

SUBMISSION BY THE CLUB TO PUBLIC INQUIRY AT KINGUSSIE
COMMENCING 25 MAY 1981 RELATIVE TO PROPOSED SKIING
DEVELOPMENTS IN LURCHER'S GULLY AND OTHER NORTHERN CORRIES
OF CAIRN GORM

Submission to Public Inquiry into planning application for skiing
developments in Northern Corries of Cairn Gorm

The Cairngorm Club is a club of climbers and hillwalkers based in Aberdeen. Its membership has stood at between 350 and 400 for the last 25 years, making it Scotland's largest single climbing club. While it was not Scotland's first climbing club, it is Scotland's oldest surviving climbing club, having been founded on 23 June 1887, the morning after Queen Victoria's Jubilee, by six climbers who had been celebrating the Jubilee with fireworks on Ben Macdui.

In terms of its constitution, a copy of which is lodged, the objects of the Club are to encourage mountain climbing in Scotland, with special reference to the Cairngorm group of mountains; to produce and impart scientific and other information concerning mountains; to consider the right of access to Scottish mountains and to adopt such measures in regard thereto as may be deemed advisable; and to issue such publications as may be considered advantageous.

The interests and activities of the members of the Club are extremely diverse. Unlike a number of other leading climbing clubs, the Cairngorm Club has always been open to men and women alike. It is also open to and equally participated in by members of all ages from 16 upwards, younger members attending the same meets and social functions as members in their 60's and 70's. A common interest in the mountains draws them into and keeps them in the Club, but beyond that the diversity is considerable. Some members climb on rock while others have never been on a rope; some unashamedly collect 'Munros' while others simply revisit their respected home hills again and again, always finding something new; some regard 15 miles as a minimum respectable walk while others are simply glad to be out; some make plants, birds or animals their especial interest while others look for landforms or rocks; an increasing number ski as well as climb, even on Club meets, while others prefer the one activity only. All in all, the Club can be regarded as an extremely broadly based group, representing all types of interests likely to be found amongst climbers, not excluding skiing. The strength of the Club and breadth of its activities are vouched by its Members' Handbook and members' circulars, the Handbook and four most recent circulars being lodged.

The Club has always been outward looking and not simply a means for arranging shared transport to the hills. This is evidenced in many ways. Its objects under its constitution, already quoted, are themselves outward looking. Its founding members included such outward looking men as

James Bryce, Liberal MP, later a most successful ambassador to the United States, and subsequently created Viscount Bryce, who campaigned in Parliament and sponsored a Bill for free access to mountains and moorland for recreation and was deeply concerned with the protection of natural scenery, particularly in the mountains. As first President of the Club, Bryce along with other early members was responsible for the infant Club commencing within six years of its foundation the publication of a high quality *Journal* which has now reached its nineteenth volume and ninety-eighth issue; the *Journal* is not only a chronical of Club events and climbing exploits but also an account of scientific investigation of numerous aspects of the mountain environment. Another important outward-looking aspect of the Club has been its responsibility for or involvement in the construction of bridges and mountain indicators. In the 1920's James A. Parker designed and supervised the erection of indicator plates on the summits of Ben Macdui and Lochnagar, both of which survive, almost as new, 50 years later. In 1912 the same James A. Parker had been responsible for the erection of a footbridge to carry the Lairig Ghru path safely over a river whose spates had washed away several predecessors; this footbridge still stands and is named on the map 'Cairngorm Club Footbridge' (OS grid reference NH 926077); an account of the opening of this footbridge is contained in Volume 12 of the Club *Journal* at pages 235 to 240, copies of which pages are lodged. More recently Club members have had a large part in the design and construction of five other footbridges in the Cairngorms area, two in Glen Derry, one over the Luibeg, one near Corrou Bothy and another over the Eidart. It can only be esteem for a Club with a history such as this that leads so many members to keep up their membership long after they have left the Club's home area, something which is uncommon in activity-based clubs but is clearly borne out by the range of addresses in the list of members, a copy of the last printed version of which (1977) is produced.

