

IMPORTANT NOTICE

High Level Bothies

The following bothies are to be re-sited, and will be removed from their present locations on 6 June 1975 or as soon as possible thereafter.

It is most important that no plans be made involving the use of these bothies after 6 June 1975.

CURRAN

situated beside Lochan Buidhe at MR 983010.

ST VALERY

on the cliffs above the west end of Loch Avon at MR 002022.

The Cairngorms high level bothies

JOHN DUFF

On Friday, 13 June 1975, the last of the fabric from the controversial Curran Bothy was carried down to Glen Derry by Naval Apprentices from H.M.S. *Caledonia*, Rosyth, thus concluding the demolition of Curran and St Valery Bothies.

Now that the first stage in the resiting of the three high level bothies is almost complete (El Alamein has not yet been dismantled), it seems appropriate to set down a factual history of these three shelters, which have several times made headline news, and which caused one of the most heated disputes in recent British mountaineering history.

The facts are as follows:

- July 1963:* Members of the 51st Highland Division Engineers (T.A.) erected St Valery and El Alamein shelters for the (now defunct) Cairngorm Trust. At that time it was intended that these should be the first of a chain of high level shelters on the Cairngorm/Ben Macdhui plateau. It is believed that El Alamein, because of a mistaken map reference, was built in the wrong place (unverified).
- July 1967:* Apprentices from H.M.S. *Caledonia* erected Curran Bothy for Cairngorm Mountain Rescue Association.
- August 1967:* Banff County Council granted planning permission for Curran.

- November 1967:* At a meeting of Scottish Mountain Rescue Teams held by the Mountain Rescue Committee of Scotland, the Braemar Team protested about the lack of consultation as regards Curran, and also about the siting of the high level refuge huts.
- November 1968:* At a meeting of the Mountain Rescue Committee of Scotland, the whole subject of Mountain Bothies was discussed, and the Committee was unanimous in its opposition in general to high level shelters.
- December 1968:* After consultation with the Chief Constable of the Scottish North-Eastern Counties Constabulary and Mountain Rescue organisations, the Navy decided not to build another shelter near the Wells of Dee and instead renovated an existing low level shelter at Fords of Avon.
- November 1971:* Six teenagers died heading for Curran Bothy, and one rescuer was almost killed while searching for St Valery at night in a snowstorm.
- February 1972:* Public Inquiry at Banff into the Feith Buidhe Disaster. The two expert witnesses who sat through the entire Inquiry both described in their evidence the dangers of high level bothies. At the end of the Inquiry, one of the Jury's recommendations was that 'In the matter of high level bothies, advice as to their removal or otherwise should be left to the experts.'
- February 1972:* At a meeting of the Mountain Rescue Committee of Scotland the Committee decided that the St Valery, El Alamein and Curran Refuges should be removed. No one spoke against the decision, which was unanimous.
- April 1972:* At a meeting of the Scottish Committee of the Nature Conservancy, the Committee agreed with the view that the high level bothies should be removed, and that, if necessary, others should be constructed in safe localities with minimum disturbance to the environment.
- May 1972:* At the Annual General Meeting of the Mountain Rescue Committee of Scotland, the representative of Cairngorm Mountain Rescue Association said that his Association considered Curran Bothy as their (Cairngorm Mountain Rescue Association's) property and was opposed to its removal.
- October 1972:* A police decision that the three bothies should be dismantled in June 1973 was made known at a meeting of the Mountain Rescue Committee of Scotland. It was decided to print a warning in the Mountain Rescue Committee Handbook, to inform the Ordnance Survey, and to contact the Scottish Sports Council to press for a meeting of all interested parties.

November 1972: The Secretary of State for Scotland requested the Scottish Sports Council to consult various interests regarding the removal of the high level bothies with a view to reaching an agreed solution. Further steps in the provisional police plans for the removal of the bothies were meanwhile suspended.

December 1972: The Mountaineering Council of Scotland circulated to all its member Mountaineering Clubs for their views on keeping or removing the three high level bothies.

January 1973: The investigations by the Scottish Sports Council and the Mountaineering Council of Scotland both independently showed that the vast majority of informed mountaineering opinion in the country favoured the removal of the high level bothies.

