

Bennachie Landscapes Project

Introduction

The Bennachie Landscapes Project commenced in 2012, and is a joint venture between the Bailies of Bennachie and the University of Aberdeen. It is partly funded by an Arts and Humanities Research Council, Connected Communities: Community Heritage Grant.



Bennachie from Monymusk

For those more distant readers who may not be aware of the local topography, the Bennachie hillside is a dramatic backdrop in the Aberdeenshire countryside and, at 1733 feet at the highest point, is visible across much of the county. Locally we know when winter is around the corner when snow covers the higher slopes and in summer it is regularly traversed by individuals and families, but how many of us stop to think of how the community in the past both viewed and may have used the hill?

The Project focuses on the past relationship which the local community had with the hillside. Previous research has revealed various periods of occupation from a Pictish power centre in approximately the 4th century AD, in the shape of the hillfort on the Mither Tap, to a nineteenth century crofting community on the lower slopes. Surprisingly, although much has been written and deliberated about the hill, little archaeological and historical research has been undertaken and the Project aims to put the historical communities into their landscape context.

Background

The aggressive Highland Clearances generally refer to the population clearances which affected mainly the north and western Scotland. However the north-east of Scotland also suffered from the introduction of large scale farming and a number of local authors of the so-called Statistical Accounts in the 1790s and 1840s refer to the changes which were occurring in their parishes. The manufacturing industry was also taking great strides in the cities, alluring agricultural workers with wages sometimes twice as much as they had formerly made working on the farm. There may have been an element in some areas of which came first the large scale farming or the manufacturing industry taking farmhands away from the farms causing the farmers to reconsider their farming methods.

As farmers devised new farming strategies, often old accommodation, previously housing farmhands and their families, was either taken down or adapted for housing animals or farm supplies. This resulted in a lack of suitable accommodation for married farmhands which, in turn, led to a dramatic rise in the number of illegitimate births in the north-east of Scotland. In the *Aberdeen Journal* in 1860 it was acknowledged that the number of houses had to be multiplied, and existing homes improved, for farm workers.

Up to about 1849 the Bennachie hillside was regarded as a Free, or Royal, Forest; a commony on which the local inhabitants had rights of grazing for their animals, and stones, peat and wood were there for the taking, for providing fuel for their fires and for

building dwelling houses, barns, and byres. In 1844 an action was commenced to divide the land between the lairds whose estates adjoined the hillside, but it was to be fifteen years before the Court finally came to a conclusion, to the benefit of the lairds, and the detriment of the general public. Until the division local inhabitants could go upon the hillside; they could cut turf upon it; they could build a house upon it; the citizens of Aberdeen could go out upon holidays and picnic upon it, but after the division in 1859 all trespassers were under the threat of prosecution.

The Commonty

It is suggested in an article about the Commonty in the *Scots Magazine* (Jan. 1958) that in 1801 the villagers of Chapel of Garioch saw a lone figure climb the south-east slope of Bennachie with pick and spade on his shoulder and proceed to “rive in a piece o’ grun” and that those villagers were witnessing the beginning of the colony of squatters who were to have a fascinating history lasting over a century. If the date is correct, this may have related to the start of the quarrying on the hillside rather than being connected to the families who established themselves on the commonty.

By the 1841 census we know that four families were living on the commonty - James Findlater, wife Ann Ross and children Sarah and Robert; Francis Cooper, wife Isobel Smith and children William and John; Arthur Gardiner and wife Gilchrist Grant, two daughters Margaret and Jean and a child Isobel Ragg; and Alexander Littlejohn, wife Elizabeth Kesson and six of their children, Alexander, Sarah, Hugh, James, David and Mary.

In addition there was also another family living at the Quarry of Benochie, William Jamieson and wife Mary Snowie (or Snoy), with two of their daughters, Anne and Margaret, and possibly a grandchild William, aged 5. William senior was known as the “*Heedie Crow o’ Bennachie*” and “*was married, or rather overtaken, by Mary Snowie*”. In Alexander Inkson McConnochie’s book *Bennachie*, William Jamieson is described as one of the queerest, and at the same time, undesirable characters; a sort of social outcast. He had lived in the neighbourhood for years, if not his whole life, and eventually came across Mary Snowie who had set her cap at him. Mary’s personal appearance was slightly lacking and when she led William to believe that there was a strong reason why they should be married forthwith, he took to his heels, swearing that he would “traivel tae unken tae pairts” even if he had to go as far as Buchan (Peterhead area). In his panicked bid for freedom, William, however, must have become disorientated and he ended up in Montrose where he claimed a crow sitting on a fence told him to turn back or he would regret his actions. He turned back and was duly married, later to find that Mary had deceived him, but they set up home together in the “English” Quarry Smiddy.