The Cairngorm Club objects to the granting of planning permission for any further skiing developments in the hitherto undeveloped corries on the north flank of Cairn Gorm. The Club's reasons will be more fully explained later but may be summarised as this, that the proposed development would represent a further unwarranted and irreversible encroachment of human disturbance into an area highly prized by climbers and walkers (including ski mountaineers) for its wilderness character and highly prized by other interest groups for a range of other qualities, including its scenic grandeur. Many Club members ski as well as climb, either as the opportunity arises in conjunction with climbing or as a separate sport for separate days; many of these members are also members of ski clubs and the Club still has amongst its members at least one founder member and several other early active members of the Aberdeen Ski Club. Far from being an objection to skiing as a sport, the Club's objection is to the intrusion into the particular area of ski facilities and the infrastructure of roads and car parks which service them.

It is often thought (or argued by those whose case it serves) that some of the present day pleas of climbers and other outdoor users for conservation of wilderness areas are a novelty, a selfish and elitist trend of the last ten or fifteen years. However the history of the Cairngorm Club bears out that this is not so. It is clear from the Club's *Journal* that there has for at least a century been a demand from members of the public (who cannot all be cranks) for opportunity for 'wilderness experience', opportunity to get away from the usual trappings of civilisation. It seems likely that so long as there are places to satisfy it this demand will be an eternal one. References to it occur throughout the volumes of the *Cairngorm Club Journal*, which, as already mentioned, has been published continuously since 1893. Two references to this demand in the Club *Journal* are worthy of quotation. Firstly in an article in the very first issue of the *Journal* (Volume 1 at pages 7 to 14), the then Vice-President Rev. Robert Lippe, after recounting how the six founder members came to be together at the Shelter Stone, close to Loch Avon and just below Cairn Gorm, tells us this:— "Before finally taking our separate ways we spontaneously and unanimously agreed to form ourselves into the Cairngorm Club, the name being naturally suggested by the monarch mountain so full in view in the foreground and calmly looking down on our meeting. Office-bearers were elected by acclamation and with that generous and genial absence of selfishness which has always characterised our society we resolved to open our ranks to the admission of men and women of heroic spirit and possessed of souls open to the influences and enjoyment of nature pure and simple as displayed amongst our loftiest mountains." (In the passing it may be noted that this founding of the Club was immediately followed by an ascent of Cairn Gorm as the first Club meet, five of the party traversing it to Loch Morlich.) The second pertinent quotation is in Volume 12 of the *Cairngorm Club Journal*, at page 166, in an account of the toast to the Club at its 1929 Annual Dinner by its then President, the already mentioned Dr. James A. Parker. Parker had served on a national committee, the Scottish Forest Reserve Committee, whose purpose it was to promote the establishment of national parks with the Cairngorms as a prime candidate. He is quoted thus "I think that one essential condition of such a reserve is that it must be mountain land remote from civilisation and that it must be so large that no matter how popular it may become it will still retain its charm of solitude. (Applause). The Cairngorms have this essential to a degree perhaps not equalled by any other area of land in the Highlands. Probably no other solitudes in this country are so remote from civilisation as say Loch Avon or the rough corries of Braeriach and Beinn a' Bhuid." Later he points out "Absolutely no huts or works of any kind must be erected or carried out in or near the innermost sanctuaries of the Cairngorms or on the summits of the mountains themselves. These must be left untouched."

Such then are two expressions of demand for and appreciation of wilderness character generally and of the unique suitability of the Cairngorms to meet that demand. They stem one from nearly 90 years ago, the other from over 50. They epitomise the feelings of Cairngorm Club members then and are no less representative of the feelings of Cairngorm Club members now.

Cairn Gorm as Bruce, Lippe and Parker knew it was very different from the Cairn Gorm of today. The development of facilities for downhill skiing has brought profound changes. Many active Cairngorm Club members, some still only in their 40's, remember when an ascent of Cairn Gorm — the Club has a meet there at least once a year — began, from the north, at Loch Morlich. As shown on the map lodged (1957 edition of the OS 1in to 1 mile Seventh Series map), there were no roads beyond Loch Morlich other than private forestry roads. Above, one had a prospect of a mountain apparently untouched by human intervention, with wooded lower slopes giving way to moorland which in turn merged into deep corries leading through steep and in parts precipitous back walls to the plateau itself. The standard route up as shown on that and current maps was by the ridge between Coire Cas and Coire na Ciste, past the present Ptarmigan Restaurant. Anyone climbing in any of the northern corries or following the corrie backwalls along the edge of the plateau was already well into the wilderness area as Rev. Lippe in 1887 or Dr. Parker in 1929 would have known it. Indeed the latter would certainly have considered Coire Gas and Coire na Ciste, the sites of the present skiing complex, as "innermost sanctuaries".

