

THE GREEN DIARY

August 1996

The Stewards of the Hill

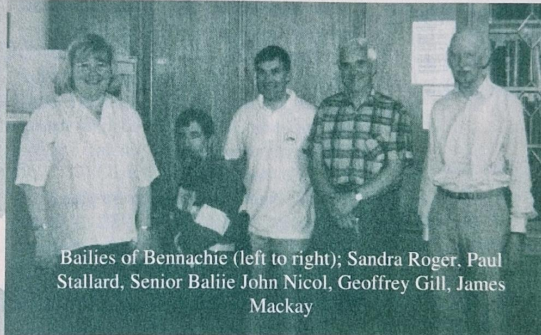
August has a "Glorious 11th" this year as far as the Bailies of Bennachie are concerned. On that Sunday they hold their summer rally on the slopes of the mountain dearest to their hearts. The Bailies (steward is a rough equivalent of their quaint title) are a society formed 23 years ago although the Bailie badge is a replica made for the Bennachie Club of 1805. The founder was the late Dr Danny Gordon who was also an author, authority on Bennachie and one of the sadly missed great characters of the North East.

Today the society has a membership of over 4700 scattered through 35 countries around the globe and the summer rally has become a sort of pilgrimage for many of them.

It was because of Bennachie's near magical, mystical drawing power that the Bailies came into being. Many thousands of feet pad their way up and down our "hill" every year and it was thought that there was a real danger that people might be unwittingly destroying the very features which attracted them. So, to become a Bailie is to share in the safeguarding of its future. The creed, to preserve the amenity of the hill and to encourage public interest in it and its welfare.

Other practical aims include discouraging litter and vandalism; the maintenance of footpaths and rights of way; the study of plants, rocks and their interaction; collecting, collating and preserving "endangered species" in the form of legends, ballads, poetry, literature, art, music and customs relevant to Bennachie.

Rich in B.C. Beaker, Bronze and Iron Age history, a prominent landmark from many parts



Bailies of Bennachie (left to right); Sandra Roger, Paul Stallard, Senior Bailie John Nicol, Geoffrey Gill, James Mackay

of Aberdeenshire, Bennachie dominates the farmlands of the Garioch, standing "with its feet among the corn" as one local author, the late John R Allan (father of Charlie) wrote. It is what is known as a batholith with a plateau of around 400 metres. This seven-headed plateau (the highest is 529 metres) supports a very rich flora including interesting mosses, heaths and rare wild flowers as well as heather and is home to the magnificent capercaillie, ptarmigan, pheasant, grouse, deer, wildcat and several kinds of birds of prey. The delightful "Benny Gowk" (cuckoo) makes its presence so "audio" if not visual, it has been adopted as the emblem of the new Bennachie Visitors' Centre.

It was in great part thanks to the Bailies' tireless work as dedicated champions of Bennachie that the fine new visitors' centre came into being. Trustees of the centre, they now have their official headquarters and visitors' room within the centre which Prince Charles opened last year (He has since accepted the title of Honorary Senior Bailie).

The Bailies also publish a calendar, a map of the range and a charming series of postcards (photos and drawings by local Bailie artists). "The New Guide to Bennachie" published two years ago is the work of James Mackay and describes many of the walks on Bennachie. There is also a Bailie's video "A Postcard from Bennachie" which was "premiered" last October.

One of Bennachie's most famous "bailies" was George Esson, the last of the Bennachie



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The Stewards of the Hill

(cont. from front page)

colonists. A remarkable and highly original man, after years in the States he returned to be a mason and drystone dyker and died in 1939 at his croft on the east side of Bennachie. Enduring examples of his dyking are to be found on all the neighbouring estates. The patch of green is still known as "Esson's croft," part of the colony which formed in the land hunger in the early 1800's. By their hard toil those early settlers turned chunks of rocky heather moors into arable fields bound by drystone dykes. By the mid-19th century around 60 people lived in this "township" and Bennachie was a "commonty" where anyone living around the slopes had a right to graze their animals and to take peat, wood, heather and stones for their own use.

However neighbouring lairds wanted Bennachie for themselves. They drew up a plan dividing the hill into nine parts and in 1859, secured the approval of the Court of Session in Edinburgh. Many of the crofters were forcibly removed until in the lean times of the late 19th century the colony had grown less and less and only John Esson, father of George stubbornly remained.

Following the great success of a first guided walk of the historic colony site last year a second topic tour took place last June led by depute senior bailie James Mackay.

Another famous figure from the past has taken up residence at the foot of Bennachie. Visitors to the centre in recent weeks have been welcomed, even startled by the sudden appearance of the legendary Jock O' Bennachie, rival of the neighbouring Jock o' North. The 12 foot wooden sculpture stands at the centre's fortress wall, arms outstretched, greeting all-comers. There have been some mutterings that he looks as if he'd jumped off a tin of sweetcorn-well, he is very jolly and very green!-but he makes an undeniably cheery sentinel and no doubt he will "weather down" somewhat.

Not quite as gigantic as the mythical mannie of the Mither Tap-he was reputed to be over 200 metres tall! The work of borders artist Ken Wilson, the lime wood sculpture is made up of many pieces of wood and took six months to complete.

