

If I was not conscious of it myself, a number of you have reminded me that it is some considerable time since the last Newsletter, seven months to be exact. It has not been a case of idleness. We have had holiday makers both staying at the cottages and visiting the gardens. We have also had a series of projects that have got started, on which I wanted to report. However, as is the way in these parts, only a few have actually been completed. In particular, there are the public toilets, a long and involved saga that I will return to in a later Newsletter. Here is an aerial view of the House taken by our Canadian friends' drone, when they visited us.



Aerial view of Arbigland House

You can see the small parterre to the front (well really the back) of the House, but the main Gardens are to the left among the trees running down to the Solway Firth. In front of the hedge you can detect the line of Wayne's trench for the electricity supply cable and to the right you can see the Stableyard containing the holiday lets. All this will be familiar to those (growing number) of you who have been to visit us up here in this foreign land – no passports yet required.

This view is still quite wintery and it is true that the weather this last summer was not as glorious as it was the first summer we had up here. There have been more grey and wet days and these certainly dampen numbers coming to the Gardens. By contrast, the last few days have been ones with crystal clear skies, stunning visibility, but very cold with a frost so hard that it looks as if it has snowed. Nevertheless, through wet and cold the work on the Gardens has continued, particularly clearing the paths to improve access and open up the views. To prove that there are blooms a plenty, particularly in spring and early summer, and that the paths are being developed, here are a few photos.



Broadwalk with rhododendrons in bloom



Handkerchief tree with close up of the "handkerchiefs" and Alistair on a "steamroller"

Probably the most appreciative visitors to the gardens and particularly the beach are our two dogs, my sister's two dogs and any other dogs that bring their human minders onto the premises. If only dogs could be persuaded to use litter trays!

The "home team" on one of the sunnier days

First, some good news. The Colditz or rather Stalag style defences for the chickens have worked well and all eleven chickens and one cockerel have

survived the last seven months. The bad news is that they seem to have given up on laying any eggs. So currently the only beneficiaries are the agricultural suppliers “Tarff” from whom we purchase the feed corn. Lest this bastion of the Dumfries economy fear retrenchment, Wayne has now decided to purchase from the “children’s farm” just up the road from the aforementioned “Tarff”, two pairs of rheas. These are a South American form of ostrich, who seem to be very hardy and well able to deal with the local conditions. Nevertheless, it will require more Stalag style fencing and the creation of a couple of huts for them to settle down and lay their eggs. I have not yet established whether these eggs are edible by humans, but I do know that last year none of the eggs the two pairs produced actually hatched into any little rheas.

As I have already mentioned, visitor numbers to the Gardens this last year very much depended on the weather. There have been some generous comments about the Gardens on “Tripadvisor”, but it is hard to get the predominantly older age group that visit gardens to engage with these new-fangled means of communication. We have decided that for 2020 we will be open every day from 1st April to 30th September, bringing us into line with the John Paul Jones Museum, next door, who sell our tickets for us. We will also charge an extra £2 per person for those wishing a tour of the main rooms of the House, on which front there is some more good news. Having established that the portraits of the couple who built the House were languishing in an attic at neighbouring Shambellie House, we have negotiated a long term loan of the portraits so that next year visitors to Arbigland House can see them both.



The portrait of William Craik of Arbigland

The portrait of his wife, Elisabeth Stewart

The portraits are temporarily hanging in our sitting room awaiting the completion of changes to the library. Here, new bookshelves have been built to match the ones already there, Wayne has painted them a matching colour, and I have just about fitted all the books up from Manchester on to them.

However, the books fit so tightly that we are going to have to institute a “one in, one out” rule to deal with any more books being purchased. We now just have to do something with the fireplace to stop the library becoming atmospherically smog-bound every time we light a fire.

One of the pleasures of the cottages, is the variety of people we meet through them being rented out. Perhaps the most unusual this last year was a family of orthodox Jews from Manchester, two parents and eight children (with a ninth apparently on the way). This did require us to find extra deep-freezer space to cater for the frozen kosher food they brought with them and we were a little concerned how they would take to the depths of the Scottish countryside. However, they were intrepid in their exploration of local historic sites, they loved having an open fire in the sitting room and the ability to go down to the beach and have barbeques. Most of them even became reconciled to the attentions of our two very children-friendly dogs when occasionally they escaped us.

One of the problems we have not quite solved yet is external lighting on these dark winter nights, though a major benefit of such complete darkness is the

extraordinary display of stars. It is not that we did not realise the problem early on and we summoned electricians to install motion sensitive lighting. It is just that only half the lights have so far been installed. It is a curious trait of local builders etc that they come and do half a job and then disappear, even though this means that have not been paid a penny for the work they have done. We have been promised a reappearance of electricians before our Christmas Party on 21st December. Otherwise, we are going to have set up temporary lighting again to ensure no accidents on our front steps.

We have managed to replace our failing hot water boiler and while we were doing this, we decided to have installed a “return pipe” to speed up the arrival of hot water to the various basins and baths around the House. I fear I may not have thought this through carefully enough. True, the hot water arrives much faster, but this is because a continuous pump sends it round the circuit of pipes. That however, effectively creates a permanent radiator of this circuit which in turn requires the boiler to keep topping up the temperature of the water even though you have not used any. There seem to be three possible solutions:

1. Lag the circuit of pipes (tricky given where they run and aesthetically unpleasing to the eye);
2. Install a system to turn the pump on just when needed; or
3. Abandon the pump and have the patience to wait for the water to flow hot.

The dogs continue to thrive, although Briar’s digestive system would be helped if she would just desist from eating everything and anything she comes across in the woods. As already mentioned, both dogs love going down to the beach, Bramble to go digging in rock pools, and Briar to retrieve sticks thrown to her. She has developed a new variant on this game. When the stick inevitably gets sandy, she takes it to a large rock pool and “dunks” it clean before returning it to you. However, she can be rather over-ambitious in the size of “stick” she thinks you can throw, frequently presenting you with a log or a whole branch cut down in one of Wayne’s clearing operations.