

## Upcoming Events

### Atholl Highlanders Parade

Saturday 27th May

### Atholl Gathering

Sunday 28th May

### Summer Foraging

Saturday 1st & Sunday 2nd July

### Blair Castle International Horse Trials

Thursday 24th - Sunday 27th August

For information on Events taking place throughout 2023, please visit our website: [atholl-estates.co.uk/events](https://atholl-estates.co.uk/events) or scan the QR code below.



Register for our monthly **e-newsletter** with the latest events, special offers and news **at:** [atholl-estates.co.uk](https://atholl-estates.co.uk)

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## Websites

[atholl-estates.co.uk](https://atholl-estates.co.uk)  
[blairhorsetrials.co.uk](https://blairhorsetrials.co.uk)



Our new calves, Morag and Elspeth of Atholl



# Newsletter

## Spring/Summer 2023



# Welcome

I hope this newsletter reveals a flavour of what we have all been up to this winter. I am delighted to say that many of our major construction projects from Charlottefield, Tulliemet and Glen Glack are near completion as well as the South End of the castle. We are a year in to our 2022-2025 Forward plan which is available on the website for all to see and we are making good progress in the transformation of the in-hand farms to being regenerative, as well as becoming Living Wage accredited employers across the estate.

Behind the scenes we have had a big software restructuring of our archives and collection systems which we hope places us in a strong position for the future. Last year our tourism business really had to dig deep with the nationwide staffing crisis and whilst the labour market remains a hard place to operate, the castle and caravan park teams have done brilliantly to recruit a really upbeat and talented team. In particular, there are lots of new faces in the restaurant as this is our first year for many moons where we have taken the catering in-house. I am sampling everything and it's delicious.

This issue's centrefold spread celebrates the amazing work that Mum and Jim the gardener have been doing for many years in Hercules Garden and we are all very proud to announce that we have been shortlisted for the Historic Houses Garden of the Year award.

Best Regards,  
Bertie Troughton  
*Resident Trustee*

## Staff News

### New Starts

Debs Morgan - Lodges Manager  
Fay Symington - Restaurant Cook  
Ffion Wyn Jones - Horse Trials Assistant  
Yvonne & Graeme Hunter - Tulliemet Housekeeper & Caretaker

Robin Douglas - Reception Supervisor  
Emma Haley - Castle Operations Manager (maternity cover)  
Maddie Pullan - Horse Trials Assistant

We have also welcomed many returning and new seasonal staff to the castle & caravan park.

Atholl Estates have said goodbye to several of our team, who have moved on to new opportunities, and we wish them all the best and thank them for their hard work over their time with us.

### Deaths, marriages & births

We were saddened to hear about the deaths of:

Bobby Dow, wife of Morris Dow, Gamekeeper - 14th January 2023

Peem Gray, previous Atholl Highlander - 14th April 2023

The new team learning about Blair Castle on another successful staff induction day.



## A visit to Binn Skips

In January a group from the estate visited Binn Skips facility in Glenfarg. Arguably most of us are guilty of putting our rubbish or recycling in the bin and not thinking about what happens next so it was fascinating to see the processes involved at the Binn Ecopark. The estate produces 85 tonnes of waste each year and so it is key to firstly try and reduce that volume and secondly deal with any waste in a responsible, sustainable manner.

## Volunteering on the Estate

Regular monthly volunteering sessions continue on the estate with the group tackling invasive species removal, path work and wildlife monitoring. If you are interested in taking part as a volunteer, please contact [julia@atholl-estates.co.uk](mailto:julia@atholl-estates.co.uk)

## Agri-environment scheme

During 2022, Balanloan Home Farm applied for the next round of funding for Agri-Environment Climate Scheme and in early 2023, received the news that it had been successful in its application. It was one of the biggest applications in Scotland on scale, and will see the creation of over 3800 metres of native hedgerows, formation of wader scrapes and wetlands, as well as promote areas for wild bird cover for winter feed. This work will be carried out in the Summer / Autumn of this year, and will add to the previous schemes hedgerow creation meaning in the past six years we have created over 8000 metres of new hedgerow.

