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# SUMMIT SPECIAL

**BENNACHIE** forms the impressive and picturesque backdrop for towns and villages throughout Garioch and Donside. Thousands of walkers flock to the hill every year, tramping to the top of its numerous peaks.

And for centuries the hill has touched the lives of locals who have tried to farm its braes. In his poem *Bennachie*, the late Doric writer Charles Murray listed the North-east's famous hills before adding: *But Bennachie! Faith, yon's the hill, Rugs at the hairt when ye're awa!*

Advertiser Chief Reporter **STEVE MCKENZIE** takes a personal look at the centre dedicated to the hill.

**G**ORDON Ranger Service and the Bailies of Bennachie have gone back to nature thanks to the Bennachie Centre.

For the building based on the design of an ancient hill fort provides a base for the organisations in the shadow of the landmark they're dedicated to.

The centre has provided the rangers and bailies with a new headquarters in more natural surroundings than their offices in Inverurie.

On Thursday, the centre trustees hosted a special function thanking the individuals and organisations that had made the building possible.

Inverurie's Federal Tait paper mill also used the event as an opportunity to hand over £3500 to go towards a forestry display in the premises.

Costing £400,000 to complete, the building was the result of a joint project led by Gordon District Council in partnership with various groups including the Bailies of Bennachie.

Last May, the Prince of Wales gave the centre his royal seal of approval when he stopped off during a whirlwind tour of Garioch.

He spent time looking over displays detailing Bennachie's history and talking to those concerned with its conservation.

Senior pupils from nearby Chapel of Garioch, Monymusk and

Clatt primary school were delighted when he stopped to admire environmental projects they had prepared.

Before leaving for the next stop on his tour, he unveiled a plaque commemorating the official opening of the centre.

After his visit, Prince Charles was invited to become an honorary member of the bailies and a framed acceptance letter hangs in the bailies' office.

Sitting in the main open plan section of the centre, Gordon senior ranger Fred Gordon and Bennachie Centre Trustees chairman and bailie James Mackay enthused about the hill and its interpretation centre.

Said Fred: "Although the centre

is primarily aimed at Bennachie will be the base for the range of the central part of Aberdeenshire.

"It also provides us with a room to hold events and somewhere to store our equipment."

For the bailies the centre is a place they can make themselves known to the public. Said Mackay:

"Previously we had a room in Inverurie Town Hall, but it was well-known and not visited much.

"Here we feel we are really talking to the people.

"The thing about Bennachie is that it is quite well-known as a beautiful family hill, but there's a awful lot more to Bennachie people realise."

Heels near...



# INITIAL

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is primarily aimed at Bennachie, it will be the base for the rangers for the central part of Aberdeenshire.

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For the bailies the centre means they can make themselves better known to the public. Said Mr Mackay:

"Previously we had a room in Inverurie Town Hall, but it wasn't well-known and not visited very much.

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"The thing about Bennachie is that it is quite well-known and is a beautiful family hill, but there is an awful lot more to Bennachie than people realise."



Flashback: Senior Gordon ranger Fred Gordon (left) with bailies John Nicol, John Ogston, Gordon Ingram, James Mackay, Bert Cadenhead and Algy Watson at the then newly completed Bennachie Centre.

## Treasures of the hill

**R**USTING somewhere on the slopes of Bennachie are the remains of two fighter aircraft left by the bailies as commemorative markers to their dead pilots.

One of the crashed machines was a wartime biplane, the other a 1950s Meteor jet fighter - the grandfather of the hi-tec Tomadoes and Harriers which scream across today's skies.

Harriers of a different nature have also been spotted above Bennachie's sprawling moorland zone.

Hen harriers are among the rarer birds of prey seen hunting the same land scoured for rodents by buzzards and small, agile kestrels.

Dodging the attentions of the hill's raptors in the surrounding woodland habitat are goldcrest, garish yellow hammers, warblers, finches and tree creepers.

