Liddell, and seconded by Alistair McGeoch, and so were passed as a true record of the proceedings.

Agenda Item 2 – Chairperson’s Statement

This was given by the chairman as per the Annual Submission to the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR) for the period 1st September 2023 to 31st August 2024.

2024 has been a rather quiet year on the whole. We ran three courses at Auchenfoyle Farm with around fifty attendees, and from the positive feedback, they thoroughly enjoyed themselves. This has resulted in around twelve new members which is always good to see.

There has been a distinct lack of community projects to undertake, and I am not sure if this is due to Covid or some other reasons. We did get a couple of enquiries which needed to apply for lottery funding so we might hear from them in the coming year.

In May, we had another day at the Kilmacolm show, when once again the sun shone brightly. We rebuilt a section of the wall to demonstrate the skills of our members, and this was enjoyed by many of the general public.

We recently purchased two loads of fresh red sandstone for Kilsyth, mainly to give us a lighter and more workable stone to deal with. This is a new source of stone and is relatively cheap and worthwhile investing in for the future. It may be possible to run the July course at Kilsyth using this stone as it may suit those who want to use a lighter stone than our usual whin which can be challenging for some. If we do, we will probably need another couple of loads to give us a plentiful supply and it would have to be a wall which we dismantle and rebuild which isn't the ideal but would suffice for teaching purposes.

Latterly, we finished off the year at Glenarn in Rhu, where we finished off the steep wall and, once again, were well looked after by our hosts, Mike and Sue Thornley.

Obituaries

Last October we were shocked and saddened to lose our past Chairman, Norman Muir. Norman was an inspirational leader who instigated some of our most memorable builds at Gardening Scotland, Erskine Home, Greenock Ocean terminal, Kilsyth Golf Club and elsewhere. He has been a hard act to follow.

Gordon asked about John’s opinion on the new red sandstone. John said he’d like more bigger bits and would appreciate Gordon having a look. It was a good price and included delivery. It perhaps needs another delivery and then can be sorted as the smaller stone could be used for other purposes. Alistair M suggested some could be used for the retaining wall for the advanced test.

Mentioning the tests, John said that he had a meeting with Scottish Liaison Group (SLG - the 4-5 branches of Scotland that were active) a couple of weeks ago, and they were saying that they haven't really got their test site in Dunfermline up and running yet and they've had very few candidates. We didn't have a test this year either and it may be because the DSWA down in Cumbria are doing intensive one-week courses followed by a test, and so they could be taking all the people who want tests and who want to do walling seriously. He thought that's what's been happening, as we usually

get passed people who want the test from the DSWA, but we're getting no-one from the DSWA. We get frequent bulletins from the Walling Association about people who have passed their tests.

We only had one or two for the 2024 test so we had to cancel it again, so it might not be viable the way things are going. He'll be interested to see this year's new members who want to maybe get tested on Initial or go onto Intermediate and hopefully get a test in the coming year. It's a different stone down there in different conditions. It might suit them because that's what they deal with down in Derbyshire and Yorkshire, but it does leave it very weak in Scotland for trainees who want to go ahead (apart from branch members).

Gordon asked about the stone to be used in Dunfermline. Alistair M suggested we could change the website to highlight that our test site can also be used for training and for practise.

Agenda Item 3 – Finance Report

Chairman John New submitted the annual accounts as per the Annual Submission to OSCR for the period 1st September 2023 to 31st August 2024.

John passed around paper copies of the accounts.

You can see that for those who have seen here the training courses from last year to this year, we've taken more from £5,100 to £5,400 - that is our main earner for the branches and we could actually end up doing a fourth course because there's such a demand for it. The subscriptions are about the same as last year – accepted on-line and in cash.

On the expenses side, the main drain is there is a van of £1,433. It's been running great and then the gear linkage went on it so still to get it checked out, hopefully just a linkage but if it's the box it could be the end of it, because it may be a very hefty price.

