

# MINUTE OF THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE SCOTTISH RIGHTS OF WAY AND ACCESS SOCIETY

**Held in The British Horse Society, Stirling Agricultural Centre and on Zoom  
on Saturday 16 November 2024 at 2.30 pm.**

**Present:** Bob Aitken (Honorary Vice-President), Katharine Taylor (Chair), 5 other Directors plus 19 members in person, a further 2 Directors and 13 members joining online.

**In attendance:** Alison Riddell (National Secretary and Treasurer), Eleisha Fahy (Senior Access Officer), Lynda Grant, Neil Feggans and Karen Lowrie (Access Officers), Neil Birch (Access officer, Outreach), Craig Reilly, (Information Officer).

## 1. Apologies

Apologies were offered on behalf of 9 members:

Anne	Bennet	Peter	Mackay	Euan	Terras
John	Bennet	Ian	Provan		
Stephan	Hennig	Muriel	Robertson		
Judith	Lewis	Alice	Simons		

A proxy had been lodged on behalf of one member in favour of the chair.

The Chair, Katharine Taylor, welcomed everyone to the meeting.

## 2. Minute of AGM 2023

The draft minute had been posted on the Society's website and there were copies available for those in attendance. There being no amendments, approval of the minutes was proposed by John Elliot, seconded by Eric Gotts and carried unanimously.

## 3. To receive the Report of the Directors

Chair Katharine Taylor presented the Directors' Report, recognising that it had been a challenging year, which had heightened awareness of the financial situation. While the reserves meant it was not about to go bankrupt, Directors had a responsibility to ensure the sustainability of the Society. As a result, Richard Barron had left the organisation by mutual agreement, so there were three fewer staff days a week. In addition, Alison Riddell was suddenly taken ill resulting in a prolonged absence. Staff and directors had all stepped up to cover her absence but it had been a steep learning curve for all.

In the meantime, the staff continued to deliver the search service, the source of most of the income and Katharine expressed her thanks to the access team for their hard work in this regard. She also noted the progress Craig Reilly had made during the year he had been in post in organising and updating our data and was pleased to note that Neil Birch and his team of volunteers were ahead of target in repairing signage across the country.

ScotWays and other organisations had been working with Network Rail to resolve issues and persistence was paying off in that discussions had opened up. This was a major part of Eleisha Fahy's work. Director Stephan Hennig was also involved in this through his

chairmanship of the legal & access committee, and had provided invaluable support to Eleisha. Katharine thanked both for their hard work in this area.

A significant event recently was the launch of the 6th edition of *Scottish Hill Tracks* – a very good publication with some inspiring photographs. The book was already going to a reprint as sales had been exceptionally good.

Katharine acknowledged the work of the staff and of the volunteer directors who maintained a positive attitude, worked collaboratively and made positive suggestions to improve the organisation. She particularly thanked the directors for all the work they did on a voluntary basis for the organisation. She also thanked the 240 or so registered volunteers who had also done a lot of work on behalf of the Society. Activity had quietened down after the major project to survey all the routes for *Scottish Hill Tracks* but there would be a new project in the new year.

While recognising that the Society did many good things, the board had a responsibility to ensure the charity was delivering its objectives. The Board had recently had an away day when they considered this. While directors were satisfied that the work being carried out met the charitable objectives, there was a concern that ScotWays was trying to do too much for the resources it had available. It was time to reassess what ScotWays does in order to secure its future and have a clear sense of where it was headed. Directors intended to continue the process of digital transformation such as the development of CAMS Pro for record keeping, and to review systems and processes for greater efficiency. They aimed to improve communications between staff and board, working together to achieve success. In order not to reduce activity, there was a need to find significant external funding.

Katharine concluded her presentation by acknowledging the recent deaths of two longstanding members, Mrs Margaret Hunter at the age of 96 and Mrs Agnes Nasmyth at the age of 93. Mrs Hunter and her late husband Tom had been instrumental in setting up the West Highland Way and had been faithful supporters of ScotWays for many years. She was also sad to mark the very recent passing of Eddie Palmer, not a ScotWays member but someone who worked very closely with us in his capacity as a key member of the access committee for Paddle Scotland, particularly as regards the use of mediation in access disputes.