Also making a home in the branches are red squirrel and bats, while on the ground elusive roe deer and even the occasional red deer have been spotted.





Paper money: Federal Tait managing director Thomas Tait (front left) presents a £3500 cheque to Bennachie Centre Trustees chairman James Mackay as other trust members look on.

**G**ARIOCH youngsters have the chance to find out more about Gordon's famous landmark.

For the Bennachie Centre runs junior and senior ranger clubs focusing on local wildlife, conservation and nest building.

Teenagers are being targeted especially to boost numbers in the senior outfit.

For more information contact Bennachie Centre ranger Jackie Cumberbirch on ☎ (01467) 681470, or Gordon senior ranger Fred Gordon on ☎

(01467) 620981 extension 399.

# Heels, peace but no 99s!

**O**NE of the great things about Bennachie is that you can climb it in ladies shoes.

Not that I've tried doing this myself, but on one summer's day hike I passed a middle-aged woman humping carrier bags of picnic goodies steadily up to Mither Tap in a pair of ordinary low heeled pumps.

A recent survey revealed 80,000-100,000 people walked up Bennachie in a year and 75 per cent were locals - many making regular return trips.

Several clearly marked paths make access to Bennachie's numerous peaks easy - ideal for family outings.

In the summer, the hill is a magnet to local townfolk and hillwalkers looking for an enjoyable hike close to home.

Yet at the right time of day, and day of the week, Bennachie is excellent for people looking to flee for a while from the madding crowd.

My introduction to Gordon's famous landmark was a family hike to Mither Tap during the primary school summer holidays.

Fed up with my brother's and my own constant questioning if we were nearly there yet, Dad lied convincingly that he would buy ice creams at a shop on the summit.

You can imagine the disappointment at finding only a

rickle of stones at Mither Tap and no chocolate flake 99 ice creams.

The mass of rock almost completely circling the top is the remains of a once impressive Iron Age fort.

Hundreds of tons of well-chosen granite boulders were carried up the hill to be skillfully built into position.

The ancient builders created an outer and inner wall over 20 ft thick and in places it is still 14 ft in height.

But the huge amount of fallen rock at the base of the ruins makes it difficult for historians to estimate its true height.

Protected by the walls would have been round houses or hut circles and one theory is that the people built the fort as a refuge.

And speculation is underlined by a discovery of a 140-acre Roman camp at Logieburnhead in 1975.

Mankind has also touched the hill in other periods of history, including the beginning of the 19th century when a colony of settlers toiled to turn stony moorland into arable fields.

For centuries locals have found comfort from Bennachie, as a place to escape to for some fresh air or even make a living from.

Said Bennachie Baili James Mckay: "Bennachie is very prominent symbol of permanence in a changing world and I think is reassuring for many people."



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Royal approval: Prince Charles chats to senior ranger Fred Gordon on his tour of the Bennachie Visitor Centre last May.

Bennachie is also an official reserve for the world's largest grouse - the capercaillie.

The bird became extinct in Britain in the 18th century, but was reintroduced from Scandinavia in the 19th century.

Recently numbers appear to have been declining again and in a bid to protect the bird Forest Enterprise established a caper reserve on the hill.

Also disappearing from the slopes are oak trees, now mainly confined to an area above Place of Tilliefour at Millstone Hill.

Most of the surviving oaks were probably planted after the Napoleonic Wars - when many oak forests were felled - to provide timber for wooden ships.

Meanwhile, grubbing about in the trees and moorland is an alien empire of creepy crawlies such as Emperor moth caterpillars.

Said Gordon senior ranger Fred Gordon: "Bennachie is a sort of mini cosmos of the whole of the North-east, with its woodland and vast expanse of moor.

"People go there to stretch their legs and look down on where they live, or to enjoy its fascinating natural history."

Far below towering Mither Tap, the Bennachie Centre houses information to clue up visitors about the hill before they set out on a walk.

Folk are also encouraged to return to the centre to report sightings - especially of bird species - which are collated and made available on a computer.