## New kitchens in our Highland Lodges

Throughout the winter we have invested in repairs and upgrades to our Highland Lodges, with our maintenance team installing new kitchens into Old Blair & Forest Lodge.



## Pitch upgrades at the caravan park

As part of a planned upgrade, previous tent pitches 1-16 have now been changed to 14 large hard standing fully serviced pitches. This is to keep up with demand for hard standing touring pitches across the Park. We are also experimenting with astroturf in a couple of areas where the grass pitches become unusable after adverse weather.

## Nativity at the castle

In December, we welcomed the local primary school up to perform their annual nativity play in the ballroom. The festive occasion was well attended by locals, parents and even staff who enjoyed the dazzling performance.

## Atholl Estates Catering

As mentioned in the introduction, we have brought our catering offering back in-house. With talented cook, Fay, at the helm, the castle restaurant is now open 7 days a week serving a selection of soup, sandwiches and freshly baked goods. The Shielling hut at the caravan park is now open every weekend too, serving filled morning rolls and hot drinks to our residents - a popular offering on wet, cold mornings.



## Fans & Flirtation - A secret language

Made popular by Queen Victoria, the fan was seen as an essential accessory for the Victorian lady. A fan acted not only as a way of cooling a lady down but became part of a secret language with over forty-one different meanings. The way a lady held and moved her fan conveyed her feelings towards those around her without her uttering a single word.

For example, drawing the fan across your forehead meant that someone was watching you and your admirer! Other messages included drawing the fan through your hand, indicating that you hated the person with whom you were conversing, whereas sliding or pressing the fan against your cheek signalled that you loved them. Look out for our wonderful fan exhibition in the castle. It gives a glimpse in the collection of fans owned by the previous Duchesses of Atholl and their daughters.

## Food & Drink Fair

On the 7th and 8th of April we held our first food and drink fair at Blair Castle. More than 20 Scottish vendors attended to showcase some amazing produce over the two days. On Saturday we paired the fair with Easter activities including egg decorating and rolling, and an Easter egg hunt in Hercules Garden. We look forward to hosting more events like this in the future.



News from  
The Castle



## Front Drive - Lime Tree Avenue

The magnificent front drive avenue provides an impressive first impression of the castle and grounds after passing through the main gateway. The avenue was planted in two sections, the Northern section closest to the castle was planted in 1740, so are 283 years old. The southern section was planted in 1844. In total there are 179 Common Lime (*Tilia x europaea*).

Due to the age of these trees, they are starting to lose vigour and some have signs of fungi and decay. This has meant some have been flagged for removal or reduction due to the risk of them falling in high winds. It became evident that unless action was taken the whole avenue was liable to be lost or significantly depleted over the next few years.

After a lot of discussions, it was decided to crown reduce the oldest section. This entailed highly skilled arborists climbing the trees and cutting back the crown of the trees to make them all a uniform age, to promote growth and to reduce sail area. The work took place over a number of weeks, and meant the front drive had to be closed for the duration. The arborists made a fantastic job of reducing the tree size whilst retaining the shape of the crown, so unless one looks expressly for the work, it is not readily noticeable. All work was carried out by arborists using ropes, harness and chainsaws. Around 100 ton of material was removed from the trees which will be sold for biomass chip.

This work will extend the lives of the trees for around 20 – 30 years, during which time we will be growing on our own Lime trees from seed, so that when the time comes to remove the original trees, we have replacements ready to plant that will already be a reasonable size. It is planned to carry out similar work on the southern end of the avenue next year.



## Highland Cows return to Atholl

Atholl Estates started its Highland Cattle herd in the mid 1800's with animals bought from the well-known and respected breeders at Taymouth. The fold normally consisted of 50 animals. From the 1880's not only were Highland cattle a common sight on the estate but they were also shown at agricultural shows throughout Scotland with great success. The most celebrated bull who won a huge number of medals and cups was Calum Riabhach of Athole 82. In 1884 at the Centenary Show of the Highland Agricultural Society, he won West Highland Best of Breed beating his son into second place. A cow worth particular mention was Rosie III 34 a beautiful animal, described as 'a red of large, deep, square frame, a fine head with horn of perfect quality' by judges who bred many good quality calves. Sadly, the Atholl fold was dispersed in the late 1930's and these bloodlines were lost. However, it is so exciting to now have two little Highland calves born on the estate and to re-introduce the Atholl fold. Thank you to Highland Cattle Society.