May 1973: On 5 May 1973 the Annual Team Meeting, followed in the afternoon by a Committee Meeting of the Mountain Rescue Committee of Scotland, was held. Although the Cairngorms Shelters were on the Agenda for the Committee Meeting, no representative of those opposing the demolition was present. At this meeting, the firm decision to demolish the bothies on the weekend of 2/3 June was announced.

30 May 1973: Following several days of sensational last minute press coverage and intense political activity, including letters to the Secretary of State for Scotland, the removal of the bothies was temporarily cancelled.

There then followed a protracted period of negotiation, letter writing, persuasion and political pressure. Although it was clear that demolition was the wish of the informed majority, no one felt able to take a stand against the political pressure exerted by those who wished the bothies retained. Although the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Scottish Home and Health Department had become involved, this was merely in a fact finding capacity, and the Secretary of State denied any statutory responsibility in the matter. Although ownership of the bothies rested with the landowners concerned, no one was prepared to involve them in a controversy which was not of their making. Understandably, the landowners themselves said nothing!

19 October 1973: In a letter to Inverness Joint Police Committee, the Scottish Office summarised the situation regarding the bothies, and made two important points: (a) that the building authorities would require to grant warrants for the demolition of the shelters, and (b) that the Secretary of State had no power to prevent, or to

arrange for the demolition of the shelters. The letter suggested that one of the local authorities or police authorities concerned should convene a joint meeting. This proved finally to be the key to the impasse.

- 7 *December 1973*: A meeting was held between representatives of the Inverness and Scottish North-Eastern Counties Constabularies and the County Councils of Inverness and Banff. This meeting decided to hold a further meeting to be attended by the Mountain Rescue Committee of Scotland; Mountaineering Council for Scotland; Countryside Commission; Nature Conservancy; Cairngorm Mountain Rescue Association; Braemar Mountain Rescue Association; Aberdeen Mountain Rescue Team.
- 15 *February 1974*: The meeting decided on was held in Inverness, and a Working Party was appointed to consider the best location for mountain shelters in the Cairngorms and to submit a report.
- 25 *February 1974*: A meeting of the Working Party was held in Inverness, and after a vote confined to those representing expert mountain rescue opinion, it was decided by five votes to one that:
- El Alamein be moved to Strathnethy at 023060
 - St Valery be moved to the Lairig an Laoigh path at 047075
 - Curran be moved to the ruins of Upper Geldie Lodge at 955867.

Representatives of the Mountaineering Council of Scotland, the Scottish Sports Council and Braemar Mountain Rescue Association all asked that their view be recorded that they thought that no case had been established for the provision of further shelters, and that they were agreeing to the resiting merely so that the objective of greater importance, namely the removal of the high level shelters, could be proceeded with.

The Working Party Report was accepted by the parent committee, by Inverness Joint Police Committee, and by the Scottish North-Eastern Counties Police Board. However, Banff County Council, whose representative had opposed the removal of Curran and St Valery bothies (both situated in Banffshire), declared themselves opposed to the proposals. This again produced a stalemate, as Banff County Council would have to issue the warrant for demolition.

- 3 *October 1974*: The Chief Constable of the Scottish North-Eastern Counties Constabulary addressed Banff County Council Planning Committee at Banff on the subject of high level bothies, but the Committee decided not to withdraw their opposition to the removal of Curran and St Valery.

8 May 1975: Following an official application by the Scottish North-Eastern Counties Police Board, Banff County Council issued a warrant to demolish Curran and St Valery Bothies.

8-13 June 1975: Curran and St Valery Bothies were removed by Naval Apprentices.

So far, no action to remove El Alamein has been taken. The materials from Curran have been taken back to Rosyth where they will be kept till a new site is found. The bothy will then be remodelled and rebuilt. The proprietors of Mar Lodge Estate have refused permission to rebuild it on their land, so its future is uncertain. The materials from St Valery are at Derry Lodge. The proposed new site for it is in the Highland Region, and the resiting will be done from that side. It remains to be seen whether this is the end of the high level bothy controversy. If it is not, let us only hope that any future discussion can be governed by logic and not emotion, and that politicians, whether amateur or professional, do not become involved.

