

Book Review in Landscape History

Bennachie and the Garioch: society and ecology in the history of north-east Scotland,
Bennachie Landscape Series 4 (the Bailies of Bennachie, 2019). Edited by Colin Shepherd.
170 × 255 mm. 153 pp. 109 mostly colour illustrations. ISBN 9780957638426. Price: n.s.

This is the fourth volume produced by this excellent project which involves a local community investigating the landscape history of a small area of north-east Scotland centred on a range of hills in Aberdeenshire. This is carried out through excavation and archaeological investigation, field survey and documentary research. The range of subject matter presented here reflects the scope of the project which must rightfully be the envy of many others involved in such work. Moreover a succession of books has presented the results for all to follow and appreciate. This volume contains reports on the examination of geological sediments deposited during the Pleistocene, some of which suggest the presence of a former lake and an ice-free environment at this time.

On quite a different theme, the Bennachie plateau and its surroundings offer a significant range of habitat types which support a high number of moth species. These were caught in light traps and photographed before release to provide data about the flight seasons and life patterns of individual moth species (illustrated with some strikingly beautiful colour photographs), also suggesting how anyone interested might participate in such a project).

As part of the ongoing excavations at Druminnor Castle, now in their eighth season, a programme of geophysical survey was undertaken to help further understanding of the site and to aid future excavation strategies. This involved the use of Ground Penetrating Radar and Electrical Resistivity Tomography. Druminnor Castle was the caput of the Lordship of Forbes, in the parish of Kearn. The accuracy of eighteenth-century plans was apparently confirmed and evidence gathered about an area which remains 'off-limits' for actual excavation due to the presence of an ancient tree.

On a different social scale, a colony of squatters was established on common land in the early nineteenth century in the parishes of Garioch and Oyne. The inhabitants led a crofting life supplemented by doing skilled work on local estates. At one of the mid-nineteenth-century colony houses, Shepherds Lodge, members of the Bennachie Landscapes Project have been recreating a kitchen garden or kailyard on the site of the original garden and conducting excavations to try to identify a garden footpath indicated on a First Edition Ordnance Survey map. It seems that hard footpaths had never existed and that the 'paths' on the map had been impermanent grassy paths baulks left to access garden paths on either side, enabling these to be moved regularly to allow the soil time to recover — a form of small-scale 'fallowing'. In selecting what was to be grown in the kailyard, the volunteers had to take into consideration the fact that no-one would be permanently on-site and that the well would dry up during the summer months so that the type of crops cultivated would be limited. A decision was thus made to concentrate upon soft fruits, selected after research based on the local Aberdeenshire croft gardens of the 1800s — gooseberries, currants and raspberries. Only by growing several varieties could it be ascertained which would thrive and what soil conditions were needed; also learn of the influence of the local microclimate. A by-product of clearing and preparing the ground was the discovery of vast amounts of broken pottery and artefacts which provided a good insight into the type of crockery used at Shepherds Lodge.

Furthermore, two local granite quarries were surveyed, perhaps opened to provide stone for building the colonists' houses. However, there were enough fieldstones available from clearing the fields for this purpose and the quarried stone was probably sold by some of the colonists as a cash crop. In order to gain an idea of the use to which the quarried granite may have been put, two local houses typical of the domestic buildings found in the area were studied in some detail — a small cottage and a higher status farmhouse with farm buildings adjacent.

Equally impressive are initial studies of the historic carvings found on the granite outcrop at the top of the Mither Tap, studied by photography and drawing. These had probably been made by the stone masons and men working in the local quarries and their preservation presents something of a challenge.

Finally, study of the seventeenth-century Pittodrie Bede House at the foot of Bennachie, probably the 'hospital' built by the local Erskine family to provide care for the local 'deserving' poor — or even a place of rest for travellers in uncertain times, — which went out of use at the end of the eighteenth century, has required extensive archival research. In addition, an earlier LiDAR survey, the gathering of local knowledge from the nineteenth century OS Name Books and a 2018 excavation (the results of which are also presented here) have provided information that has been subjected to careful interpretation by the editor and set within the wider landscape setting of such hospitals at that time, apparently rooted in a pre-Reformation religious mindset which failed to survive the so called period of 'the Enlightenment'.

Again in this series, a truly impressive and beautifully illustrated volume.

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