(Words and pictures Griselda MacGregor)

Thursday 1st August

Aberdeen Friends of the Earth

Public Meeting, Music Hall, Union Street, Aberdeen, 8.00pm. All welcome. For details contact Tracey Lloyd, Tel: (01224) 625048

Aberdeenshire Ranger Service (Haddo Country Park)

Summer Specials 2.30-4.00pm. Children of all ages are welcome with or without an adult. They can take part in various activities, pond-dipping, bird-watching, crafts and drama to name but a few. Contact, Tel: (01651) 851489

Friday 2nd August

National Trust for Scotland Conservation Volunteers (Grampian Group)

Leith Hall Weekend project, (to Sun 4th) depart 7.30pm Music Hall Aberdeen. Accommodation: Kennethmont village Hall. Mixture of trail management tasks. For details contact Alistair Watt, Tel: (01224) 783418

Balmedie Country Park Ranger Service

Rockpool Ramble at Collieston, 10.00am-12.00noon. Come and discover the many wonderful creature that live on this shore. Booking is required. For details, and to book a place, contact, Tel: (01358) 742396

Saturday 3rd August

Women's Environment Network

Monthly Meeting, Women's Centre, Shoe Lane, Aberdeen, 11.00-1.00pm. For details contact, Bridget Stone, Tel: (01224) 641295

Grampian Cyclists Touring Club

Easy Morning (15-20m) Plus Coffee stop weather permitting. 9.30am Airyhall Library, Springfield road led by Gordon. For further information on this event contact Sandy Cormack, Tel: (01224) 682781

The National Trust For Scotland

'Nightwalk', Crathes Castle, 9.00-11.00pm. Adults £2: Children Free, booking required. For full details contact, Tel: (01330) 844651

Sunday 4th August

The National Trust For Scotland

Children's Walk 'Nature Detective' Fyvie Castle, 2.30-4.00pm. Adults free: Children £1. For details contact, Tel: (01330) 844651

Grampian Cyclists Touring Club

Afternoon run (44m) 1.00pm Kingswells (old loop by church and pub), Clinterty, Cairntradin, Kintore, Burnhervie, Esson's Car Park, Blairdaff, Monymusk, Lyne of Skene, Kirkton of Skene, Westhill, Kingswells led by Sherriff. For details contact Steve Donaldson, Tel: (01224) 722514

Monday 5th August

Greenpeace

Greenpeace Aberdeen Local Support Group Meeting, in the Blue Lamp, Gallowgate, 8.00pm. Contact Claire, Tel: (01224) 649030 or Alastair, Tel: (01224) 622389

Aberdeen Cuba Solidarity Campaign

Monthly meeting at 6.30pm in the Trades Council Offices, 24 Adelphi. For more information contact Michael Martin, Tel: (01224) 233 344 (9.00-5.00pm) or Tel: (01224) 705639 (Answerphone)

Tuesday 6th August

Aberdeenshire Ranger Service

Jock O'Bennachie adventures for 8 year old and over (younger should be accompanied by an adult). 1.30-3.30pm. When Jock O'Bennachie needs to sleep, he puts a dream-catcher above his bed and mobiles in his cave. Come and create your own mobile and dream-catcher. Meet at Bennachie Centre, Essons Car park. For details contact, Tel: (01467) 681470

The Aberdeen Alternative Festival

Activity Trails at Donmouth Nature Reserve, 9.00-11.00am Families welcome. £1 for child (adults free if accompanied by child).

Birdwatching, nature games and art on the beach. Meet at the bird hide next to the esplanade. Please book in advance. For details contact Alison or Rachel, Tel: (01224) 635822

Aberdeenshire Ranger Service (Aden Country Park)

Fun for nature, Aden country park, 10.00am-1.00pm. have fun exploring the amazing world of nature, suitable for the 7 to 14 age range, adult helpers most welcome bring a snack. Booking required. For further details contact, Tel: (01771) 622857

Aberdeenshire Ranger Service (Haddo Country Park)

Nature Club 6.30-8.00pm. Children of all ages are welcome with or without an adult. They can take part in various activities, pond-dipping, bird-watching, crafts and drama to name but a few. Details from the Ranger Service, Tel: (01651) 851489

Wednesday 7th August

The National Trust For Scotland

'Discovery Walk', Pitmedden Gardens, 2.30-4.00pm. Adults free: Children £1. Contact the NTS Ranger Service, Tel: (01330) 844651

Grampian Cyclists Touring Club

Pub run 7.30pm Crombie Mill Visitor Centre, Woodside, (4m), Kingswells led by Allan Cowking. For details contact Selwyn Roberts, Tel: (01224) 318354

Thursday 8th August

Aberdeenshire Ranger Service (Haddo Country Park)

Summer Specials 2.30-4.00pm. Children of all ages are welcome with or without an adult. Take part in various activities, pond-dipping, bird-watching, crafts and drama. Details from the Ranger Service, Tel: (01651) 851489

The National Trust For Scotland

'Discovery Walk', Crathes Castle, 2.30-4.00pm. Donations welcome. For details contact, Tel: (01330) 844651

Friday 9th August

The NTS Conservation Volunteers

House of Dun weekend project II, (to Sun 11th see also Ceilidh on 10th) depart 7.30pm Music Hall Aberdeen. Work with woodland or footpath and also maintenance around the old mill wheel near the property. Put your name down for a lift if needed. Accommodation: House of Dun Basecamp. For details ring Alistair Watt, Tel: (01224) 783418