Now, the upper part of the old standard route is largely obstructed by snow fencing and crossed by a ski tow; there is a high level restaurant; the summit is marred by huts and masts; the solitude aspect is lost not only because of these intrusions but also because of the visible and often audible presence of chairlifts and ski tows and, in the skiing season, snowmobiles and other service vehicles. Fortunately the two fine corries to the west, Coire an Lochain and Coire an t-Sneachda, are as yet unspoiled. The ridge of the Fiacail a'Coire Cas shields the visitor to these corries from the sights and sounds of Coire Cas. The hillwalker can have a pleasant and rewarding day free for the most part from intrusions of downhill skiing by ascending into these corries or by following the course of the Lurcher's Burn to the plateau and thence round the rims of these corries to the summit of Cairn Gorm.

If the present proposals were to be approved and implemented these corries too would be despoiled. The qualities which the climber and hillwalker seek would be permanently degraded. The walker who wished to reach the summit of Cairn Gorm from the north without being faced with the artefacts necessary for downhill skiing would find it impossible to do so except by two roundabout and unnatural routes, one along the ridge to the north-north-east of the summit and the other even longer from the

Lairig Ghru track. It is no part of the Cairngorm Club's present case that the clock should be turned back or that the present facilities should never have been allowed. It is merely submitted that enough is enough, and that the whole eastern half of the northern corries of Cairn Gorm having been given over to skiing interests, the western half should not lightly be given over to the same interests. The Club believes that it should not properly be up to persons such as itself to argue a conclusive case against the granting of planning permission for the despoliation of Coire an Lochain and Coire an t-Sneachda; it believes that it is firmly the onus of the developers and their supporters to prove that their proposals if implemented would produce a public gain greater than the public loss. In this connection it is pertinent to consider the relative impact that skiers and other mountain recreation groups have on each other. The ski tows, snow fences and other facilities which are the inevitable concomitants of downhill skiing have a very considerable impact on the pleasure which other recreational users of mountains, whether active ones such as climbers or more passive admirers of scenery or flora and fauna, derive from their activities; furthermore, when the downhill skiers leave the mountain their facilities remain as a year-round reminder of their intermittent activities. By contrast, the activities of other recreational users of the mountains have negligible impact on each other and no impact on the activities of skiers.

The Club accepts that the existing skiing facilities are overloaded at some weekends and in holiday periods; it has adequate anecdotal evidence of this from its own members who ski there and accepts the findings to this effect of the Winter Sports Market Research Study prepared for the Highlands & Islands Development Board and listed as a report to the Winter Sports Technical Working Party. This same report, however, points out that the present facilities are under utilised on weekdays and are adequate to cope with any likely increase in demand for weekday skiing for many years to come. It appears then that the extra facilities are needed only to satisfy the excess demand at weekends and holiday periods. Out of an average season of 150 days the extra facilities are therefore required for at most 50 of them. After allowing for days when skiing is not possible because of adverse weather conditions and for the lower demand at the beginning and end of the season, the number of days when the extra facilities are really needed will be much less than this. The Club maintains that the serious degradation of the environment of the western corries and the gross impairment of the pleasure and enjoyment of climbing and walking in them, which will be occasioned over 365 days a year, is too high a price to pay to satisfy the convenient but not essential requirements of a single recreational group for only 20 to 30 days a year. It must be remembered that if the objections to the proposed developments are sustained the snowfields will still be there, unimpaired by the activities of climbers and other recreational groups, for skiers to enjoy if they are simply prepared to leave behind the mechanical uplift facilities. If however

the development were to go ahead, the climbers and walkers would be unable to enjoy these corries; their essential qualities would have been destroyed. The Club would not wish these thoughts to be viewed as indicative of any feeling that the debate over the present proposals involves any direct and simple confrontation between skiers and climbers. This is not so. As already mentioned, the Club does include skiers amongst its members. Most other climbing clubs are the same. The situation is one where two groups with a certain common element both have special needs which can be satisfied only in a few places. In these circumstances there must be a rational assessment firstly of the loss which would accrue to each group through the granting or refusing of planning permission and secondly of the possibility of making good that loss elsewhere.

