

The Shelter Stone Revisited

John Adams

The Shelter Stone has always figured as an icon in the annals of the Cairngorm Club. The idea for a club was conceived and put into effect there in 1887, and part of the centenary celebrations of 1987 was a gathering of Club members there, after an overnighter in the surrounding hills. The wording on the Club's coat of arms is 'Clac Dian', derived from the Gaelic *clac dhian*, meaning shelter stone.

All this was unknown to me some fifty years ago, although I had heard of the Shelter Stone. In the early 1930s, during a period of unemployment in the great depression, my father had been there on one of his extreme expeditions, which involved taking his bicycle through the Lairig Ghru and other routes through the mountains.

In early July 1955, after the end of the summer term at Brechin High School, I embarked with two school friends on a week's expedition to the Cairngorms. My father was persuaded to take us by car over the Cairn o' Mount to spend our first night at Feughside Youth Hostel near Strachan (long since closed as a Youth Hostel and now a private house). In the morning we travelled to Braemar, presumably by bus, and then set off for the Cairngorms, with the intended destination of Aviemore. We walked to Derry Lodge and Luibeg where we spent the night at Bob Scott's bothy at a cost of one shilling each. The sleeping accommodation was in the hay store separated from the resident garron by a thin board partition. In the morning we decided to make our next destination the Shelter Stone and to spend the night there. When we informed Bob Scott of our intentions, I remember being told in no uncertain terms that we had to be careful in our route finding, and of the difficulties of the terrain ahead. Undaunted, however, by these warnings we set out up Glen Derry and Choire Etchachan to Loch Etchachan, and after a good deal of searching we found the Shelter Stone on our descent to Loch Avon.

Although the summer of 1955 is on record as one of the warmest, the night-time temperature at an altitude of around 750m is always low. In the dark cavity of the Shelter Stone, we managed a little light with matches and candles, and wearing all our spare clothing (we were traveling light without sleeping bags), we survived a cold and rather sleepless night. At first light after a quick breakfast we made our way up the Feith Buidhe, onto the plateau and the summit of Ben Macdui. Our first Munro, although at that time none of us had heard of Munro or his Tables!

The descent from Ben Macdui into the Lairig Ghru, down the steep and boulder-strewn slope, was difficult and time-consuming (we did not



*Inside the Shelter Stone, 1930
Fred Adams at the top right-hand corner*



At the Shelter Stone, 1955

know of the Allt Clach nan Taillear route of descent). The aim was to reach Aviemore Youth Hostel before that night, but darkness was falling as we reached the Rothiemurchus forest, and three exhausted youths were prepared to sleep under a tree, when by good fortune we came across a cottage where bed and breakfast was available.

The remainder of the trip was based at the Aviemore Youth Hostel. With hired bicycles we explored Gleann Einich in glorious sunny weather, adding Braeriach, Cairntoul and the Devil's Point to our Munro tally. Our return route was through the Lairig Ghru with nights spent at Corrou bothy and Inverey Youth Hostel, before we took the service bus home from Braemar to Brechin via Aberdeen.

This memorable first-time trip to the Cairngorms in such glorious summer weather established for me the beginning of a life-long association with the mountains. Had it rained, who knows, I might have taken up golf! Over the years, when the demands of family and work permitted, I pursued the Munros and after joining the Cairngorm Club in 1983, "completed" in 1988, in my fiftieth year.

The Cairngorm Club celebrated its centenary in 1987 and one of the events during that year was an exhibition in John Dun's house in School Hill, Aberdeen. There were old photographs and Club memorabilia marking the passage of 100 years, with a visitors' book from the Shelter Stone from the early 1930s enclosed in a glass case. The book lay open presumably at a random page. When I visited the exhibition and glanced at the book, I was astonished to see my father's name, Fred Adams. Not only his name, but there, in the middle of the right-hand page, in his own handwriting, was an entry dated 28th September 1930. This refers to a party of four cyclists, including my father, who intended to spend the night in the Shelter Stone and climb Ben Macdui the following day, *en route* for Braemar. An uncanny and amazing coincidence for me, and one which filled in a few gaps in my knowledge of my father's early life. I knew that he had visited the Shelter Stone as a young man, but did not have the exact details. Fred Adams died in 1976 and among his possessions was a flash photograph of a group of men taken inside the Shelter Stone. The visitors' book entry now put a date to the photograph and some details of his exploits of that time. The photograph, is reproduced here, my father is on the top right hand corner of the picture.

In early July 2005 I decided to revisit the Shelter Stone, retracing my first steps after fifty years, and my father's after seventy-five years. With Bramble our black Labrador for company, the first part of the journey was by car to the Linn of Dee car park. From there, we walked in via Glen Derry and Choire Etchachan, to Loch Avon as before. We were fortunate to have sole possession of the Shelter Stone for the night. Older and wiser, this time, I was equipped with a four-season sleeping bag and a Gore-Tex bivvy bag (to repel any contact with a wet dog), and a head torch to cast

some light on the interior. We spent a very comfortable night, with only a little disturbance from the resident mouse, soon silenced, thanks to Bramble.

In the morning I was pleasantly surprised by the near-daylight conditions within the chamber. The entrance faces the head of Loch Avon, which is due east, and the early morning sun streams in through the entrance opening. I made use of this near-daylight and took a few measurements. The floor area is approximate 3.6m x 3.2m giving a usable floor area of some 11.5 square metres. The height varies from 1.7m to 1.3m at the entrance side, tapering to only 0.9m at the rear. The entrance opening measures 0.7m wide by 1.2m high. While photographic evidence now exists that the Stone has accommodated at least eleven, the claim from folklore that it once held eighteen armed men is hard to believe.

Certainly the Shelter Stone has long been an icon in the annals of the Club. An icon, too, in the lives of many of our members, not least my own.