

Muir Cottage, Inverey

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Nestling amongst the Scots pines and the mountains at the side of the River Dee, the Cairngorm Club's Muir Cottage at Inverey dates from the 1800s. The Cairngorm Club originally leased the cottage in 1950, when Aberdeen University Civil Engineering lecturer Dr. George Taylor led volunteers to adapt it for use as a club hut. There was a living room used as both a kitchen and sitting room, and beds for 12 in three bedrooms, two in adjacent wooden annexes. At a cost of £150, a brick lean-to was built with a scullery and washroom. Twenty bags of building sand were purchased and delivered in hessian sacks. The sand was sixpence a bag, but the sacks were two shillings each. Graham Ewen, an Aberdonian like many Club members, cleaned the bags for return, thus saving the Club two pounds.

George Taylor, latterly an honorary Club member, was the same man who for real busman's holidays designed and managed the construction of many of the bridges in the Cairngorms. In 1972, through his generous benefaction, Muir and the surrounding land were purchased from Captain Alexander Ramsay of Mar for £1,275 and 50 new pence (we called them new pence in 1972). The original deed of ownership of the feu of Muir of Inverey was signed, after much debate, on August 16th 1972, about the time of the opening of the upgraded cottage. The ground was sold to Sheila Murray, President, Eric Johnston, Secretary and Alexander Reid, Treasurer. You can see a photograph of the opening inside the hut. Also present at the 1972 opening were Robbie Middleton and his fiancée Judy Wilson, who six weeks later became Mr. and Mrs. Middleton.

I first visited Muir as a member of the Glasgow Glenmore Club in 1974 and remember that it was considered then to be very up-market as a club hut. Along with others I have enjoyed many stays at Muir for winter walking, last Munro parties, and Burns Suppers, and I have particularly enjoyed family holidays there, walking and seeing children of all ages mixing, playing and socialising. Often one parent would be away hillwalking whilst the other parent took the kids out on expeditions and then vice versa the next day. It was never certain which parent had most earned their evening drink.

The Hut Custodian in 1972 was Peter Howgate. Under his direction the timber building was constructed, with four dormitories sleeping a total of 18, two toilets with showers, and a small sitting room separate from the dining room (later devoted to four beds normally reserved for Club members). After Peter, Denis Hardy was custodian for 8 years, Eddie Martin for 13 years and then Robbie Middleton from 1993 to 2005.

To begin with, the use of Muir was mostly by the Club's members, often with their families. However Muir came to be very popular with members of other clubs, and the level of outside usage has for many years been greater than the level of member usage. Further, over the years, the hut has accommodated groups with disabled pupils for summer breaks, including those from Marpool School, Beechwood School and Rosehill Special Needs Centre, all from Aberdeen. Hut Custodians have received letters from children enthralled at seeing red deer and red squirrels. The cottage has also often been used by scouts, girl guides, groups training for Duke of Edinburgh's awards, pensioner groups, over-50s walking groups, Glenmore Lodge trainees, and many other hillwalking and mountaineering clubs and outdoor centres.

As with any property, regular general maintenance and improvements have been carried out, such as double-glazing the windows, emptying the septic tank, renewing the shower cubicles and stove, repairing the roofing, waterproofing the walls, and replacing barge boards. The water supply was originally piped from a small burn, but this sometimes ran dry, and there were reports of visitors being all lathered up in the shower but without rinsing water. Some visitors even had to drink their whisky neat, poor things! The burn water was potentially subject to pollution such as cryptosporidium from animals, and some years ago the Club renewed the water supply by installing a few hundred metres of piping from a well on the hillside. Using this, we were also able to supply the next-door Inverey Youth Hostel with a more reliable free supply. The Youth Hostel is sometimes used jointly with Muir, when extra beds are needed.

Each April, the Club has a work weekend, when the custodian enlists the remarkably willing and diverse help of members as scrubbers, painters and general odd-jobbers, and the building is given a thorough spring clean, inside and out. It seems to be traditional – if sexist – that the custodian replenishes the supplies of cleaning materials, while his wife washes the curtains and pillow cases. The sight of Robbie staggering out of the Braemar chemists under 150 jumbo-sized packs of toilet rolls has provoked some local comments not fit for publication in the *Journal*.

In 2003, it was decided that the hut needed more than its annual spring-clean, and that major improvements and an upgraded extension were required to support the increasing numbers of users. Those who had seen flashes around the common room also reckoned there was a need to upgrade the electrics. The demand for use by school parties and disabled groups had increased materially and the Disabilities Discrimination Act had come into fuller force. It was felt that doors needed to be widened to permit easier access, and that a new toilet with a shower suitable for the less able was needed, as were safety features such as rails on the bunk beds, access ladders to upper bunks, access ramps and exterior lighting. There was considerable heat loss through the dormitory roofing, and the



Rebuilding in Progress

felt tiles, which had lasted 33 years, were even to Aberdonians well beyond their sell-by date. The existing 1950s lean-to was unsightly, damp, suffered from mice, was poorly insulated and awkward to reach. The water-supply pipe under the road and the water storage in the hut needed upgrading to complement the new water supply from the hillside. A sub-committee was set up comprising Robbie Middleton (Custodian), Ian Bryce (President), Derek Pinches (Treasurer), and Mike Forsyth, i.e. a master mariner, two civil engineers, and a quantity surveyor. Many other Club members willingly gave help and advice.

