

Marking the Millennium

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In 1997, when I was rash enough to say something about not wanting to be Club Secretary for ever, our good President took it into her head that I should be the next President and therefore the one to lead the Club into the new millennium. So it came to pass that a volunteer was found for the secretaryship and I had no grounds to protest that I could well enough be considered for the presidency on a future occasion. The Club in its benevolent wisdom endorsed the outgoing President's recommendation, making it fairly and squarely one of my tasks to lead our planning of what we might do for the millennium.

The first question was of course whether we need do anything at all. Even by late 1997 there was so much being said about millennium events and millennium problems that one was tempted to resist being caught up in the hype; we could have chosen to show what level-headed people we all were, and to do nothing. However it seemed likely that members did expect something, and so the thinking caps had to be put on. I had fond recollections of how, for our centenary, members from all over the country, many of whom for me had for fifteen years just been names on a list, came to our overnight meet and made it a very special event. I wondered what we could do that might prove a similar draw. For the centenary the overnight element linked with the founding of the Club, but in year 2000 an overnight meet without the historical connections was unlikely to be so popular, and would be so far into the year that members would think we were slow off the mark. Equally, doing anything too close to the start of the year might have members giving it a miss because they had so recently had their fill of millennial activities.

I think that I am not alone in having some of my best thoughts when I am not really thinking. It was as I was driving up to Braemar some time in 1998 that I came to have ideas along the lines which led to the "Braemar Gathering" of 31 March - 2 April 2000. Braemar seemed just the right place to do something, on the doorstep of our home hills, the place where we had our own cottage and where there was ample other accommodation, and with our members so fond of dancing we could intersperse outdoor activity with social activity.

The committee addressed the question of millennium events in more earnest in October 1998. It was confirmed that we should not simply opt out of millennium events, and when we discussed matters in more detail a scheme for what we might do fell into place remarkably easily. My idea for a Braemar Gathering found favour, with the preferred date late March/early April, avoiding short days and perhaps difficult travelling

conditions for those coming from afar. Geoff Cumming came up with the idea of obtaining a photograph for future generations of members to marvel at, with the venue the same as and date as near as possible to those of a Club expedition in 1890 from which we had a photograph of over 100 members and guests at the summit of Mount Keen in their Victorian finery. To complement these social and activity-centred events, we should also do something environmental.

The Braemar Gathering was the element that needed the greatest forward planning. We had to have reasonably complete plans before we could ask members if they were interested, but had to know that we had enough support before taking the plans too far. For our envisaged social evening, we set our sights on the Stag Ballroom at Mar Lodge, a setting as distinctive as we could hope for, and we thought that if the self-catering accommodation at Mar Lodge were available it would hold appeal for quite a number of members. We were lucky with both. The Stag Ballroom, while not used a lot, was occasionally used for private functions, and yes we could have it, as long as we accepted that the loos might be a little primitive if hoped-for improvements did not take place fast enough; at least the fall-back measure would be portaloos, not the plantation at Linn of Dee. The accommodation within the Lodge was not normally in much demand until Easter, and so our end-March slot was fine from that point of view. We half-hoped that the old Mar Lodge bar might be capable of re-opening on a one-off basis to rekindle fond memories for those who had been able to partake of a drink there by the roaring log fire in the days before Panchaud closed it, but whilst we were readily allowed to see inside it there could be no question of restoring it to its former use.

With the feasibility of this venture established, it was time to gauge if it and the Mount Keen photograph idea appealed to our members. So we circulated members with an indication of the proposals and sought responses. We knew that some members would be keen but unable to commit themselves so far ahead, and we therefore invited them to rate themselves in one of three categories - keen and as sure as they could be, keen but unsure, or uninterested or unavailable. My postman must have wondered over the next three weeks why I had such a surge of mail with handwritten addresses. Yes, the response was good, for both events, and whilst there were the inevitable disappointments in that some distinguished members could not manage, there were the heartening instances of members from afar who could and would make the effort to come to one or both of the events. Certainly the level of support was more than enough to warrant the plans being taken further.