## Bees on Atholl

Bees are much loved on the estate from the hives on the hill that produce honey which is sold in the gift shop to being a vital part of nature's bigger story of pollination. To encourage pollinators such as our bees, we aim to create more areas of wild flowers and this in turn should have a positive effect on biodiversity. Julia Duncan, Senior Estate Ranger, has also started regular surveys of bumblebees and this too should provide information on how our biodiversity improves as time goes on.

The estate is home to a rare species of bee – the Mountain Mason Bee – which is found in upland areas. It is most likely under recorded and has only been found in a handful of places in the Eastern Highlands.



## Historic Houses Garden of the Year – Shortlisted



Blair Castle and Gardens have for many years been a member and supporter of Historic Houses and we are delighted that we have been shortlisted for their prestigious Garden Of The Year prize. This is a huge triumph for the garden team that has been led by Sarah Troughton the Senior Trustee and Head Gardener, Jim Hodge.

Hercules Garden was created by the 2nd Duke of Atholl in the mid-eighteenth century, by 1965 it had fallen into disrepair and had become a bog filled with Christmas trees. It was brought back to life from 1990, using mainly volunteers under the supervision of professionals.

The 9.5 acre walled garden is true to the basic layout of its original Georgian design with more modern planting. It tells the story of how life over the last 270 years has evolved, the 2nd Dukes love of chinoiserie and statuary, the local passion for curling, the Victorian Folly designed by the 6th Duchess' companion and restored ponds with a duck and swan hut.

At 500 ft. above sea level in Highland Perthshire, the plants have to be chosen carefully to withstand some harsh winters. Fruit trees are planted in their original positions, but more modern varieties as advised by Brogdale. It was restored without any grants or public money over the last 30 years keeping in mind the need for a practical approach governed by a tight budget.

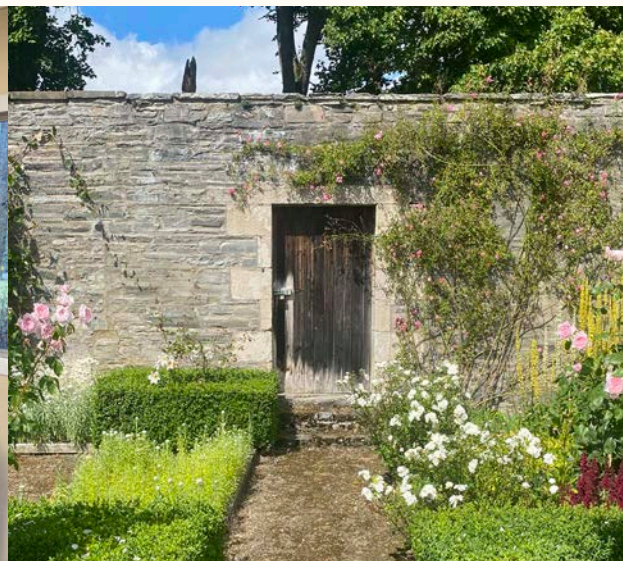
The garden provides cut flowers for the castle and fruit in the autumn and more recently apples have been used by Wasted Degrees, the local brewery, to make cider.

Hercules Garden is used for all sorts of different events, such as plays, demonstrations, open days for schools, work experience for school and college pupils, Halloween spooky walks, children's quizzes and the list goes on. It is also used for private events after opening hours, such as weddings and the estate summer barbeque.

It supports the Commemorative and Memorial Arts Trust, with eight of their works on show alongside some contemporary pieces of sculpture and stone lettering that the Blair Charitable Trust owns.