Surplus to the year is £3,000 - which is very good again. The total cash and bank balance was £8,300 last year and this year it's at £11,423.

Since the accounts were done I've paid £2,800 for the stone. The figure isn't far off £8631.89 so in the bank at the moment we have a nice health amount.

We don't want to be making lots and lots of money for the bank account. The van is the main drain on the money, and we always have to have a contingency for that.

If we didn't have a van, it would be everyone lugging stuff about in cars and equipment being scattered all over the place so it's good to keep it quite contained – especially for the courses.

John then asked for any questions:

Dave asked about any special items coming up this year. John replied that no special items and because everything is on-line and run by the system so thanks to Dave and his set up it's just all going so smoothly now. There's very little to do in the treasurer role. That's why he hasn't asked anyone to take on treasurer. The chequebook rarely gets used and the paying-in book wasn't used this year.

Dave commented that another point of having a treasurer is that you've got a certain measure of control. You've got one other person who is sitting there involved. That's the only thing he would comment on because at the moment it's Dave doing the internet process stuff and John working with the banks. We've got the accountant who checks all the accounts out and she's asked a few questions. We've sent her the reports from the IT system and that answered her questions, so the only reason we should consider having a nominal treasurer is for the control aspects of it, which is probably something that OSCR would want as well.

Alistair E asked whether one of the new members might have appropriate skills who might consider taking on the role?

Dave said we could give the Treasurer access to the Stripe transactions/reports and can see all the transactions going through and it's more an oversight role with an overall view.

Alistair M commented that a treasurer only needs to be there for big purchases – an OK from the treasury department – to make sure of reasonable value.

Russ asked about the scam incident where our on-line systems had been used to try and take money from credit cards.

Dave confirmed that the accountants had been briefed on this before the accounts had been prepared and they were satisfied with the information and result.

When we first implemented the website Donations Page, someone used it for a period of about 15 minutes, where they tried to test approximately 120 stolen credit cards - donating £5 to us each time. All but four of them were rejected. Two cardholders initiated a chargeback and received their £5 money back and we were charged a chargeback fee for those two. We processed a simple £5 refund for each of the other two.

This is one of the new events that occur when you move from physical cheques to online processes. Our funds were never in danger – we were only used to test stolen cards to see if they were active. We now know what system messages come through if this was ever to happen again and know to put through a simple refund to any cards that donate small values in the same pattern.

John asked if everyone was happy with the accounts and that was followed with a recommendation of the balance sheet as a true record of the accounts was proposed by Alistair McGeoch, seconded by Gordon Gray and passed unanimously.

Agenda Item 4 – Election of Office Bearers

We continued the post of Treasurer. John asked if anyone wanted to take on the role of Treasurer. No one indicated they wanted to.

John mentioned that we've changed treasurer three times since he became a member and they took on average about a year for the Royal Bank to process each change. They lost the forms for Jim McLachlan as well - they're just not interested in small groups like ourselves. We even tried to change the Bank of Scotland. Rest assured if we get a change of name, it will be a complicated process.

Alistair M asked if we need to have a treasurer that has a signature to prevent money going out without their signature, or do we need a treasurer that has an oversight of what we're doing – with an internal signature required. An overseer rather than a stop on the bank.

John commented that perhaps it's an extra set of eyes.

Dave suggested that this person simply gets a copy of the bank statements from the bank – and also gets a login/copy of the internal system report so they can see the break down the cost of each bank deposit or withdrawal.

John suggested a 'Joint treasurer'.

Alistair M reiterated that it would make the post a bit easier if it was an oversight role rather than wrestling with the bank forms and processes.

Aline asked how many office bearers we currently have. John replied there were six trustees. Aline said the point of the oversight independence was it could not be the chair that does that role.

Alistair M volunteered to do oversight – because he's very close physically if anything needs to be looked at/signed.

