

CORRESPONDENCE.

THE SGARSOCH MARKET.

TO THE EDITOR, "CAIRNGORM CLUB JOURNAL."

SIR,—It is one of the many advantages of the Braemar district that it possesses two contrasting types of hills. You have, in the first place, to the north-west and north, the Cairngorm group, from Cairntoul to Ben Avon, with all its lesser outliers; and the features of the Cairngorms in general are heather, flat wind-swept tops, and fine corries here and there, tinged usually with the redness of the granite of which they are composed. To the south and south-west of Braemar you have a totally different type of mountain. Glas Maol, the Ben Uarns, and the Sgarsoch are the chief representatives of this type, which is marked by rounded tops, grassy slopes, and the absence of rock corries. The visitor to the Braemar district has, in fact, the option of two quite different sorts of mountain scenery, and by taking one as an offset to the other he enhances the attractions of both. Frankly, even the Cairngorms get monotonous day after day; the antidote is an occasional trip southward on to the main Grampian range, after which the Cairngorms may be returned to with renewed zest. Of all this southern group of hills, probably the Sgarsoch is the most attractive. It stands almost at the extreme limits of Aberdeenshire, next door in fact to Carn an Fhìdhleir (Cairn Ealar), on which the three counties meet. So it is a longish walk from Braemar.

I had heard frequently of the tradition which says that the Sgarsoch was once the scene of a great cattle market—the forerunner, it is said, of the Falkirk Tryst. This tradition is very strong in Braemar, and many people there say they have substantiated it by personal

observation of remains of roads, causeways, and the like on the summit of the hill. "You'll find a piece of pavement up there, like the pavement on the streets of Aberdeen," was one statement made to me. So I went to the Sgarsoch to see for myself. It was a day in June some years ago—a splendid morning—as I entered the fine open strath beyond the Linn, where at length you leave the trees behind and come in sight of the hill towards which I was bent. Rounding the "Rough Toppy" (Cnapan Garbh), which looks down on the Bynack, I was soon on the hill itself, reaching the summit, as you might say, "without further incident." It was a day which made me almost forget the quasi-antiquarian purpose of my journey. The hills of Perthshire lay in front, tumbled about in the sun, jostling and crowding one another unendingly away to the west. Ben-y-Gloe, that odd, lumpy hill, was close at hand; and to the left of it the eye travelled through a gap away down to the low country. The agricultural land somewhere about Coupar Angus was visible there, the Sidlaws rising behind it. They say that from the Sgarsoch you can make out the Wallace Monument at Stirling on a clear day with a good glass. I do not know. It is a fine view, anyway, with its peeps of the lowlands and its wide sweep of the Highlands.

I took a walk round the hill to see what was to be seen of the Sgarsoch market, or such vestiges of it as remain. On the north side, just under the top, is a great quantity of tumbled stone, mostly blocks of the size of which the ordinary drystone dyke is built. Here and there these stones did give the appearance of having been built into something, and especially was this the case towards the west side. I did not find any "pavement," though the weathering of some outcrops of rock gave the effect of one. I came to the conclusion, however, that there was little use in a single individual trying to explore the place. I would suggest that a party of some size might go up; and,

taking the hill in sections, I think their trouble might be well spent. If they even produced a negative result, that would in no way render such an expedition fruitless. The strength of the local tradition as to the importance which the Sgarsoch market once had would of itself justify a careful exploration of the site.

I did not find a road, or the marks of a road, which is said to lead from the hill down towards Glen Feshie, but I did find what looked very like an old road leading in exactly the opposite direction—that is to say, down towards the Tarf. I followed the latter track for some quarter of a mile. It winds down the east end of the Sgarsoch and is some twelve feet broad, of a fairly uniform width, and to all appearance cut out of the hillside.

As I have said, the market on the Sgarsoch is believed to have been the original of what is now the Falkirk Tryst. As a matter of historical fact, I find from the books of reference that the latter well-known market is the representative of the older tryst at Crieff, it having been moved from Crieff to Falkirk about the year 1770. So that the Sgarsoch market, if it represented the same, would necessarily be a thing of a rather remote period. The Crieff fair, judging from its reputation in old Scottish literature, must itself have been a market of long standing; and this would place the Sgarsoch market at least two centuries back from now.

To sum up, I might collect the "evidences" on the matter as follows:—

(1) The strength of the local tradition as to there having once been a great annual cattle market held on various kinds when narrated by the Braemar people.

(2) The geographical situation of the hill itself; it is the one and only point which is equally accessible to Strathspey (through Glen Feshie), Upper Deeside and Perthshire, whether from Blair Atholl or Kirkmichael.

(3) I hesitate to put beside these evidences my own cursory observations; but I believe from what I saw

that a careful scrutiny of the hill would repay any trouble involved. I saw sufficient to justify such an investigation. Not that any structures of much importance are likely to be found, far less any buried treasure, but chiefly because a site which, if tradition speaks true, once possessed a very considerable place in the economic history of Scotland, deserves to be investigated.

Our forefathers were not all, as is frequently supposed, cattle-stealers. Some were mere prosaic cattle-dealers. Do you not remember an anecdote which is told of the old Crieff Tryst?—How Lord Seafield, who was Chancellor of Scotland at the time of the Union of 1707, went to Crieff and found his brother, who was a strong anti-Unionist, practising as a cattle-dealer. When his lordship reproached his brother with the indignity of such a business, he was met with the pointed retort—"Better sell nowt nor sell a nation!" It is this old-world Scotland of a former time which a trip to the Sgarsoch, made in the proper spirit, helps to bring to mind—I am, etc.,

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[See Note on "An Sgarsoch and Carn an Fhithleir" in *C.C.J.*, I., 52-5.—EDITOR.]