For the Braemar event we had to consider detailed plans for our Ceilidh Dance, other activities for the weekend, accommodation, transport and booking arrangements. For the Ceilidh Dance we were pleased to find that Reel Din, who had played very acceptably at our October 1999

Ceilidh Dance, were free and willing to come to Braemar. The provision of a meal initially seemed more problematic, but we then learned that Robbie Paton, the new steward at the Braemar Golf Club, would relish an opportunity to exercise his culinary talents. We thought that a bar facility might also be appreciated by drouthy dancers and arranged that with the Moorfield Hotel. We reckoned that the Ceilidh Dance would be a suitable occasion to show our appreciation of the support we have from a number of local people whom it would not be realistic to invite to the Club Dinner, and we extended invitations to about 15, of whom all that were free did choose to join us.

For other activities we wanted enough of a programme to afford opportunities for members to do things in company, not necessarily just walks, and yet not have them feeling that they were expected to join in pre-arranged activities for a whole weekend. We settled on a Friday evening rendezvous in the Fife Arms Hotel, a Saturday morning rendezvous for those wanting a whole day out, a later Saturday morning rendezvous for an escorted walk up Glen Ey, slots for "viewings" of Mar Lodge, a ranger-led low-level walk on the Sunday morning, and a Sunday lunchtime barbecue at Muir Cottage. These we felt offered a reasonable number and range of options, none individually needing major planning or such as would leave us embarrassed if they did not command support.

In regard to accommodation there were some 26 places available in self-catering suites at Mar Lodge (plus the possibility of overspill in staff quarters) and 18 bunks at Muir Cottage; others would have to stay with friends, take rooms at a hotel or bed and breakfast, or camp. We reckoned that we should offer the Mar Lodge accommodation first of all to a selected band of worthy, mainly senior, members, whom we hoped would attend, including some coming from further afield who had been out of touch for some time. (Do I hear rumblings of Undemocratic? Unconstitutional? Well, that is how it was done and it worked out very well. Those who stayed in the Lodge loved it, and no-one to my knowledge felt passed over.) To save members who wanted hotel/B&B accommodation the trouble of tracking down names and contact details, we compiled our own list from the published tourist brochure and circulated it; this too seemed to work well. Muir, surprisingly, was not in undue demand, and, so far as I know, no-one ended up camping.

Having made all our preparations we had to see that members were informed of them, and we had to log their responses. I should perhaps have delegated more of this to others, but having arranged much of the detail myself and having relatively recently stood down as Club Secretary and therefore still having up-to-date membership details on my PC, I found it as easy just to follow through with this myself. Apart from accommodation at Mar Lodge and the Ceilidh Dance, for which we did need definite numbers, we did not want members to feel obliged to

commit themselves in advance, and the form which they were invited to complete was more a request for indications of probable intentions than a booking form. Again my postman must have wondered what had triggered such a surge of non-business mail. At this point I was a relative novice on a PC with MicroSoft applications, my earlier computer experience being on something quite different, but my facility with spreadsheets and sorting of data improved by leaps and bounds as I sought to record members' answers in a form which could be updated daily and yield information quickly about this and that.

At the outset we had no real idea how many would want to join our Braemar Bash as it came to be known. We priced the Ceilidh Dance tickets on the basis of an optimistic turnout of 100 paying members. I would have been disappointed if we had not managed 80 but would not have been too surprised if we were short of 100. Little did any of us realise how well our members would respond. The support for the Ceilidh Dance, which of course included guests, had us wondering if we would have to set a cut-off number. We sold 139 tickets and had 15 guests of the Club. Altogether 102 members took part in the weekend.

As the time approached there were happily few snags to resolve, just a change of plan about the bus to allow our Braemar-based dancers to enjoy their drams and get to and fro in comfort. Inevitably there were one or two last minute call-offs, but these were balanced by a few late extras. My last job before heading for Braemar was to print off copies of an overall attendance list, a Ceilidh Dance list, a bus list, and a programme of times and rendezvous, and to arrange weather-proofing for those which would be on display outside. For once I took an extra day off from the office, so that I could go up early on the Friday and check a few things on the spot. The previous Sunday I had in fact stopped past Mar Lodge and gone to the Stag Ballroom. It was in a most undanceable and unusable condition - the floors were awash with lengths of wood panelling, incomplete wiring was in evidence here and there, and the WCs and wash-hand basins were arranged as an obstacle course over the dance floor. Yes, Sandra Dempster acknowledged, the works were a little behind schedule, but there was still a week to go and there was always the possibility of portaloos (at no extra charge to the Club!). Five days later all was different, not quite complete but within striking distance, and with the threat of portaloos lifted. At the Golf Club Robbie Paton and his wife had everything in hand - though having only newly extricated their full panoply of cooking and serving utensils from the container in which they had been stored while the new clubhouse was built. So by the Friday afternoon I could actually almost switch off from organising and look forward to meeting up with members. At Mar Lodge, we found members arriving and being most impressed at the plush accommodation and warm welcome. In the village in the evening we stationed ourselves at the Fife

