

# NEWSLETTER

# JULY, 2011



**'Friends of Duff House' is a registered Scottish charity No SC 027830**

Dear Friends,

I had hoped to issue a newsletter somewhat earlier, but we have been waiting for information on future funding of Duff House and decided that it would be better to delay publication until we heard from Aberdeenshire Council. We have now heard that the annual budget is to be reduced from £409,000 to around £300,000. To achieve this, it is proposed to close the House from the end of October until Easter (9<sup>th</sup> April in 2012). This is obviously unwelcome news from our perspective and more so for permanent staff of the House. I have been told that every effort will be made to mitigate the effect on staff, but the proposed closure would obviously reduce most staff from permanent to seasonal status, if they chose and were able to stay on. Council representatives also emphasize that new initiatives are planned to ensure that the House continues in business. Discussions with the partners (Historic Scotland and National Galleries of Scotland) are ongoing. It is recognised that admission charges are discouraging some potential visitors and these are under review, although it is hoped to increase the number of paying visitors and generate more revenue from wedding receptions and other events. The National Galleries of Scotland have undertaken to ring the changes and to provide major works of art for an opening exhibition at the start of the 2012 season with a themed continuation through the summer. A new, participative educational programme for schoolchildren is also planned and part of the Long Gallery will be adapted for use as an arts and crafts area in a way that will keep its potential as an exhibition space.

Given the present economic climate and the pressures on local authorities to contain costs, we could not reasonably have expected the House to emerge financially unscathed in the budget review. This said, a 30% cut that inevitably results in closure of the House for half the year can be seen as disproportionate and it is clear that, once again, art, music, architecture and history and related cultural pursuits are seen as a soft target. It is obviously much easier to scythe 30% off an easy touch area than to devote thought to how more modest savings might be made across the board, to achieve the same or a better overall result. Members of the Friends of Duff House Committee, who are the trustees of the charity, agreed that a letter should go to Aberdeenshire Council lamenting the seemingly unthinking approach to budget cuts which, in our case, have implications well beyond the House in terms of their potential impact on tourism and the local economy.

I have sent the letter that follows this note. Although we thought that many of you would share our concerns and views about the cuts, we accept that some of you may not. So, as

you will see, the letter does not claim to represent the Friends' views – simply those of the trustees.

Whatever the outcome, members of the Committee will continue to do everything they can on your behalf to contribute to planned initiatives and otherwise support the House and raise its profile. We will need to discuss the future of the winter lecture programme and other year end events, if the closure proposal stands. I will do my best to keep you informed of developments. News of the budgetary proposals has just broken so things are still very much in the melting pot.

And now for some good news!

**The Friends' Summer Outing** for members and their families and friends has been arranged for Saturday, 24<sup>th</sup> September 2011.

Isabelle Malcolm has organised this year's summer outing. It will be a return day trip from Banff to Dufftown - by coach to Keith and then on through wonderful countryside on the Keith to Dufftown railway and then back to Banff by coach. There will be an opportunity for a guided tour of the Glenfiddich Distillery at Dufftown for those willing and able to negotiate the stairs and gangways. Others can enjoy the distillery shop and an entertaining video that narrates the history of the Grant family or simply 'do their own thing' and rejoin the group for the return journey. The trip, which includes lunch, has been costed on a break even basis at £25 per person, so it does represent best possible value. Numbers are limited, so please book early to avoid disappointment! We will hope to have tickets available for purchase in the Duff House shop from Monday, 11<sup>th</sup> July. Details of place and time of departure and return will be given on the ticket.

For those of you who were not able to attend the AGM, the Committee members working with me are:

Iain Whigham, Secretary; Mrs Jan Sutton, Treasurer; Mrs Johan Byrne, Membership Secretary; Mrs Aileen Burnett, Mrs Isabelle Malcolm and Mrs Judith Smit-Haffmans. Jan, Judith and I are the present members of the strategy sub-group, which discusses forward plans and reports back with suggestions to the Committee. Aileen and Isabelle lead on social events and we all pile in and help, generally. Sandra Cumming, though not now a Committee member as such, does sterling work on the Dunimarle Library and I understand that our recently retired Chairman, Pippy McEwen, will be helping her in coming months.