One of the difficulties facing the sub-committee was how to consult the Club members, many of whom care passionately about Muir and some who even regard it as their second home. In order to allow the members as much say as possible, plans were produced by our architect (Andrew Keir of Robb Keir Design at Aboyne) and these were posted on our website, printed in our news letter and displayed at indoor meets. Members were asked to study the plans and to comment on them. Both verbal and written comments were made and the sub-committee considered these with the architect. Certain lady members insisted on being involved with choosing the kitchen fittings and as a result the sub-committee had little say about the layout in the kitchen. Unfortunately the kitchen is not wheelchair-friendly, but it was decided that it would be too expensive to achieve this.

Fund-raising started in December 2003, after the extent of the project had been defined and agreed with the Club. By September 2004 we were confident enough to proceed. The £75,000 project was co-funded by the Cairngorms National Park LEADER+ (40%), Aberdeenshire Council (16%), Aberdeen City Council (8.5%), the Scottish Mountaineering Trust (6.5%), and the Lottery Awards for All Fund (6.5%), with Club members themselves donating the remaining 22.5%. In order to allow tax benefits and to meet the demands of funding bodies, the Club changed its legal status and is now classed as a Community Amateur Sports Club (CASC).



*Robbie and Judy Middleton
at the grand opening*

Mike Forsyth arranged tenders, and from October 2004 to January 2005 the hut was closed for renovations. The lean-to was demolished and a new extension provided, more in keeping with the style and standard (and floor level!) of the rest of the building. The car parking area was improved, and the main door approach provided with a ramp. Insulation followed by aluminum sheeting was fixed onto the existing roof of the dormitories. Joyce Ritchie, then our booking secretary, became concerned about the Club's honesty in accepting bookings for January. She wondered if the President and Hut Custodian were telling her porkie pies about how long the hut would be shut. In order to be within budget and on time we celebrated New Year 2005 (starting on the second of January) by painting and cleaning to prepare for the first booking of the year (and saving £3,000 into the bargain). What a way to celebrate New Year! After a few hours painting the ceiling, even stale mince pies tasted wonderful, and a few hours' work gave you quite a drouth.

Muir was officially re-opened on Friday 25th March 2005 by the Club's Honorary President Anne Cordiner. Over 90 members attended this 'Easter' meet, staying in Muir and at various places around Inverey, and climbing several different hills. After champagne at the opening, we

had a celebration ceilidh/dinner on the Saturday night in the Stag Ballroom at Mar Lodge, with Dennis Mortimer and Colin Dewar playing. Someone at the opening suggested that Muir should be regularly available for champagne receptions and weddings, as well as for the many birthday parties, last Munro celebrations and barbecues that are held there. But hey, it is in a good hillwalking and climbing area, and the aims of the Club do not mention such activities.

Now, although some small works remain to be completed, we can offer first-class accommodation for outdoor activities in this beautiful mountain area, with access for less-able groups in a comfortable building where their needs can be catered for. The Club is almost certainly the first in Scotland to improve its hut in line with the new disabilities discrimination legislation. We also offer contact with the locally run charity 'Sport Any Way', which offers outdoor equipment for less-able people and is based in nearby Braemar.

Readers will hardly need reminding that there are over thirty Munros in this Cairngorms National Park area, where winter often lingers long on the high tops and serious winter routes abound. With new footpaths by the National Trust and UDAT, some are within easy reach and some require longer high-level approaches. There are also many fine traverse routes that can finish at Muir, such as over Ben Avon and Bheinn a' Bhuird from the Lecht road, from Spittal of Glen Shee or Blair Atholl in the south, or from Aviemore over the big tops like Macdui and Braeriach or through one of the Lairigs. Fine routes from Muir itself include that over Derry Cairngorm, Ben Macdui and Carn a' Mhaim, or (after a short car trip) Lochnagar, not to mention the hills to the south that can be climbed from the door.

The Cairngorm Club has been extremely fortunate to have had over the last twelve years as hut custodian Robbie Middleton, backed up by his wife Judy. In view of his commitment to running Muir so efficiently and spearheading the refurbishment, Robbie was made an Honorary Club Member at our last AGM. Richard Shirreffs has now taken over as Custodian, with Alex Barbour taking reservations at muirbooking@cairngormclub.org.uk. The hut is almost fully booked at weekends for the next eighteen months. Many thanks to the funding bodies and all the members who gave up time and money to ensure that Muir Cottage will for years to come provide a comfortable and all-ability hut in this beautiful area of The Cairngorms National Park.

Please support your new Hut Custodian Richard Shirreffs by helping out at work weekends.