Although, like so many Scottish walled gardens, it is a five minute walk from the castle, it is part of the same story and gives visitors a sense of a wider horizon and a glimpse of the hills and forestry beyond, that Atholl Estates is also well known for.

For a gardener it is interesting to see what thrives in fairly demanding conditions, for many it is just a charming place to walk, with points of interest along the way. It is calm and peaceful with plenty of space for everyone and we hope that you have the chance to visit it this summer. To vote, please scan the QR code above.



## Apps on Atholl

The estate is always willing to embrace technology and each department increasingly uses apps. Arguably quicker and more efficient, they're also better for the environment – gone are the days of duplicate books for vehicle checks.

Apps are used to record wildlife sightings, monitor soil health, deal with receipts, identify wild flowers and birds on the farm as well as improve safety for our more remote team members. The rural team spend long periods alone working and so we use an app alongside our GPS spot trackers to check in and out at set times. Mapping apps are invaluable on an estate this vast, and we have recently been introduced to an app called Avenza to bring our QGIS maps to life – or, at least, it means we can find locations in the field with ease and accuracy. Whether that be a badger set or a septic tank, it can speed up a lot of head scratching in the woods.

And yes, we even use an app for vehicle maintenance checks. A QR code is scanned which links to the vehicle or machine to be checked. The results are then immediately recorded. It's hard to imagine life without apps now.

## Butchery Course

In March, a mixed group from the Castle / Woods and Game Teams went to Pelham Organic Farm, to investigate how to add value to our own meats, by attending a craft butchery course. Fallow deer shot by the woods team were broken down into the various joints, steaks and sausages were made. Following the course, an inspection was made of their charcuterie enterprise too – and it's a great way to add value to products – given the correct facilities. It was also a chance to have a brief look at their regenerative farming enterprise!

## Retail

Following on from an exciting 2022 with the transformation of the Larder, Bertie and Deborah Smeaton, Retail manager, have had a busy winter. We went on buying trips to both The Scottish Spring Trade Fair in Glasgow and The Spring Fair in Birmingham and it was great to catch up with our current suppliers but also discover new and exciting products to introduce to the shops.

In the Gift Shop we focused on our toy offering, changing our products away from plastic to lovely new eco and wooden toys. We have created a gardening and foraging section full of lovely gift items from secateurs to mushroom brushes too.

Linking with the expanded Castle Couture exhibition, we have a fan-tastic new product detailing fan etiquette with a fan to practice with. It is already proving very popular with our visitors and a lovely memento of our exhibition.

This year we have moved back to a higher staffing level and are happy to announce two new faces to join Joy and Lynne in the Gift Shop; Amanda Henderson who was in our Ticketing Team last year and Margie Bradshaw from Rannoch. As always, a lovely warm welcome will be waiting for you with the ladies able to help with any product suggestions needed.

At the Caravan Park, we are building on the success of the first year of the Larder. We have introduced more Scottish products like our selection of biscuits from the Island Bakery from Mull and jams and chutneys from Galloway Preserves. We have also reintroduced our newspaper delivery every morning.

Hope to see you in the shops soon.





## What are the International Eventing Classes?

Known as Concours Complet International, or CCI, international Eventing is overseen by the International Equestrian Federation (FEI). There are five levels of Event competition, rated by 'stars'. Blair Castle is run at CCI1\*Intro, CCI2\*-L, CCI3\*-L, CCI4\*-S and CCI4\*-L levels.

The CCI1\*Intro and CCI2\*-L cater for younger horses and riders entering some of their first international events. The dressage tests are simpler, and the jumping phases are shorter and lower, at 1.05m and 1.10m respectively. The CCI3\*-L, at 1.15m is for Intermediate combinations, whilst the 1.20m CCI4\*-L and CCI4\*-S attract experienced riders with Advanced horses competing at the top of the sport, and who may go on to greater international success at CCI5\*-L and Championship events.

The Olympic Games and FEI World Equestrian Games exist in their own special category, where dressage and show jumping is at the CCI5\*-L level, while cross-country is at the CCI4\*-L level of difficulty. This ensures that countries with developing teams can still safely compete.

