



{Bennachie}

Bennachie (pronounced Ben-a-hee) is one of Scotland's best known mystical hills. It is a prominent landmark from many parts of Aberdeenshire and dominates the farmlands of the Garioch (pronounced Gee-ree) and Buchan.



{Bennachie Countryside}



{Bennachie Picture}

Bennachie is a batholith with a plateau at 400 metres. There are seven principal summits on the plateau, which is 7 miles east to west and 5 miles north to south. The hill supports varied fauna including heather, clubmoss, sedge, heath and both natural and planted woodland, and is home to capercaillie, deer, ptarmigan, grouse, pheasant, wildcat and birds of prey.

There is a variety of walks around and over the hill to suit all abilities. The cross country Gordon Way starts at the Bennachie Visitor Centre, and other walks start from the four main car parking areas. All incorporate toilets for the disabled and three have picnic areas. The Bailies of Bennachie organisation was set up in 1973 to preserve the amenity of the hill and to encourage public interest in it and its care. The Bailies now have more than 4500 members in 35 countries around the world, and would welcome new members who share their aims.

History and Legend

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EARLY MAN



{Stone Circle} We know little about the early inhabitants of the region such as the Beaker People - we don't know how they lived, in fact we know a lot more about their dead than about their living because every now and again the plough exposes a beaker grave in one of the fields around Bennachie. The skeleton is always in a crouched position with an ornamental pottery urn or 'beaker' which may have held food to sustain the existence around 2000 BC. Examples of such beakers are to be seen in Inverurie Museum and in the museums in Aberdeen, especially the Anthropological Museum at Marischal College.

THE BRONZE AGE

Much more permanent and obvious memorials are the recumbent stone circles of the Bronze Age people living around 2000-1000 BC. This type of monument is only found in the north-east of Scotland and the greatest density seems to be centred on the Garioch. Well preserved examples which are worthy of a visit are at Loanhead, Daviot and at Aquhorthies between Bennachie and Inverurie. They are both in the care of Historic Scotland, but another very fine one is about 200 metres north of the Lord's Throat road about 1km east of Keig at the western end of Bennachie. Another stone circle with a large quartz stone is at Balquhain visible from the A96.

These Bronze Age people seem to have cremated their dead and placed the ashes in pottery urns which have been found at the centre of most of the stone circles. Whilst the circles can be regarded as burial grounds there is a lot of evidence to suggest that they were also centres of worship.

THE IRON AGE

In contrast the Iron Age people, living from 500 BC-500 AD, must have had relatively more highly organised settlements. These were probably the people who built the very impressive fort surrounding the summit of the Mither Tap of Bennachie. Thousands of people climb the Tap every year and yet many of them never notice the massive stone rampart through which they walk. The labour involved in building the fort must have been enormous. Hundreds and hundreds of tons of well chosen granite boulders were carried up the hill to be skilfully built into position. Stretching from cliff to cliff the rampart, with an outer and inner wall, surrounds the whole mountain top in a circuit of about 500 metres. It is over 200 feet thick, and in places is still almost 14ft in height.

THE PICTS AND THE MAIDEN STONE



Some of the oldest and most beautiful works of art in this area are possibly the result of the conversion of the Aberdeenshire Picts to Christianity. We refer to the Pictish Symbol Stones, of which we have a great number around Bennachie. One of the most beautiful is the Maiden Stone near Chapel of Garioch. The Maiden Stone belongs to a slightly later period (around 700-800 AD) and has the symbols standing out in relief. If you have never seen it you must visit it - if you do know it you must have another look at it. It stands almost 11 ft high and has beautiful art work all over it. On the east side are four panels, the bottom having two figures, and a mirror and a comb. The next panel has a representation of an 'elephant'; above that the two-legged rectangle and a Z rod, and at the top four-legged beasts too faint to identify - some think the lower one is a centaur. The west side of the stone has sadly become very difficult to decipher due to the effect of weathering. The lower figure is a pattern of circles and Celtic knotwork which is continued in what must have been a fantastically beautiful wicker-work pattern on the sides, this pattern probably being based on the extensive use of willow by the early inhabitants in the construction of houses, boats, shields, baskets and so on. Above the circles stands a Celtic Cross over 5 ft high.

