

Bailies Of Bennachie Come Fae A' The Airts For Their Annual Rally

by SHEENAH COBB

OVER 500 people gathered at the Back O' Bennachie last Sunday afternoon for the Summer rally which is hailed to be "the social highlight of the Garioch calendar."

Every man, woman and child there had one thing in common - each was a Baillie of Bennachie. Some were attending the annual Rally for the first time; others had not missed one since they began in 1973.

Who are the Bailies and what is it about that hill, only 1,733 feet high that draws new members at the rate of about four per week?

A few friends who shared a love of Bennachie and were becoming increasingly worried about the amount of litter and broken glass on the mountain, called a public meeting in 1973. They aimed at finding around fifty like-minded souls who could take responsibility for the care and maintenance of the paths.

The name of Baillie, suggested by Dr. James Gill, caught on and by their third year there were over 900 members.

At the latest count there are 2,936 Bailies each proud to pay one pound, a modest fee granting life membership of this unique group.

Their objectives are four-fold: To preserve amenity and fight litter and vandalism, to preserve rights of way and footpaths, to study the geology and biology of the mountain and to preserve the flora and fauna, and to collect and preserve the bibliography of Bennachie.

LAIRDS

There is no limit of age, class or creed. The three lairds of Bennachie in those early days became Honorary Bailies. Lady Grant of Monymusk, Lord Forbes of Finzeuch and Mr Theodore Smith of Pittodrie joined the ranks and paid their fees.

Lord Aberdeen, the first Guardian of Bennachie has been succeeded by Sir Maitland Mackie. In his foreword to "Bennachie Again" he says "However old the Hill is, it's there and it's easier to climb and tidier because of the Bailies - Bless them. I'm proud to be associated."

Founder Senior Baillie, Dr. Daniel Gordon is still active and took his place at the Rally this year with the other officials, gently but firmly ensuring that everything was going according to plan.

Officials of the Council of the Bailies of Bennachie qualify for office, it would seem to lesser persons, by having an over-abundance of good qualities. Each one over the years deserves unbounded praise but instead prefers to pass the credit on. Ask any member of the Council about his/her particular contribution to the work of the Bailies and you will receive a glowing commendation about a colleague.

Senior Baillie, Algy Watson of Oyne who is a geography teacher, has been involved since the inception of the Bailies. He was appointed Clerk in 1973 and succeeded Dr. Danny Gordon as Senior Baillie when the doctor decided to retire from the post, in 1978.

Mr Watson is not slow to emphasise the wonderful bond there is between the Forestry Commission and the Bailies of Bennachie. Ron Marnie, District Officer is reputed to have a soft spot for the hill and enjoys the happy relationship that exists between the two.

boggy parts or removing loose stones on the paths.

THOUGHTLESS

Draining water away from the paths too is important, but it is discouraging when this valuable work is undone by thoughtless youngsters, who block the drainage channels with stones. Erosion on the Rowan Tree-Mither Tap path has been tackled by draining as well as removal of all the cairns, using their stones to fill the erosion channels.

The Wardens are ever vigilant and have been rewarded in a great reduction in litter. Their task is never ending but there has been a great improvement since those early days.

In 1973 under the leadership of Mrs Helen Fraser, Chairman of the Keep Aberdeenshire Tidy Committee, a giant spring cleaning operation took place on Bennachie. Many sacks of litter were brought down and from then on the Wardens of the Marches and High Tops took over.

Helen Fraser no longer holds that post but has been Clerk to the Bailies since 1978, fulfilling her duties with an enviable enthusiasm and energy. Sadly, Helen is resigning as Clerk in September but will remain a Baillie. "My contact with the Bailies is so precious and I hope to continue that as long as possible," says Helen.

The paperwork involved is quite vast. Helen is responsible for arranging membership, corresponding with members, both local and further afield, communicating with various societies who are interested in the Bailies and answering the endless letters which arrive at her cottage in Aquithie, Kemnay, headed "Dear Helen".

She feels that this informality epitomises the spirit of the Bailies of Bennachie. "We are not business-like or profit making" she explains. "We are all friends and our circle increases daily."

Sadly Helen's husband Sam, died in March this year and it has been a difficult time in her life. He shared her deep interest in the Bailies and was proud to be holding the "Welcome" sign each year at the Rally.

Despite her personal grief Helen has been as busy as ever. She has been doing research work on the early colonists on Bennachie. She began with the Esson family and is now working on the other families who lived and worked on the hill. She plans to find out what happened to all those people and to write about them.