Aline asked how many committee meetings we had every year. Dave replied every 6-8 weeks. Aline said that so long as we minute the treasurer actions and that gives an audit trail and allows an auditor to see that we've all agreed to meet and actions have been taken.

Aline asked about OSCR and what requirements they have for office bearers and other requirements. John and Alistair M detailed what we submit to OSCR (bound audited accounts).

Dave commented that he was thinking of creating simple, written role descriptions for each of the office bearers. Aline asked whether we had a constitution. Derek replied that Norman created a constitution and we voted for it so it must be on the books. Aline commented that Office Bearers are protected by the Terms and References that support the Constitution.

Alistair M said our goals are on the front page of the website.

At this point John and Dave signed off the accounts and John demitted office. Alistair Eadie proposed John New resume his post and Crawford seconded, so John retook the Chair.

All other existing officers and committee members, (had agreed previously or) agreed to stand for re-election.

John mentioned that all the committee members were present today (they indicated who they were), and they are all trustees so have a duty of care for the association and so we can have up to nine trustees so there's three spaces at the moment if anyone wants to sign up.

Dave commented that this involved 5 to 6 meetings per year during the summer, at the Waitrose location and each meeting lasted about an hour.

John commented that judging on the SLG meeting we are probably the most well attended branch in Scotland at the moment.

Aline asked what we had posted on the website and Dave answered that we post the AGM minutes. He also said the Committee minutes could be posted on the website as well.

Agenda Item 5 – 2024 Courses and IT

John gave an update on the courses.

The courses I said in my statement that nearly 50 people attended this year, and they are oversubscribed all the time I think it's a great testimony to what we're doing and considering the site: it's a tough challenging stone up there at Auchenfoyle, but it's a good base for people to learn because I say on the courses, if you if you learn with that stone everything after that is easy because it's a tough stone that challenges a lot of aspects of your build and how you have to be so careful.

Aline commented that the large number of instructors was spot on and the course pace was good and relaxed and you get through things without being too rushed and it works for all abilities.

John replied that's great feedback and on the two days, we rarely have to go to 4 o'clock on the second day at that pace, and we have a lot of people to mentor the attendees over the two-day period. If we've got enough members of the association there it helps to get that contact. A few years ago, Alistair M suggested we use the blue coats to identify the instructors. John thought the fact that we've got the website and the pictures of all the past courses - it lets people who are thinking about booking a course will get a bit of confidence and they can see from the photos that are a whole range people, men, women, older people, younger people and young couples attend, so it's a nice balance and people shouldn't feel a bit daunted it about coming on these things.

John then detailed some future plans for the Auchenfoyle site. But they also have their summer camps in July so we may move our courses to the end of June, to prevent any interaction with the summer camps.

Alistair M reiterated that two lots of cars, use of toilets and safeguarding issues would be much easier if we have no interactions with the summer camps.

Aline asked about our current courses being oversubscribed and if there was scope to add more courses. John said we may be able to add a mini course to complete the small parts of the wall that were incomplete.

John asked if there was a waiting list. Dave replied that we have about eleven people on a waiting course who had booked in but had various reasons that they couldn't make the course so we've just move them to a future course and when the 2025 courses are added in, they will get first shot to take places.

John said we need to watch that we don't just do courses. We have to have development after that for people who want other various types of job and other types of walls to make it more interesting. We could fill the whole year up with courses – take the attendees per course down to 12 or 10 and do 6 or 7 courses but you need to take people to the next step. It's a short season – only about 14 weeks.

Alistair M said we used to find that community groups and projects used to come to us. Concerning the training, (addressing the group), he said, rather than us dictate what extra development will be, we should ask the new members what sort of things they would like to learn. – e.g. large walls, small walls, features, what challenges do you have?

Russ asked about the short season and thought it was longer when he first joined and suggested something in March as the weather now is a little less severe. Ronnie suggested that our old community projects were run outside the summer holidays and we had a longer season because of them.

Alistair E said that bad weather runs the risk of discouraging people. And we need new members so want the experience to be good.