She then paid tribute to Richard Barron who had left ScotWays after active involvement in ScotWays a variety of roles for 30 years or so and was pleased to report his recent appointment as convenor elect of the National Access Forum. He had a huge knowledge of access matters and had begun the update of our digital systems. John Elliot was standing down from the board after eight years of service, three as chair, and was warmly thanked for his contribution. Finally, Lynda Grant was retiring at the end of January after eleven years on the staff team. She will be missed but Katharine confirmed that a replacement was being recruited.

#### **4. To receive the Accounts**

A summary of the accounts had been published in the Annual Report, and full copies were available at the meeting as well as on the Society's website. John Elliot, director

and chair of the finance committee provided a summary of the financial position, noting that income at £199,000 was down on last year while expenditure was significantly up, giving a trading loss of about £72,000. This was mitigated by a gain of around £32,000 on the investment portfolio, leading to a final loss of £42,000.

Responding to search requests provided about 70% of the Society's income so it was important to monitor the numbers coming in and setting an appropriate charge for them. Pricing was difficult but had been increased in line with inflation over the last few years. He noted that the accounts to 30 June did not include the excellent sales of the 6th edition of Scottish Hill Tracks which would appear in next year's figures.

Staff costs had increased over the year since Craig Reilly had been recruited to manage the organisation's information and data, essential material to enable us to fulfil our objectives. A significant sum was expended this year on professional fees, largely in relation to the situation at Dalwhinnie.

The final outcome for the year was negative, and the directors' aim was to bring income and expenditure into line, while continuing to invest in the office systems. While John was stepping down from the board at today's meeting, he was sure that the new finance committee would be able to guide the Society to a positive position. He also acknowledged the contribution of Alison Riddell as treasurer.

#### **5. To appoint Directors**

The Board was recommending the appointment of three directors standing for the first time. They were:-

Fiona Dick, proposed by John Elliot, seconded by Bob Aitken

Rachel Taylor, proposed by Tim Simons, seconded by David Dixon

Martin Yeoman, proposed by Peter Stewart, seconded by Eric Gotts

All were invited to say a few words to introduce themselves before they were appointed.

Fiona Dick has been a passive member for about 20 years. She became interested in the Society as she did a lot of walking and noticed the signposts. On retirement in 2021, she became more active in surveying some of the signposts, and then responded to the call for support for the finance committee. Her background is mainly financial management, with a bit of fundraising and her last post was with Dance Base where she spent 15 years.

Rachel Taylor was interested in joining the board as she believes in the importance of its work in protecting access in general. She has been an active volunteer for about three years. As she is often out cycling or walking, she has a good understanding of how access rights operate on the ground. She is keen on fundraising, increasing membership and raising the profile of the Society. She would also like to focus on the Heritage Paths project and would like to see the routes included in it resurveyed given how long it is since they were done.

Martin Yeoman spends a lot of his free time in Sutherland, not far from the Alladale estate and Carbisdale Castle, where there have been access issues. He has

volunteered for the past year on the finance committee and seen the tremendous dedication of the staff. His background is in banking and he would like to help move the Society forward and ensure every penny counts. He participates in Paths for All health walks in Sutherland.

All three were elected.

#### **6. To appoint the Independent Examiner of the Accounts**

Fiona Dick proposed the reappointment of Whitelaw Wells as Independent Examiner. She had had a lot to do with the firm in Alison Riddell's absence and had no hesitation in recommending them. This was seconded by Rachel Taylor and was then approved.

#### **7. ScotWays in Action**

Craig Reilly had only been with ScotWays two weeks at the time of the last AGM. During the year he had now been with the Society, a major part of his role involved the resilience of the organisation and its data. He started by getting a sense of what systems and data it had - a preliminary survey identified fifteen record series and 58 forms. He is now starting to organise those records more efficiently.

He has been involved in the Network Rail work in that he assisted in processing the 323 questionnaires received evidencing the use of the Dalwhinnie level crossing as part of a through route. He has started going through the backlog of paper records and digitising them to make them more accessible for all staff, adding the data on them to CROW. As part of his work to make records more accessible, he has also been visiting the National Records of Scotland researching board minutes between 1845 and 1960 and creating an inventory of the 1106 maps in the office. With volunteer assistance, he has been writing summaries of case files to assist in finding information in them. While a lot has been achieved, he can see that there is still plenty to do.