All of you should, please, feel free to contact me if you want any information or simply want to make a point or offer suggestions - particularly appreciated at this very challenging time. My telephone number is 01261 818762 and my e-mail is [peter@13scotstoun.co.uk](mailto:peter@13scotstoun.co.uk).

Thank you all for your continuing membership and support.



Peter Johnston, Chairman

## The letter

27<sup>th</sup> June, 2011

The Chief Executive  
Aberdeenshire Council  
Woodhill House  
Westburn Road  
Aberdeen  
AB16 5GB

Dear Sir,

I write on behalf of the Trustees of Friends of Duff House to register our deep concern at the proposed reduction of the budget for Duff House from around £409,000 to £300,000 and the closure of the House from November to Easter. We do not underestimate the financial challenges facing Aberdeenshire Council in common with other local authorities, but question the wisdom of the budget reduction and resultant winter closure, particularly when, as I understand it, other budgets have sustained little or no reductions.

These proposals are clearly inconsistent with the strategic theme of the Banff and Buchan Community Plan, B6 “to promote Duff House and the Banff and Buchan area as a Cultural Tourism destination”. We understand that Duff House is one of only two buildings in the North–east which currently have five star status and we wonder whether it can hope to retain this if these proposals are implemented. We believe that the proposals do not take into account the value of Duff House as a tourist attraction. We believe that it should be regarded and safeguarded as an investment in tourism, supporting local businesses, rather than as a liability. There is an additional irony in that these proposals appear to dismiss the newly launched *Go Local* initiative, supported by Aberdeenshire Council, which is designed to ‘bring the arts and businesses together and create a real buzz’ and to encourage people to ‘explore and take advantage of all the great cultural things available on their doorsteps for them and their families’. Few people would dispute the proposition that Duff House is the greatest cultural thing in this part of Aberdeenshire. As such, it should be accessible throughout the year.

We are also deeply concerned about the potential effect of the proposals on members of Duff House staff, who have responded very positively to previous changes in conditions and displayed great loyalty to the House and a strong team spirit. Winter closure in any business inevitably impairs the ability of employers to identify and retain good staff for the summer season and this is particularly so in circumstances where honesty, reliability and a keen interest in, and knowledge of, the business are prerequisites. Visitors respond well to good staff and are equally disenchanted by indifferent part-time jobholders with no career potential. In the case of Duff House, there will be some additional costs associated with training, uniforms and the like and training will, presumably, have to commence some weeks before the House is re-opened at Easter. The real cost, however, will be the loss of the existing core of good, reliable permanent staff. So, we believe that while short term financial savings could be made by closing the House for the winter, there would be hidden costs, including potentially disastrous reputational costs for Aberdeenshire Council and the House as a former five star tourist attraction.

Aberdeenshire councillors have expressed their desire to ‘maximise the long term partnership agreement between Historic Scotland, National Galleries of Scotland and Aberdeenshire’. They have also noted the significant financial and in kind contributions of Historic Scotland and National Galleries of Scotland to Duff House since the partnership was created. We see the current proposals as inconsistent with this expressed desire and as a disincentive to the partners.

You will know that members of your staff are developing a new three year exhibition policy with a more community, family friendly, historical and craft based programme and education emphasis. The staff concerned have said that, “..depending on the scale and ambition for these changes, this new approach could offer the basis for the exploration of a major partner, friends and corporate sponsorship fundraising drive, over the coming 12 to 18 months [as of September 2010], in which we hope to generate major financial

support". The Trustees of Friends of Duff House are very supportive of these initiatives and are concerned that the proposed budget reduction of around 30% and closure of the House will send all the wrong messages to potential corporate sponsors and make fundraising much more difficult. We are also concerned that the praiseworthy craft based and education emphasis will be far harder to achieve if the House is open only during the third school term, since this is the busiest term of the school year. It would clearly be much easier for schools to participate fully in this initiative, if the House were to be open throughout the first and second terms.

Traditionally, art, architecture and music have been seen and treated as soft targets when financial pressures increase, on the basis that they are very much 'minority sports'. Those who understand their true educational and social value take a different view. In the case of Duff House, there is the very important, additional dimension, which is the value of Duff House to the local economy as a tourist attraction. Critics often point out that visitor numbers are very low in the winter months. The Trustees believe that the appropriate response to this is to develop and implement a strategy to bring more visitors to the area during winter months, rather than to close down the star tourist attraction.