Arms to meet up with others as they arrived and to ensure that they were aware of plans for the morrow. The weather on the Saturday morning was not what we might have hoped for, and whether for that reason or because most wanted to conserve their energies for the evening, only a handful undertook a full day's exploit. However the walk up Glen Ey, with Graham Ewen and Eddie Martin pointing out things which they had learned from their researches into the history of the glen, and Hazel Witte saying a few words about the Piper's Wood, was attended by about 80.

By the late Saturday afternoon the Stag Ballroom was at last looking a fitting venue for a function in the evening, and the catering and bar facilities started to appear, soon followed by the band. At this point however disaster nearly struck, for whenever the band connected a particular piece of equipment a fuse blew and a whole side of the hall lost power. The problem was still unresolved as members and guests started to arrive in force, and your President was torn between the need to be sociable and welcoming and the need to do what he could to promote a solution to the problem with the electricians. Eventually our indispensable local member, Norman Robertson, although joining us as a guest, was able to make his contribution as sparkie and to get us going. After this the evening went extremely well. The dancing was varied and the dance floor was invariably full. The meal was a veritable feast and the only disappointment of the evening was that having eaten our fill we saw so much fine food still left.

By the time we were leaving the Stag Ballroom, the weather had turned to light but persistent snow. By the Sunday morning the snow was quite considerable. I suspected that the walk up Glen Quoich, which we had arranged with Peter Holden, one of the Mar Lodge Rangers, would have a nil turnout, but no, there were a dozen or so stalwarts there still keen to go, and we had our walk followed by a cup of tea by the fireside at Allanaquoich. In Glen Quoich the conditions were not unpleasant, and I was thinking that our projected lunchtime barbecue might still be possible, but as I later drove past Muir a skyward spiral of spindrift told me that this was not to be. Many members had in fact by now decided to head for home, but a few of us took ourselves to Mar Lodge, where those in residence were staying another night, and imposed ourselves upon their hospitality - enhanced by the plush comfort of their quarters. So the first of our millennium ventures had been successfully accomplished.

The Mount Keen photograph trip on 6 May seemed less of a logistical exercise, but that may just have been an impression because of Graham Ewen looking after the bus bookings and Brian Davey arranging the photographer. My part in the planning had been sounding out hotels (with just the one real option emerging) and trying to obtain permission for

limited vehicular access up Glen Tanar (something which all approaches through official channels and a few less official ones failed to secure, but which was accorded to a select band of members in response, I can only infer, to the feminine charms of the past President who many years before had inveigled me into taking on the secretaryship!).

It had been a worry that our chosen day, which we obviously could not change at the last minute, would turn out to be one with cloud which would prevent a summit photograph, and we had contingency plans for stopping everyone short, below the cloud base, so as to get at least some sort of photograph. In the result our worries were needless. Although there was some low cloud as we left Aberdeen in the morning, by the time that we started up Glen Tanar the weather was fine and sunny, albeit a little chilly. We were a mixture of slow walkers, fast walkers, cyclists and even runners. We had set 1 p.m. as the time for the actual photographs at the summit, hoping that this would allow everyone plenty of time to get there and also time to get back to the bus or to private transport soon enough to make our evening meal rendezvous at Aboyne. Inevitably many were at the summit with much time to kill, whereas others were still pecking up the last lap as we tried to shepherd those already there into the best location for the photograph. Despite the good overhead conditions, there was a brisk breeze at the summit and most members felt the need to don their full complement of outer layers. I had set myself the task of "photographing the photograph", taking video footage as well as slides of all the setting up arrangements. It was Ken Thomson who along with the photographer Mike Davidson took primary responsibility for positioning the company of 107. Eventually, with everyone (or so we thought) in place, the "shoot" began. Mike Davidson had just the right manner to get people to smile repeatedly as he took what seemed to be an endless sequence of shots, these mainly in colour but some also in black and white. After the photographs with the whole company, we thought that when we had a goodly number of past Presidents and other past office-bearers, as well as most of the current committee, present together with a photographer, we should take some shots of them.