Eleisha Fahy followed to speak about her work, stressing that she did not spend all her time on Network Rail work although it felt like it at times. There were two aspects to her workload, a national picture and a local one. The national picture included the work with Network Rail. The Highland Council were very grateful that we had been able to share the redacted questionnaires with them. Since the annual report had been written, there had been a meeting with Network Rail also attended by representatives of ScotWays, The Highland Council, Perth & Kinross Council and Cairngorms National Park Authority. It was agreed to disagree about the legal situation at Dalwhinnie and to seek a pragmatic solution to the issue. While ongoing discussions were sensitive, she would report when she could about progress.

More positively, ScotWays was a member of a working group set up by the National Access Forum on the issue of level crossings and core paths and there had been constructive discussion at a recent meeting. ScotWays had made the case for local level crossings whether core paths, rights of way or no specific status. Network Rail appears content with public use of private level crossings provided such use can be made safely.

While progress has been made, this work has been resource-heavy and incurred a financial cost, not least that of obtaining legal advice. Eleisha encouraged members to notify ScotWays of any railway issues in their local area to give us the national picture. She also stressed that ScotWays limited resources meant that it was very helpful for members to know what action to take if coming across an access issue, and flagged up the guidance on the law leaflet. The quick answer was to contact the relevant local authority as they had the duty and powers to act. She recommended taking photographs of the situation, both close up for detail and zoomed out for context, and counselled having patience as so many access officers were overwhelmed with their workload. She also encouraged members to consult Ken on the ScotWays website as well as the ScotWays law guide, but stressed that ScotWays was still interested to hear about a situation for information, whether or not they were in a position to take any action.

Neil Birch, access officer (outreach) then followed up by saying that the law leaflet was due to be reprinted shortly with updated membership information. He thanked all volunteers, particularly those who had been busy with PR for Scottish Hill Tracks and with social media content. We had also had coverage on BBC Out of Doors, with the promise of more features to come and his colleague Neil Feggans had spoken to local television about the right of way through the Lorne Arcade in Ayr which was protected from closure through the planning system.

The biggest PR was through the 3,500 signposts in which ScotWays had an interest. In the year to 30 June, 155 signs and waymarkers had been repaired. He gave special thanks to two volunteers who had helped through an employer day release scheme. While all help was welcome, he would particularly appreciate offers from those willing and able to dig deep holes and to transport the long poles.

While the current financial situation is not what we would like, we were currently using a grant of £5,000 received from the E M Whittome Trust to support our repair work. Neil also spoke about the signpost sponsorship scheme he was currently working on as a potential new income stream.

Many volunteers had been helping with the signpost verification scheme, working to tidy up and reconcile the records held in several different systems. Much work was needed to reconcile the survey data with the records where for example a sign was ordered but never installed. About a quarter of signs were currently unknown. Neil was hoping to clear the backlog over the winter. The main focus of his role was supporting volunteers but since Richard Barron's departure he had had to spend rather more time on communications and management matters. He apologised that he had been unable to support volunteers keen to get busy and said that there were many more projects in the pipeline when time permitted. Next year for example was the 140th anniversary of the first two signposting projects which he hoped we would be able to mark in some way.

## **9 Any Other Business**

Bruce Logan asked if CROW, the organisation's most valuable economic asset, was secure against hacking. Craig Reilly confirmed it was as the database was managed by Idox, a company which took security very seriously.

David Dixon asked about the 1% of signs Neil Birch had said were removed and wondered if this was malicious. Neil confirmed that those removed were by agreement or at our choice. The 10% that were missing was a different matter and were pending investigation.

Eric Gotts asked if any progress had been made on appointing an honorary president. Katharine Taylor, chair, confirmed that no progress had been made, although several people had been approached.

Bob Aitken urged the board to approach the Scottish Mountaineering Trust for a grant, given that ScotWays was currently in very good standing with them. While the SMT would not support revenue funding, it might provide £5,000 to £10,000 for the likes of a signposting project.

Peter Stewart proposed formal thanks to all those who had contributed in any way to the new edition of Scottish Hill Tracks.

The Chair then thanked all those present for attending, and drew the meeting to a close at 3.45 pm.

Proposed: asd }

xx/ 11/2025

Seconded: asd }