The Old Parish Records show that the first recorded birth or baptism on Bennachie occurred in 1838:

Cooper – *Francis Cooper, Hill of Benochie, had a Son born of his wife, Isabel Smith, on the 5th of January 1838, baptized on the 2d of April and named Francis in the presence of Alexander Petrie in Burntknows and Alexander Mitchell in Blinhillock.*

This was the second child born to Francis and Isabel. Their first son William is recorded in the baptism register for Chapel of Garioch in 1836 when the couple lived at Backhill of Whitecross.

Similarly the second birth or baptism recorded on the hillside, also in 1838 was:

Littlejohn – *Alexander Littlejohn in Hill of Benochie had a Son born of his wife Elizabeth Kesson on the 24th of August 1838, baptized on the 9th of September and named David, in the presence of Robert Hunter in Whitewell & William Selby in Cummingston.*

David was known to be the couple's at least eighth child. The child prior to David, James, was also born in 1836, when Alexander and Elizabeth lived at Kethney, Chapel of Garioch.

The *Scots Magazine* article (Jan. 1958) on the Colony on Bennachie, states that, "*with stones for the walls of his house, divots for the roof and peat all around for his hearth, the first squatter and his wife settled on the left bank of the Clachie Burn, some seven hundred feet from the base. Twenty-five years later, this squatter's daughter married a mason, by name John Esson, and when their first born son was five, the family squatted on the Hill beside the father-in-law.*"

This appears to suggest that the first squatters on the hillside were James Findlater and Ann Ross, whose daughter, Sarah, later married John Esson in 1847. The timescale inferred by the *Scots Magazine* suggests that the first squatter came to the hillside twenty-five years previous, approximately 1822, but at the time of the birth of James and Ann's last child, Robert, in 1830, the couple were still living at Tullos. The family moved to the hillside sometime between Robert's birth in 1830 and the 1841 census.

Also incorrectly stated is the time of John Esson and Sarah Findlater's move to the hillside. Their first born son, John, was born on the Commonty in 1848 and it looks probable that the couple started their marriage the year before living together on Bennachie. The start of the occupation on the Commonty would seem likely therefore to have occurred approximately mid to late 1830s.

On the borders of the parishes of Chapel of Garioch and Oyne, when the Poor Law (Scotland) Act 1845 came into force, neither parish wanted to accept responsibility for the colonists as it was deemed likely that they would require more assistance than they would ever contribute. Although the commonty appears on the 1841 and 1851 Chapel of Garioch censuses, eventually Oyne had to accept the colonists as being within their boundary and the subsequent census returns appear under Oyne.

Most of the colonists were day-labourers. Some were dry-stane dykers or stonemasons who travelled some distance to their work whatever the weather. They were hardworking, and had to eke out an income by running the crofts they built on the hillside in their spare time. Their cattle and sheep grazed on the hillside – one of the colonists is stated to have had a flock of 400 sheep. The colonists bore no resemblance to the nomadic tinker or hawker fraternity travelling around northern Scotland at the time. The majority of the colonists came from the area although we have not, so far, discovered their reasons for moving to the hillside, however there is a strong possibility that the changes in farming or lack of suitable accommodation played some part in their decision.

From the five families on the 1841 census, by 1851 the community had increased to ten families. In 1859 it is believed that twelve families were living there, by 1861 this had reduced to ten, and in 1871 there were nine households. Many of these were the same

names living continually on the hillside for more than twenty years. Sarah Findlater appears on the 1841 census living with her parents James and Ann. She married in 1847, possibly in her parents' house on the hillside, and appears on the 1851 census with husband John Esson and three of their family. She died in the croft at Boghead of Tullos, on Bennachie in 1880. Husband John Esson died in 1890 in the same croft.