Russ asked whether we had insurance for the courses. John replied we've Public Liability of £5m. Russ asked whether we ask if anyone has any medical conditions. Alistair M said we have notes on emails and on the website about how strenuous the courses can be. He makes a point of normally talking to people when on the course. E.g. who has diabetes, so we are aware of so if there is an issue. John said that on the website, there's a preamble about your personal responsibility to be able to take this one because it's very physical, there's uneven ground and mud, so people have to be aware of that.

Aline commented that we (as trustees) have to protect ourselves if something goes wrong, so if you feel that there's enough on the website and enough in the joining instructions and enough on the pre-brief that you can stand in court 6 months later when someone is trying to sue you, then that's enough.

Alistair M said we also have a full risk assessment that covers all that, including full first-aid assessments etc. We used to do that for our Lantra courses and it's suitable for the training weekends. So, we do as much as we can without asking too much about people's medical status.

John said it's good point to make and it's something that we have to keep in mind but as Alistair M says, how far you take that, as everyone has to have their own personal responsibility.

Alistair M said if they have a condition and they don't make you aware of it, then there's not much you can do about it. He would say that 95% of the people on the course don't consider these things. But we have to be aware that with the younger generations, their philosophy on teaching and training and those types of things are very different to how we were brought up. So, we need to be a bit more aware of these things that might have to be enveloped into what we do.

Gordon asked if disclaimers cover us. Alistair M said there's a possibility that we could have a template briefing to read at the beginning of each course, just highlighting points like health and safety, the physicality of the course, and any safety/health issues you want to discuss come and speak to us separately.

Aline said we sort of did that anyway – but perhaps it needs to be a little more structured for our own protection, because if someone is stupid enough not to say anything, we've given them an opportunity to come and talk to you quietly. 'Is there any reason why I should not be on this course – the answer is yes and I'll talk to you'. It links back to covering ourselves.

You were great on the site, and I don't think anyone who attended the course would feel like they weren't looked after. But again, I'm back to protecting YOU from someone who wants to sue you - you need a bit more structure. Your joining instructions on the website, I think, are pretty good. I would just put them in again and that's what you allude to again.

Dave finished off the IT section. We've got the courses set up for next year, but we haven't put them on the website. They will go first go to the people who are on the holding course and also there any voucher holders and we've got 14 outstanding vouchers. About eight vouchers have been purchased during this year. The people we've got on the holding course will be added before we release the waitlist. There's about 150 people on the waitlist, but a lot of people add themselves to the waitlist and we never hear from them again. We may get 4% of responses off that waitlist.

We still got pictures to put onto the website.

Also to attract more community builds, I've been thinking of expanding the text and adding a form for people with a potential community build. It will send an email to John. So, we hope to make it a little easier to drive in requests for community builds.

Agenda Item 6 – SLG (Scottish Liaison Group)

The SLG meeting was a few weeks ago. Richard Love chaired the meeting. Southwest branch held a wonderful day at Threave, and they are planning to do it again next year. The other things that came up in the meeting were basically just general chitchat about each association and what they've been doing. One of the overridden things was that most branches are finding that most of the attendees are committee members and maybe one or two of membership. They always seem to struggle with numbers getting people involved. Although they show 56 members on paper, they might only have six or seven active members. It seems to be nationwide. So, there was a conversation on how to encourage more members to get involved. Most are running courses and the occasional community event. Dave said that Southwest branch has been looking at our booking system, that we use with Stripe and the booking system that we bought in. They did mention that the main group is going to create DSWA vouchers and Dave had made a note to make sure that we say that we will not be accepting DSWA vouchers. John said he knew they're looking for someone to take on the chair for next year and organise it because Richard is getting over 80 now and he wants to step back a bit.

Agenda Item 7 – Discussion on what members would like in the programme

Dave said we'd like to have a short discussion about what the members would like to see in our season program. We would like to drive that with some suggestion here at the AGM and then follow that up with an online survey to the membership.