By definition, members of Friends of Duff House are among the House's most ardent supporters – support of Duff House being the fundamental reason for our existence. I am sure that the Friends will continue to offer this support, whatever the final decision. However, there is bound to be some dilution of enthusiasm if these proposals are implemented, which will add to the difficulties. You will be aware that 65% of Friends of Duff House annual subscription income is made over to Aberdeenshire Council and that all other income is in one way or another disbursed for the benefit of the House. Members of the Friends also donate many hundreds, if not thousands, of working hours in support of the House. Our winter series of talks and other events increase the footfall in the House during the winter months and generate revenue for the House and tearoom. A number of people have already expressed dismay that these events will no longer take place if the House is closed throughout the winter.

To our mind, the proposals have no merit other than as a 'quick fix' money saving measure by the Committee immediately responsible for the budget. Previously agreed strategies have been set aside, ongoing strategies have been disregarded and little or no thought has been given to the adverse impact of the proposals on economic development and tourism. The most important factors are the demoralisation and likely irreplaceable loss of current permanent staff, the anticipated downgrading of the tourism status of the House and the loss of one of Banff's best amenities and associated educational and cultural events for half the year.

We know from past experience that more than one councillor has come to appreciate the true worth of Duff House only when they visited it for the first time. The Trustees would be more than happy to host a lunch visit for any councillors who had not visited the House and who would like to learn and understand more about it.

The very great success of the 2010 Friends' exhibition in the grounds of Duff House and in the House itself during the COAST Festival weekend and thereafter, and the very favourable financial impact of the weekend for the House (over £3,000 in revenue for the shop and the tearoom during the weekend) proves that well thought out initiatives that offer something of interest at reasonable or no cost can bring people to the House and generate revenue. The Trustees stand ready to contribute to such events and more generally to continue to offer any support they can to the House and to Aberdeenshire Council and we hope that councillors will reconsider the current proposals and would ask you to circulate this letter to them and to colleagues.

Yours faithfully,



Chairman

A copy of this letter goes to: The Duke of Fife; The Rt Hon Alex Salmond MSP, First Minister of Scotland; Dr Eilidh Whiteford MP; Stewart Stevenson MSP; The Chief Executive, Historic Scotland; The Director-General, National Galleries of Scotland; Councillors John Cox, John Duncan, Sydney Mair, Robert Watson.

## Questionnaire

Our thanks go to all the members who responded to the questionnaire and who expressed many diverse views. These are appreciated and will continue to inform committee discussions, as well as being shared with Rachel. More than a third of our membership responded and, not surprisingly, no clear consensus emerged, though many expressed appreciation for the recent series of winter lectures.

Members confirmed their Interest in and commitment to Duff House. The majority responding had visited the house in the previous 6 month period, many attending the lectures. We hope that this support will continue during the summer at this challenging time for the House.

Some members drew attention to their difficulties in participating in weekday daytime activities. You will see that the summer outing will be at the weekend (Saturday, 23<sup>rd</sup> September). We trust the train journey will also be of interest to families. However, responses to the survey indicated very limited interest in an overnight stay with a visit to a more distant property, so this will not be taken forward.

As expected members have very varied music appreciation but light classical was the most popular. Some interest exists for a weekend daytime concert, and we are hoping to progress this in some way once the future plans for the House are finally decided.

Any member wishing to receive a more detailed review of the questionnaire responses is welcome to ask. Contact Jan Sutton, 01261 831121. Thank you to everyone who provided email addresses, enabling us to save postage.

## Forthcoming Events at Duff House

A new exhibition which opens on 9 July called **Hurricane Lamb** in collaboration with Gray's School of Art and Peacock Visual Arts Aberdeen

OUTDOOR THEATRE FROM ILLYRIA - Great Family Entertainment

Bring a picnic, something comfortable to sit on and enjoy!

(Cancellation only in the event of a hurricane)

Thursday 14 July at 6.30pm <b>Roald Dahl's THE FANTASTIC MR FOX</b> Full price £13, Concession £10, Family £39	Thursday 4 August at 6.30pm <b>Gilbert &amp; Sullivan's PIRATES OF PENZANCE</b> Full price £16, Concession £13, Family £42
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For tickets, call 01261 813003 or personally into the Duff House Shop.