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A new chapter in the history of the Bailies of Bennachie

Gordon Way to open this year

THIS year should see the opening of The Gordon Way, and exciting hill walk 18 miles long, over the tops and ridges of Bennachie from the east near Oyne to Lumsden in the west.

The project represents a new chapter in the history of the Bailies of Bennachie, that 4000-strong body of men and women who are devoted to the care of their precious mountain. It is fitting that the honour of performing the opening ceremony for the Gordon Way should go to retired Inverurie doctor, Danny Gordon, founder of the Bailies.

Who could have foreseen the success of this conservation group which started in 1973? Dr. Gordon, and a few friends who shared his worries about the litter and glass on the hill, called a public meeting that year, aiming at finding around fifty like-minded souls who could take responsibility for the care of the paths.

Dr James Gill suggested the name of Bailie, which instantly caught the imagination of local people and by their third year there were over 900 members. The lifetime membership fee has remained at £1 and today, new members arrive at a rate of four per week, from all corners of the world.

The 15-strong council of the Bailies is elected annually and membership is also open to each of the landowners, and the Forestry Commission.

The Forestry Commission owns around 15,000 acres in the Bennachie area and the other landowners are the Castle Forbes Estate, Brackla, Pittodrie and Monymusk estates.

The Society's aims are to preserve the amenity of the hill, to maintain footpaths and rights of way, to stimulate public interest in the care of the hill, and to study wildlife and preserve the poetry, music and literature of Bennachie.

Mr Bert Cadenhead of Inverurie is Senior Bailie and he is particularly pleased that the Gordon Way is opening this summer. "It is to be a middle-distance walk" he says. "This is something which has been sorely needed and with the four car parks, people will be able to tackle the entire length, or just a section, depending on their walking ability."

Bert has been involved in much of the work which goes on around the year, such as repair of paths, draining of water away from the paths and fencing projects.

Volunteer helpers are always needed and Bert would like to hear from anyone with a few hours to spare over coming months, who would like to help with this vital work. His telephone number is Inverurie 20287.

The Mid Grampian Employment Training group have also contributed a great deal to the stream clearance project on Bennachie, removing branchwood debris which causes the water to become acid and is harmful to aquatic creatures. The Forestry Commission provides the tools, the site and the training and with Government funding the squad steadily works its way through the forest being transported in a van supplied by the Bailies.

A vegetation survey has been

carried out by Mr James R. Mackay, council member of the Bailies, who has meticulously recorded each feature on the hill. His report should be published soon and will reveal some of the uncommon species found on Bennachie.

Mr Mackay is also planning the restoration of one of the Colony cottages near to the Heather Brig path. Bailies will be familiar with the story of the early colonists on Bennachie, and with the research carried out by the late Mrs Helen Fraser, founder member and devoted clerk and membership secretary for many years.

As honorary editor of the Bennachie Notes, her writings on the Esson family were enjoyed by Bailies all over the world. A wealth of literature exists on the hill's history and legends and the top sellers are "McConnachie's Bennachie" which has sold out five times, "Bennachie Again" edited by Mr Archie Whiteley and "Poems of Bennachie" by the Bailies.

Since 1987 Gordon District Council with other concerned bodies, has been researching a Management Plan for Bennachie which is progressing well, and is to be known as the Bennachie Study. The Working Group of 18 representative councillors and officers have met each month with the Forestry Commission and interested landowners.

One of the most exciting ideas to come from the Project is a possible Visitor Centre and ranger service on the hill which would be funded with the help of the Forestry Commission and the Countryside Commission,

which recently gained the support of the District Council.

The Bailies have also been instrumental in blocking two proposed planting schemes which would have been unsympathetic to the forest architecture.

Their representations to the District Council proved successful on schemes on Brackla Estate at Premnay and the Monymusk Triangle.

Each year from May until September the Bailies Room opens in the Town Hall, Inverurie, manned voluntarily by members and is a popular spot for visitors who can spend a while studying the extensive collection of literature on Bennachie.

The highlight of the year is the Bailies Picnic, held each August at the Back o' Bennachie when around 600 members gather to chat, enjoy a cup of tea and share their thoughts on the hill.

First-timers at the picnic must wonder why all these people want to give their time and energy to this lump of rock 1698ft. high. Lord Aberdeen once said "To hell with your Alps, Rockies, Himalayas, Bennachie is the hill for me" and his thoughts have been echoed by so many people over the centuries.

Perhaps each man, woman and child who has paid their £1 membership fee is simply spell-bound by the opportunity given to safeguard this beautiful mountain which is around 400 million years old. Its very timelessness is part of its attraction and through the efforts of the Bailies it looks set to survive for a few more million years.