John said one of the things he'd noticed was our development days didn't get great feedback and we cancelled one of them.

Alistair M mentioned suggestions like garden features, moongates, bridges etc. rather than the committee deciding what to do. Dave mentioned different stone, steep slope walling, retaining walls, different UK styles, community work when they come back.

Aline said that she wanted to see "what was next" after the course. E.g. a community build that included soup and sandwiches – and something where you could put something back into the community.

Alistair M said community builds are good for our exposure. Also, we don't want to take work off commercial wallers but highlight ourselves for the community. So how do we put ourselves in the frame.

Alistair E suggested newspapers articles – which drives people to us rather than people starting out with our website. Alistair M suggested the regional papers. And then we start the discussion with them on how we could help the groups.

John said it's a difficult thing to try and encourage people from the out there in the world to come in to these things unless it's a school and we've had schools in the past

but then it's a whole different ball game with kid's primary schools – trying to do anything in a school involves so much more health and safety and safeguarding.

Other potential community prospects include two community seats, and they were just waiting for lottery funding, and they haven't come back to us yet.

There was a redevelopment of a swing park – there's an opportunity there. Maybe a semi-circular seat but they had machines and builders in there at the time, but that's another possibility.

Dave said we'd but some different community subjects in the survey but is there anything we haven't covered? We just thought we'd put in a talking point here into the agenda just to see if there's anything came out which was different from what we thought, and I think what HAS happened is almost everyone wants more community projects.

Aline said playing with Google you can see different community groups linking with each other. And linking with someone could start a networking opportunity so others think of us when they are thinking of projects.

John O said that he and Jo started about 18 months ago. They went to Auchenfoyle as they have some broken wall in their garden and they wanted to build it back up again. He reiterated that we shouldn't lose sight of the basics of how to take the whole wall down and then learn the principles of building it up again safely. Alistair M replied that we'll always do the basics as we have to cover all the stages, but we also want to give members more additional focussed techniques or stone. Jeff said you get your associated membership for a year after your course so you can repeat the courses.

Agenda Item 8– Discussion on Merchandise and Friends/Family course discount

Dave started the conversation saying we would have a quick discussion on Merchandise and Friends/Family discount on courses.

The idea would be to have a 5% or 10% discount for friends and family if they were to take a course.

You normally use these tools to generate business. However, we don't need to generate any business, but we just thought maybe people would like to have this so that members could give a discounted voucher as a Christmas gift. Or gifts.

It's very easy to generate a course discount code.

It's harder to create an online shop.

We've currently only got our shirts, and we only create an informal order every three years. We don't want inventory. Perhaps water bottles, baseball cap, notebooks – those sort of things.

The shop could be online for a short while – perhaps before Christmas and we take the order and the payment and send a bulk order to the manufacturer.

We're very small that we just wanted to get a measure of interest - so are there any thoughts on either of those concepts?

Alistair M said it's not about generating business; it's about generating people – it's about a sense of belonging and keep people coming to the builds.

A suggestion was made on adding a T-shirt (with an added cost) onto a course. This idea was accepted very well.

We also discussed the concept of a calendar – showing some of the walls and features we've done over the years. Alistair E suggested taking photos of walls during different times of the years. Alistair M said we'd have to take the photos ourselves to avoid licensing issues. Also, we'd have to task a group of people to choose the walls. Dave suggested we find one really interesting wall and take the same photo of it every month, showing how the environment changed around a wall that provided an anchor point.

Dave said we'd look at these new ideas and take some of them forward.

Agenda Item 9 – Any other business

John called for any other business.

Derek went to Sardinia with his wife and brought some pictures of the huge boulders they build with over there. He passed them around.

We held the raffle for a bottle of whisky and a walking stick. The stick was won by Alan Patrick and the whisky was won by Alan as well.

Chairman John New thanked members for the good turnout and the meeting closed at 3.44pm.