

WHO WERE THE 'BENNACHIE COLONISTS'?

In the late 18th and early 19th century, rural society was changing. Landowners were developing their estates and required greater income from their land to achieve this. They were building stone dykes, fences and hedges to enclose fields and were keen to drain and improve uncultivated ground.

These 'improvements' eventually resulted in the demise of the former communal farming systems and created the countryside we see today. The changes caused the scattering of much of the rural population. Many ended up emigrating or moving to towns and cities.

In the early part of the 19th-century the first of the Bennachie 'Colonists' arrived. Others soon followed, generally from the surrounding area.

For displaced country folk, Bennachie was an attractive place to settle as it was a 'Commonty' in the shared ownership of local estates, and thus not controlled by any one landowner. Consequently, Colonists were not required to sign leases or pay rent. They were able to reclaim rough uncultivated land on the hillside and build simple two-roomed cottages of stone and clay, roofed with rough timbers and heather thatch, from materials found on the hill.

WHAT WAS LIFE LIKE ON THE COLONY?

Life was hard but probably preferable to becoming a factory worker in the towns or a labourer on one of the newly-'improved' farms, where married accommodation was seldom available and single men were housed in simple bothies. As crofters the 'Colonists' tended crops, hens, sheep, cattle, and honey-bees. They combined this with working at trades such as quarrying, drystone dyking, stonemasonry, ditching, thatching and fish-selling. The women would help their men as well as raising the children and carrying on a cottage trade, such as knitting stockings or taking in laundry.

Food was simple but sustaining, although somewhat dull. Brose, a form of porridge, would have featured most days, along with seasonal vegetables and berries from the 'kailyard' or kitchen garden. Meat would have been a luxury but home-produced dairy products and eggs would have been available. No doubt the Bennachie 'larder' would have added variety to the diet.

HOW DID IT ALL END?

In 1845 the Poor Law made landowners responsible for paupers on their estates, making it necessary to define property boundaries accurately. On Bennachie, this was achieved by a legal process known as the Division of the Commonty, which eventually took effect in 1859. Ownership of the Colony area fell to the estate of Balquhain, which in consequence added nine tenants to the rent roll.

In the years that followed, the Colony population dwindled. This was spurred by a combination of ill health, poverty, and the shift of quarry employment away from Bennachie to the developing Kemnay Quarry. By 1878 the two Littlejohn households at Shepherd's Lodge, together with Margaret McDonald at Hillside, had fallen into significant arrears of rent. The Littlejohns were "removed" (evicted) and there is strong evidence that the same fate befell Hillside. By 1881 only 5 individuals remained, John Esson and his son George at Boghead of Tullis, their housekeeper Susan Findlater, who also had her own cottage, and Alexander Porter with his wife Elizabeth. The Colony era ended with the death, in 1939, of George Esson, described as "descended from the first and himself the last of the Colonists of Bennachie."

As the people gradually left, their lands reverted to the landowner's use and were planted with trees rather than re-let. Today it is, once again, enjoyed by the many rather than just the few. The remains of the buildings and fields which can be seen along the Trail are a surviving memorial to the Colonists. Please treat them with respect and let them remain for future generations.

THE BENNACHIE COLONY APP

Download this FREE App for a tour around the digitally-reconstructed Colony settlement and its houses.

Suitable for Android and Apple operating systems.

SOME THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR ON THE COLONY TRAIL

THE 'GOWK STANE'

- does the name refer to a cuckoo or a fool?

- we may never know

SHEPHERD'S LODGE WELL

- a small well providing the water supply to the Shepherd's Lodge cottage

SHEPHERD'S LODGE KAILYARD

- a demonstration of how Shepherd's Lodge kitchen garden might have looked growing fruit during the 1800's

SHEPHERD'S LODGE FORAGING WOODLAND

- recently planted in these fields is a native 'foraging woodland'. Look out for crab apples, rowan berries, plums and more...