As well as John and Sarah Esson, there was William Esson and wife Elizabeth Gardiner (Gardner) living on the commonty. William and John were witnesses at the baptisms of each other's children and it is believed that they were probably brothers. William and Elizabeth only appear living on Bennachie with their family on the 1851 census. Between 1856 and 1859 the family emigrated to Lincoln, Ontario, and appear on the Canadian census for 1871, where another four children have been added to the household. The 1871 was the first national census in Canada, although a partial census had been carried out in 1861 in some areas, however no trace was found of William and Elizabeth in the available Canadian records for 1861. Canadian death records show that a William Esson, age 65, born in Aberdeen, Scotland died in 1877, whilst an Elizabeth Esson, aged 55, died in 1878. Unfortunately the death records do not provide spouse's or parents' details to confirm their identities, however as neither are living with surviving children on the 1881 census, it looks likely that these are the correct couple.

Other colonists included an unnamed and, so far, unidentified woman from Morayshire, and the Beverleys, one of whom, on the minister's refusal, baptised his own grandson and gave him a "gweed strong name" of Samson Eesic (Isaac). There was also John McDonald and his daughter Margaret. John originated from Farr, Sutherlandshire, and on his death in his croft at Hillside, was stated by his daughter as being the son of Hugh McDonald, Crofter, and Betty McKay. After John's death, Margaret continued living in the croft and is found on the 1871 census living there with her son John Scott. Margaret died in 1878, in Aberdeen, when her mother was listed as Margaret Daniel, wife of James Ogg, paper worker. Apart from the listing of son John on the 1871 census we have been unable to trace any record or further mention for him.

Also living on the commonty were the following families:

Mary Emslie and her two children, Margaret Robb, and Robert Eddison (Addison), together with two lodgers, Alexander (Sandy) Lindsay, fish dealer, from Forfar, and his wife Mary Clark from Chapel of Garioch.

John Christie, wife Mary Reid and family George, Arthur, Mary and Charles Taggart.

John Garden and Jean (Jane) Brebner (Bremner) and family Margaret, John, William, James, Jean, and Elspet.

James Mitchell and Sarah Littlejohn and family Elisabeth, James, Helen and William.

Hugh Littlejohn and Ann Florence with their family Elizabeth Catherine, James Florance, and Jane Ann.

Finally as the lairds divided up the hillside, the colonists found themselves having to sign leases and paying rent for the houses which they themselves had built. Others moved off the hillside of their own accord, while some, such as Hugh Littlejohn and his family, in 1878, were eventually forcibly evicted. There is a report of one aged crofter being carried out on his bed and deposited amongst the heather.

In May 1939 the last of the colonists, George Esson, son of John Esson and Sarah Findlater, and grandson of James Findlater and Ann Ross, one of the original colonist

families, died at his croft at Boghead of Tullos. George had been born on the hillside in 1864 and apart from a short period in the United States, had lived his whole life on Bennachie. Like many of his commonty predecessors, George is interred in Chapel of Garioch churchyard where the minister, Rev. N.L.A. Campbell had a memorial stone raised to his memory which reads: "*George Esson, descended from the first, and himself the last of the colonists of Bennachie.*"

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Remains of one of the houses

The names of the colonists mentioned above are only some of the 126 people who we know so far lived on the hillside at some time during the nineteenth century. Today the remains of some of the crofts, such as Boghead of Tullos (Essons), Shepherd's Lodge (Littlejohns) and Burnside (Findlaters) can still be found on the hillside. As well as undertaking archival research on the Bennachie Colonists, in 2012 and 2013 the Bennachie Landscapes Project, in conjunction with the Bailies of Bennachie, carried out extensive archaeological excavations of the remains of the crofts at Shepherd's Lodge and Hillside. At the time of writing, at the start of 2014, we envisage a static exhibition of some of the finds and our research in the Bennachie Centre and also possibly a mobile short duration exhibition travelling around some local areas. If you are interested in finding out more about either of the exhibitions, or the Bennachie Landscapes Project, then check out the Bailies website detailed below. We would also welcome information on the colonists and if these were your ancestors, or you hold information on any of them, please do not hesitate to contact either myself or the Project - our contact details are available via the Bailies website.

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Suggested further reading:

Fagen, Jennifer (2011), *The Bennachie Colony Project*. Bailies of Bennachie, Huntly. (A good introduction for understanding the commonty, but with omissions/discrepancies.)

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www.abdn.ac.uk/archaeology/research/projects/the-bennachie-landscape-projec/