The -S and -L designations divide the levels into Short and Long formats. Long formats are known as three-day events and the order of the competition is always dressage, followed by cross country and finally show jumping. International one-day events are the Short format, abbreviated to CCI-S, or CCI-Intro in the case of the 1\*. The cross-country courses for Short format classes are shorter than the equivalent Long class. In a CCI-S, the dressage always takes place as the first phase but events have the choice to run the show jumping before or after the cross country. At Blair, the show jumping for both the CCI4\*-S and CCI1\*Intro takes place before the cross country, giving an exciting finish out on course!

## The re-brand of the Horse Trials

The horse trials has a brand new name and logo for 2023! We will now be known as Defender Blair Castle International Horse Trials and the iconic Land Rover oval has been replaced by the Defender logo. This is part of Jaguar Land Rover's companywide strategy which will see almost all of their existing sponsorships be reallocated to one of their four prestige marques, Jaguar, Range Rover, Discovery and Defender. Rugby and Equestrian sport will now come under the Defender marque. Although you won't see the Land Rover oval on any of the branding at the event, the rest of the range will be on display at the horse trials alongside Defender. Land Rover are also working with the Land Rover Experience at Dunkeld to reinstate the off-road area within the woods at the event, so that visitors can test out what the vehicles can do.

We also have some insider tips for any Land Rover (not just Defender) owners visiting the horse trials. There is a designated forward parking area in each car park, to reduce the walk into the event. Also, presenting your Land Rover key at the Land Rover Café adjacent to their trade stand will allow you access to free light refreshments.





## Peatland Restoration

Peatland restoration work on Clunes beat has been ongoing since October 2021. The restoration work consisted of c.80km of drain damming using wave damming and zipping (grip reprofiling) techniques. This extensive work that has been carried out and the future peatland restoration work planned has resulted in Atholl Estates being nominated for the Historic Houses sustainability award.

CNPA are now working with us on a trial restoration project, treating areas of gully restoration, gully erosion, and micro-erosion areas whilst monitoring the impacts of higher deer numbers on the restoration outcome.

The peatland being restored comprises of blanket bog habitat overlying deep peat, and shallower areas of wet heath and acid grassland. The peatland was drained predominantly in the 1960s under government encouragement to dry it out for better grazing. The complex network of drainage channels have degraded the blanket bog, reducing sphagnum mosses and other bog specialist plants and increasing grasses and heather. There are areas of eroded peatland at both sites, including areas of micro-erosion, and larger gullies.

The aim of the restoration activity is to restore natural flow pathways and to raise water levels across the site ("re-wetting"), restoring a more natural water table and optimum conditions for blanket bog plant species to thrive, thereby preventing further degradation. This could reduce carbon emissions and eventually actively store carbon, improve water quality, prevent flooding downstream and enhance biodiversity.



## Game department

The last six months have been busy for the Game team, with hind culls being completed over a challenging season. Gavin who had been at Forest Lodge, has moved to Kindrochet and is now Senior Keeper for the Bruar, Clunes and Dalnamein beats. With Dominic leaving the estate, we have decided to operate with a seasonal stag stalker at Bruar for this year, whilst we consider future deer numbers at this end, and Derek Laubscher is going to be undertaking the stag season at Bruar. This has left an opportunity on the Forest Lodge end of the estate – and we are currently recruiting for this position.

Muirburn has been going on after the hind season, with weather conditions allowing for a substantial number of fires being burnt. There is early optimism that grouse numbers look encouraging at Forest Lodge (but still a long way to go before August), whilst at the other end of the estate they are looking a lot less encouraging – fingers crossed for some decent weather to help all our ground nesting birds.

## Adapting cattle & the regenerative journey

Three years ago, the idea of running a regenerative, essentially organic farm with lower chemical use and reduced inputs was not thought about at Blair, but following the learnings and success at Tulliemet we decided to speed up the journey at Blair and in the autumn of 2022 we decided to go full steam ahead into regenerative farming. Along with Tulliemet, the Blair Home Farm regenerative project will be one of the largest in the UK.