THE QUARRY

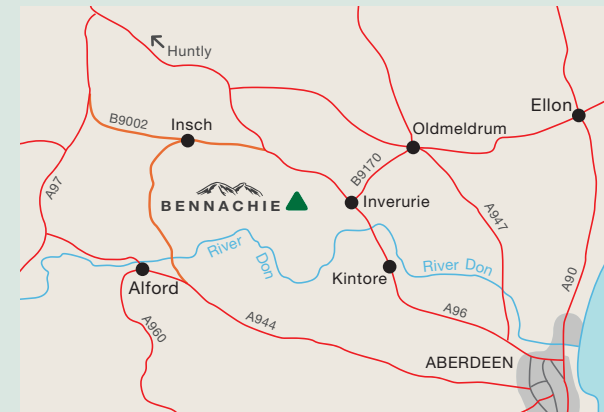
- used by the Colonists to supply building stone

THE CORN STACK BASE

- circular stone pavement used to stack corn or hay

THE 'THIEVES' MARKS'

- the local name given to the boundary stones set up by the Lairds following the division of the Commonty



Why not join the Bailies of Bennachie/Bennachie Landscapes Project and help to find out more

Look on the web site at:

www.bailiesofbennachie.co.uk

or visit our Facebook page

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The Colony Trail

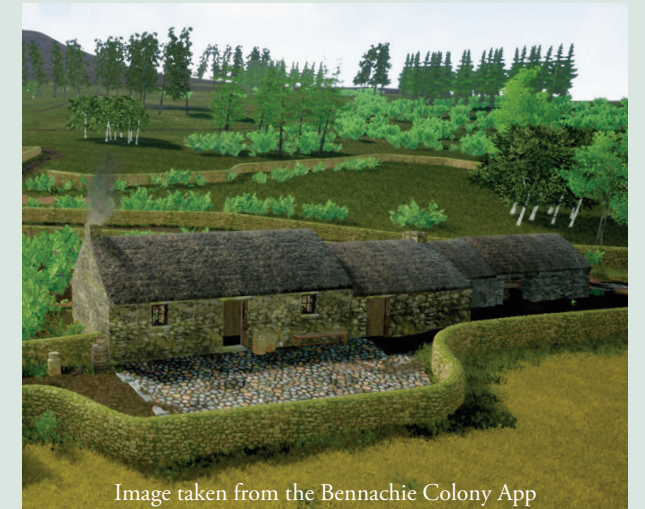


Image taken from the Bennachie Colony App

***"For the goodly mountain
yielded fuel for the fire
Stones for the dwelling house,
the barn, and the byre
Heather for roofing,
and all were gotten free
For no oppressive landlord
could swallow Bennachie!"
(Anon.)***




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The Colony Trail




Mither Tap
Hill-fort

Key:

 Visible remains of the Colonists' buildings, gardens and fields. Please treat with respect.

 Colony Trail

 Other paths

 Forest roads

 Public road

① Views of Esson's Croft

② Cairn Couttie

③ Shepherd's Lodge Well
(10m directly down from this waymarker, in the wall)

④ Quarry

⑤ Gowk Stane

⑥ Stack yard

⑦ Boundary stone

The Colony Trail is approximately 2.5 miles (4km) in length and takes about 2 hours. Some uphill walking is required.



Please follow the Colony Trail signs

Esson's Croft

Esson's Old House

Shepherd's Lodge, Kailyard & 'Foraging Woodland'

Cairn Couttie

West End

Gordon Way

Burnside

Hillside

Clachie Burn

Gordon Way

Woodend

Bennachie Centre

0 500 1000 metres

The names of these crofts have been adopted by the Bennachie Landscapes Project purely for identification purposes only and are not necessarily the original names.

Are you related to any of the following families:

Christie, Cooper, Emslie, Esson, Findlater, Gardiner, Lindsay, Littlejohn, Mitchell, McDonald or Porter?