

Fossil Grove: Room for cautious optimism

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The famous Fossil Grove in Glasgow's Victoria Park is again a cause of concern. The *in situ* stumps of 11 fossil trees are some of the earliest examples of geoconservation, especially one involving the preservation of a geological site within a building.

The trees were discovered in 1887 and the highly foresightful local authority deemed that they should be preserved. They were carefully excavated and the building displaying them was opened in 1890. Fossil Grove was designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in 1954 and became a Regionally Important Geological Site (RIGS) in 2007. It is internationally important in providing a rare glimpse into a Lower Carboniferous forest and for 126 years it has played a very popular role in displaying aspects of geology to the wider public. The past decade has been a rollercoaster of pessimism and optimism about the future of this important and, especially to many Glaswegians, much loved site.

The story so far

Concerns about public access to Fossil Grove were first raised with Glasgow City Council in 2007 following rumours of closure when it became the responsibility of the Council's Land and Environmental Services department (LES) rather than the museums service, which had been incorporated in the new Culture & Sport Glasgow (see *Earth Heritage* 29).

As a result of discussions between interested bodies (Strathclyde RIGS Group, the Geological Society of Glasgow, Scottish Natural Heritage [SNH] and the museums service and LES), seasonal opening of Fossil Grove was secured, pressing maintenance matters were dealt with and, eventually, the dormant Fossil Grove Trust was revived in 2010.

The Trust began addressing the future development of Fossil Grove and, along with Glasgow City Council, by 2014 had arrived at proposals which were intended to lead to a bid for Heritage Lottery funding to replace the present, deteriorating, building with a new structure. This would ensure the conservation of the site and provide a greatly enhanced visitor and educational experience (see *Earth Heritage* 42). Unfortunately, progress on the bid stalled because no organisation was prepared to take on the eventual management of Fossil Grove, with all its financial implications.

Since then, staffing and opportunities for visitor access have been progressively reduced; lighting and other internal features have degenerated; and the condition of the building and its surroundings have worsened, resulting in a serious threat to the fossils. The findings of an interim assessment by SNH as part of their programme of Site Condition Monitoring of SSSI in December 2015 were that the fossils were deteriorating and that the site may be in unfavourable condition.

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Dark areas on the floor are
water stains, including water
that has condensed and
dripped from metal
infrastructure.



One of the fossil tree stumps
with ponding of water (dark
areas) and showing the effects
of successive wetting and
drying (white patches of
efflorescent salts on the lower
part of the roots).



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Sadly, until very recently the condition of the site continued to decline. This is despite a formal petition being made by Strathclyde Geoconservation Group to Glasgow City Council early in 2016. This attracted press and internet coverage and led to a recommendation from the petitions committee that LES should continue to work with stakeholders 'to safeguard the site in the short term and to explore long-term solutions'.

A party from Strathclyde Geoconservation Group worked to clear debris beside the building that had probably contributed to the ingress of water, and alarm bells on the state of Fossil Grove were rung in the local community. The geological world was also alerted by articles in the Palaeontological Association and Geological Society of Glasgow newsletters. Feedback from visitors was commonly that they were impressed by the fossils but saddened by the building.

Not all doom and gloom

Positive developments over the past year are bearing fruit. The Fossil Grove Trust has been revitalised and is much more proactive in dealing with the Council to seek a long-term plan for the grove. A Fossil Grove Advisory Group has been established to help provide scientific, conservation and curatorial advice to the Trust. The Council has recently undertaken some remedial work to the building. This included thoroughly clearing debris from the side to help reduce water ingress. As with other relatively straightforward actions such as attention to the gutters, this will need to be done as part of regular maintenance.

Improvements to the drainage are planned following a CCTV survey and there are plans afoot to monitor and regulate the temperature and humidity of the building. Detailed assessment of the efflorescence on the surface of the fossil trees will inform future conservation. All these actions are urgent and essential to the preservation of the fossil trees.

As for the longer term, the Fossil Grove Trust is exploring possible business models to ensure a sustainable future for the site, including taking it out of the control of the Council.

Fossil Grove may well exemplify the wider problem of SSSI having low priority to cash-strapped local authorities. In many ways this is understandable – council budgets are limited and cases can be made for many things to be given priority. Nonetheless, there are statutory responsibilities for the care and maintenance of these scientifically important sites. Fossil Grove is something to be cherished both from a geological and geoconservation point of view and as part of Glasgow's cultural heritage. It has enormous potential as somewhere to promote an understanding of geoscience to the wider public, nationally and as an international visitor destination. Maybe, just maybe, there are signs that this potential may eventually be realised. There may be light through the [fossil] trees. *Watch this space!*



The south side of the Fossil Grove building showing the accumulation of soil and plant debris against the wall. Left to accumulate for years, this material has probably aided ingress of water through the building into the grove.

The south wall of Fossil Grove during the clear-up of soil and leaf mould by Strathclyde Geoconservation Group. The build-up of material against the wall was a probable cause of the ingress of water into the building. Photo by Margaret Greene, Strathclyde Geoconservation Group