We learned afterwards that despite the length of time that we stayed at the summit there was one person on his way to join us who did not quite make it in time. The son of a member up from the south, who had, I recall, been flying from Amsterdam to Edinburgh and then taking a hired car to Glen Tanar meaning to run up the glen and the hill, suffered delay over the hire car and reached the summit just after the photo session was over.

Those who had travelled independently returned to their starting points in Glen Tanar or Glen Esk, but the bus party descended to Bridge of Muick. The route seemed extremely long and hard underfoot, though sharing part of the photographer's heavy load of equipment may have

exaggerated this impression! When we met up at the Charleston Hotel in Aboyne, there were several members who had felt they could not manage the ascent of the hill, and on the basis that it would be a shame not to include them in any of the day's set of photographs our ever-willing photographer re-assembled his kit and had us all arranged at the edge of the Aboyne Green for still more photographs. All in all the day was a complete success.

A little later Brian Davey received a batch of prints from Mike Davidson. Mike had already chosen those photographs which he rated best (those with the fewest grimaces, shut eyes and hair-obscured faces!), and it was left to Brian and myself to decide which to offer to our members. It would not have been feasible to let everyone see a whole range of prints and let them choose the ones in which they personally looked best. The photographs were all of excellent quality and we were well pleased with our choice of photographer. We circulated members with requests for orders and showed what was on offer at as many Club events as was possible. There were one or two members who attended and for some reason showed no interest in having any of the photographs, but in general the uptake was good and we provided a total of 181 to our members.

Graham Ewen and I were keen to put names to all the faces in the main summit photograph. The majority were no problem, and some whom neither of us immediately recognised we could identify from the list of names as having been in company with someone whom we did recognise. Eventually, with a little help from others we managed to identify all but one, who we think must have been a non-member just choosing to join us when he saw us all there. The results of our efforts can be seen on page 58.

These then were our millennial activities. In addition, however, we had our input to an environmental project, the giving of £2000 to the Clachnaben Path Trust to help with their work on the footpath to the summit of Clachnaben (*see the article on page 21 - Ed.*). In July 2000 that the Trust had a small ceremony to inaugurate the path (notwithstanding that some work nearer the summit still had to be completed). I as President and Gill as past-President went along on a morning of splendid weather to attend the ceremony. Unfortunately with it being a week-day and both of us having to get back for commitments in the afternoon we were unable to inspect the path all the way to the summit. However a number of members recovered quickly enough from the Annual Dinner in November to complete the ascent on the Sunday, and to admire the impressive progress on the path, which was well worth our support.

I wonder what our next big event will be. Will 125 years from our foundation be worth marking? Or the time when our cherished

Cairngorms become a national park? Only time will tell. But I am sure that our members will still be as enthusiastic as they were in 1987 and 2000.

The Sounds of a Lonely Mountain

If we are very lucky, there are moments on the mountain when time seems to stop. The beauty of these moments is that we often carry them with us for the rest of our lives. They are only a thought away when needed.

The sound of the lonely mountain
sweeps as music to my ear
I stand in peace and wonder
that I ever stood in fear

Because of understanding lost
through strain or ever giving
Parts of soul that should be mine,
that were, in the beginning

The mountain soft beneath my feet
the hillside stream that's flowing,
Strength floods back and doubts subside,
my heart's wild beat is slowing

And now I stand at peace again,
with all the sweetest sounds
The small bird's call, the rushing stream
fond memories all around

So watch the sky and feel the peace
smell the beds of heather
Smile at a friend or hold a hand
share your time together

Along life's path you'll cherish this,
this lasting glimpse in time
As memories come flooding back,
through a picture put to rhyme

Robbie Middleton
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