So far as skiers are concerned the loss of potential facilities that would result from refusal of the present application would, in the view of the Cairngorm Club, easily be capable of being made good by development on a comparable scale elsewhere. The skier wishes snow, slopes of certain gradients, ease of access from home, and in some cases nearby accommodation and facilities. He does not seek grandeur of scenery, solitude or interesting flora or fauna. If the facilities are provided the needs of the skier can be met in various other places. Some of these places might be valued by climbers as highly as the northern corries of Cairn Gorm, but not all. The Cairngorm Club would not object to ski development at Drumochter, either on the east side of the A9, in the corries thought suitable for development by the preparers of the Langmuir report, or on the west side which others consider suitable. Drumochter is as accessible from the south as Aviemore and as close to Dalwhinnie, Newtonmore and Kingussie for accommodation as Cairn Gorm is to Aviemore and Coylumbridge and the skiing potential seems as great; given that some winters, such as 1980 - 81 produce less snow than others, further development in a new area seems more likely to assure skiers of skiable snow somewhere than extended development in substantially the same place. What Drumochter does not have is substantial appeal to climbers; there are no recognised climbing cliffs, none of the grander, wilder aspects of the Cairngorms, only sprawling hills on the east and more interesting although still unexciting hills on the west, with the busy A9 and nearby railway excluding the climber's other desire, solitude. Cairn Gorm on the other hand possesses almost every feature that is attractive to climbers; it still has parts that are remote; it has cliffs for climbers and ridges and plateaux for walkers; it embraces on its various quarters a complete range of mountain landforms — high level plateaux, deep corries with precipitous back walls, shallower corries on the south, aretes as well as more gentle ridges between adjoining corries, boulder fields, the vast trenches in the form of the Lairig Ghru and upper Strath Nethy, and tors visible a short distance away on Beinn Mheadhoin and Ben Avon.

In making any comparison between the attractiveness to others of

possible sites for skiing developments it is surely worth considering what views past generations have formed. These can show whether current views are ephemeral or reflect a viewpoint which has been held for some time and can be expected still to be held in the foreseeable future.

The fact that Scotland's oldest and largest climbing club is as closely linked with a group of hills as the Cairngorm Club is with the Cairngorms cannot be simply a coincidence or an accident of a large centre of population being close to a significant mountain area. The closeness of this link is exemplified by the things already mentioned about the history of the Club such as its erection of mountain indicators and bridges. If other mountain areas had quite the same qualities there would surely be a 'Glencoe Club' or 'Arrochar Alps Club' based in Glasgow. It may be impossible to define it beyond what was expressed or implied in the quotations already made from the *Cairngorm Club Journal*, but the Cairngorms clearly have 'something' which other mountain areas do not.

This something has equally clearly been perceived over the years not just by members of the Cairngorm Club, nor indeed just by climbers. It must have been perceived fifty years ago by those urging the establishment of something in the nature of a national park as referred to in Volume 12 of the *Cairngorm Club Journal* at pages 163 and 164, copies of which are produced: it must have been perceived again in 1947 or thereby when there was fresh discussion of the whole question of national parks in Scotland. It was certainly again perceived in the 1970's by the Countryside Commission for Scotland, whose report 'Scotland's Scenic Heritage' (1978) includes it as one of the largest areas thought worthy of especial protection. With this continuity of high esteem for the Cairngorms in the past there can be little doubt that present objections to further development are founded in a viewpoint which will outlive objectors and supporters alike.

The Club is aware of the other arguments, including arguments of safety, which have been raised on behalf of climbers generally by the Mountaineering Council of Scotland. The Club supports all of these arguments and scarcely needs to add anything further to them. It hopes that its presenting a more personalised view of Cairn Gorm and its attractions will show how deeply individuals can feel about the preservation of their environment and how there is absolutely nothing novel in the appreciation of that mountain and its qualities. The Club urges that no further development of this mountain be permitted, at least in the hitherto undeveloped corries, and that it be conserved without further despoliation for future generations of "men and women of heroic spirit and possessed of souls open to the influence and enjoyment of nature pure and simple."