A famous legend probably gave the stone its name. The legend of the lovely Maiden of Drumdurno, who had many suitors, tells of the rejected suitor who met the Devil in Pittodrie Woods and in exchange for his soul bought his revenge. It was the eve of her wedding and she was baking the oatcakes, singing at her work, when she looked up and there was a handsome stranger, who wagered her that he would build a causeway right up to the Mither Tap before she had finished baking her firlot of meal. 'It sets ye weel to bake, lass, gin ye had ony mair speed at it.' Thinking this but idle banter, she lightly promised her hand and heart would be his reward if he won. Twilight came on, her firlot was nearly all baked, when she looked up and saw a causeway finished right up the hill-top, and the handsome stranger whom she now recognised as Satan himself, coming to claim his reward. Terrorstruck she ran to Pittodrie Woods, but the Devil caught her and as she cried for help, she was turned into a pillar of stone, known to this day as the Maiden Stone.

The mirror and comb carved on this Pictish sculptured stone were pointed out by the superstitious as the maiden's girdle and baking board, and the crack near the top as the mark of Satan's hand. The Maiden Causeway had disappeared from human ken, until when studying aerial photographs the writer saw a faint double line where he thought it should be. Excavations revealed a massive roughly paved roadway which is being examined closely in the hope that we can estimate its age.

THE BATTLE OF HARLAW AND HOSIE'S WELL

Coming nearer our time, but still in the mists of antiquity in 1411, there was fought a great and bloody battle at Harlaw, lying between Donald, Lord of the Isles, and Alexander, Earl of Mar, supported by the Provost and Bailies of Aberdeen. The legend of Harlaw tells a sad tale. Hosie,

a local lad, and his bride were dressed for their wedding when the news arrived that the host of Highlanders was advancing to Harlaw in 1411. Off to the battle went Hosie, who fought valiantly, chased after the retreating Highlanders rather too ardently and got himself captured and taken away to a dungeon in the Hebrides. Escaping many years after, he came home to claim his bride, who had in the meantime married another gallant. Hosie died of a broken heart and was buried on the slopes of Bennachie beside the Rushmill Burn, where Hosie's Well can be seen. 'The water that rises in Hosie's Well is nothing but Hosie's tears.'

THE BENNACHIE COLONY AND DIVISION OF THE COMMONTY

Look at the eastern-most side of Bennachie and you will see an emerald green island of grass among the darker pines and spruce trees. This is Esson's Croft-part of the colony where the settlers in the land hunger at the beginning of the 19th century made little crofts and by toil and sweat turned bits of rocky heather moor into arable fields surrounded by substantial stone dykes. The houses were simple two-roomed thatched cottages, the walls made of stones from the hillside clay being used instead of cement. By 1850 there were about 60 people living in this township on the north of the Clachie Burn. At that time Bennachie was a Commonty where anybody around the slopes had the right to graze sheep and cattle and take peats, wood, stone and heather.

But the neighbouring lairds wanted Bennachie for themselves, so they drew up a plan to divide Bennachie into nine parts, and in 1859 they got the Court of Session in Edinburgh to approve it.



{Thieves Mark} The lairds' victory is commemorated in the 'Thieves' Mark' on top of the Mither Tap-B stands for Balquhain, P for Pittodrie, and LE for Logie Elphinstone. The last of the colonists was a remarkable man called George Esson. He died in 1939 in his cottage on the edge of that patch of green, having returned from America to be a mason and dry stane dyker as most of the other settlers were also. Read the inscription on his gravestone in Chapel of Garioch churchyard across the road from the Church. 'George Esson- descended from the first and himself the last of the colonists on Bennachie.'



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