In the Book of Bennachie, Helen writes of John Duncan, the Weaver Botanist, an apprentice weaver who came to work in Aberdeenshire in the 19th century and pursued his hobby of studying plants on Bennachie and surrounding countryside. It is a fascinating story, well worth reading.

SUCCESS

"The Book of Bennachie" was an outstanding success and sold out five times. "Bennachie Again", too, promises to be a best-seller. Helen Fraser has contributed once again. "The Cormack Connection",

TOWN HALL

The Room in the Town Hall opens each year in May until the end of October and is manned voluntarily by the Bailies, Monday to Friday, 10 a.m. to 12 noon and 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. except Wednesday afternoon.

Apart from Jeannie Cormack's photographs the visitor can enjoy an hour or two studying the extensive collection of literature on Bennachie. "A Guide to Bennachie" by James R. MacKay is especially popular and there are maps and postcards for sale.

There are also relics which have been uncovered in the area. A popular item in sale is the Bailies of Bennachie calendar. The 1986 edition is particularly outstanding, consisting of seven watercolours by James Kelman, depute Senior Baillie. They are printed on Inverurie Drawing Cartridge made by Thomas Tait & Sons, Ltd.

2,300 copies of the 1985 Calendar were sold and sent all over the world.

James MacKay, James Kelman and Algy Watson are generating an even wider interest in Bennachie by giving talks and slide shows to clubs and associations in Gordon, Deeside and Aberdeen districts.

And so the work of the Bailies continues. They gather again for the Annual General Meeting in Inverurie Academy on Thursday September 26 and then quietly slip away to continue their labours of love on the hill that means so much to each one of them.

E. Stephen's poem "Tae Bennachie Dear Hill o' Haim," contained in "Poems of Bennachie" published by the Bailies in 1982, touches on the tender spot which is the hallmark of a true Baillie.

The first verse reads:
Oh Bennachie, dear hill o' haim
Sae calm an' steadfast, aye the same
Fu' mony years ye've lookit' doon
On generations endless run'
Fu' mony tales ye weel could tell
O' fit yer Garioch folk befell.

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Bob Aitken, Chief Forester on Bennachie since the Baillies began, values the important work done, particularly in monitoring litter or damage. He is encouraged by the responsible attitude shown by those who pass their leisure time on the hill.

"We have not had a fire in fourteen years. The amount of vandalism is of very minimal nature. The toilet blocks have remained in good condition and the mass of people are behaving well," reports Bob.

COMMISSION

The Forestry Commission have established car parks, picnic sites and toilet facilities in three areas. The Back O' Bennachie Car Park lies a little west of Oyne on the Insch Road. The Bennachie Car Park lies near Pittodrie off the Chapel of Garioch Road and the visitor centre with car park and picnic site has been built alongside the Lord's Throat road on the north bank of the River Don.

The walks too are an important part of their work and although Bob takes great pride in having been part of the team responsible for these, he points out that "The walk from Rowan Tree to Mither Tap has been there for over a hundred years and we cannot take the credit for that one."

The wet weather this year has brought its own problems and the Commission are planning widening the tree line a little to permit more light into the dense canopy, to allow drying out of the paths. This would also allow passage of winds to assist in the task.

Having established these facilities the Forestry Commission are indebted to the Baillies' working parties who do a power of work under the direction of co-ordinator Deputy Senior Bailie, James T. Kelman. Teams of 8-10 tackle work such as laying steppingstones across

down and from them on the verges of the Marches and High Tops took over.

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Jeannie's family farmed the croft of Whitewell and the Cormacks have been connected with the area for almost two hundred years. In 1977 Jeannie, on one of many visits to the area, heard about the Baillies and formed a friendship which continues today.

She gifted a wonderful collection of old photographs taken at the beginning of the century by her aunt, Sarah Cormack. The album is on display in the "Baillies Room" in Inverurie Town Hall and is treasured.

Jeannie, now in her eighties lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and has crossed the Atlantic fourteen times. She arrived in Britain this summer on July 24 and attended her first Rally on Sunday. A delightful lady, she enjoyed the special welcome bestowed on her and was obviously thrilled to be taking part in the proceedings.

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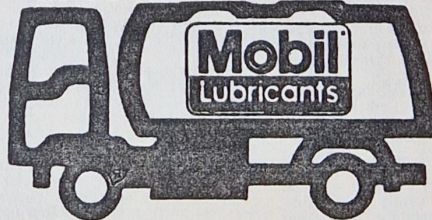
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