The important cultural heritage of the Scottish blackface flock has been retained, with the movement of these from Glen Tilt into the more productive parks. The aim is to have a self-sustaining flock of sheep that produce a quality product, on minimal inputs with lambs all finished off grass.

Our cattle herd at Blair has historically been based on a mixture of breeds, but over the previous five years we gradually progressed to more Aberdeen Angus terminal sires and we are accelerating that by replacing more bulls with Aberdeen Angus, whilst retaining more of our own replacement heifers of the smaller hardier type, to produce a functional, productive, but culturally appropriate commercial Aberdeen Angus cattle herd. We are focusing on animal health including fertility, reduced veterinary interventions, and daily live weight gains and reducing the housing periods and amount of forage conserved.

As well as planting many more miles of hedgerows and implementing detailed grazing plans (which detail numbers of livestock in which fields for set numbers of days), there is also much more recording of biodiversity and soil health information. It is an exciting journey to be on, not only for the farm but for the estate as a whole.



## Glen Glack

An update on the Glen Glack cabins near Dunkeld from Claire Spencer Churchill.

We are now on the final push to get Glen Glack finished and ready to welcome guests in July. The last few weeks have been a logistical juggling act with power and wifi connections taking place, windows and doors being installed, Mike Bryan finishing the landscaping and Alex Butter starting to plant the trees and turf. Malcom continues to work closely with the team on site to ensure the first impressions exceed expectations.

The housekeeping hub is now installed and fitted out to ensure a quick turnaround of the cabins during peak season and a great golf buggy has been sourced to make moving between cabins easier for those on the ground.

A late addition to our one-bedroom cabin, Juniper, is a wood fired outdoor bath. Along with the 'switch off wifi' button installed in all cabins this is because we really hope those looking to escape the trappings of everyday life can do so in the wilderness and comfort of Glen Glack.

A continued and huge thanks to everyone involved in pulling of this almighty project!

## Highland Ponies

2023 marks the centenary year of the Highland Pony Society who are celebrating 100 years of managing and protecting the standard of this wonderful native breed. Queen Elizabeth II was patron of the society and Highland ponies were her particular favourite. Originally bred in Scotland to cultivate the land on crofts, families would then use them as transport to church. Having such a calm and sensible nature, along with an immense strength, their abilities allow them to be ridden, driven, to jump, work the hill and even drag timber from the forest.

On Atholl Estates, Highland ponies or garrons are the traditional way to bring deer off the hill during stalking and it requires skill and patience to train the ponies to carry out this demanding job. Susan Laing trains our Highland ponies for the hill which takes many years.

Atholl Highland ponies are bred from generations of Atholl ponies and the first records in the archives go back to the 1860s. The aim now is to use outbred stallions with homebred mares to produce the working stock and also produce Atholl stallions. The present stallion is "Glencoe", a half-brother to Tilt from the Croila line. If any ponies are not sturdy or calm enough to make the grade on the hill they can be sold as ordinary riding ponies. There is limited time for showing but to keep the breed in the public eye the estate takes the ponies to the Aberfeldy Show, Scone Game Fair and Blair Horse Trials. Over the years many cups and medals have been won, some of which are on show in the castle. With the dedication to both training and breeding the Highland ponies have a strong future on Atholl. This year to mark the centenary of the Highland Pony Society we have a mini exhibition in the Castle Banvie Hall.



## Dunkeld Vet

The opening of The Dunkeld Vet sees the return of an independent veterinary practice to Highland Perthshire. The new practice has been opened by Nicole Robertson, who moved to the area as a child and is now raising her young family here with her husband alongside running The Dunkeld Vet.

The Dunkeld Vet can be found in the Cally Industrial Estate, less than half a mile from the centre of Dunkeld; a central location for pet owners in Perthshire, with ample parking. The practice offers consultations and surgery for pets, including exotics, and features two consulting rooms, a dedicated theatre space, separate cat and dog wards and a diagnostic imaging room. The team consists of five members of staff, including the vets Nicole and Jim.

They are currently still accepting new clients and welcome people visiting the area in need of veterinary care. They can be contacted on 01350 729270.

