

Renovating Corrou

Neil Reid

Aye, and we did it without a Bren Gun Carrier.

A mere 50-odd years since the Cairngorm Club rescued Corrou Bothy from complete dereliction, the MBA and assorted ne'er-do-wells had to step in and do the job over again. Just couldn't get the proper staff in those days I suppose! Now, after two years and 2,000 miles¹ Corrou, cold hole of many a Lairig Ghru-some legend, is now an all-singing, all-dancing five-star hotel of a bothy, where the only fear is of heat exhaustion, and even that can be tackled by opening - yes, opening! - the window. And perhaps even equal in importance to keeping warm, future bothiers can relegate the bothy spade to allotment duties and use their copies of *How to Shit in the Woods* for loo roll. There's a cludgie!

Corrou, relic of Victorian deerstalking days, has been one of the Highlands' busiest bothies for close on a century now. Described as a ruin in the 1930's, it nevertheless remained popular, situated conveniently halfway through the Lairig Ghru and at the foot of the Devil's Point and Cairn Toul. It was a base, too, for some early rock climbing pioneers. In 1950 it was rescued from total ruin by the Cairngorm Club, who replaced the roof and buttressed the north gable to prevent its by then imminent collapse. Amidst lots of hard work and hilarity, which involved ponies, a jeep and, improbably enough, a Bren Gun Carrier (which never quite made it), they certainly made it wind and watertight, but it remained a pretty unwelcoming place by the standards of many other bothies, even retaining a bare earth floor until the 1970's.

The new millennium brought a need for some serious action. Once more the fabric of the bothy was showing signs of wear and tear, and, more importantly, increasing usage meant the problem of pollution was becoming critical - especially as it was slap bang in the middle of a Site of Special Scientific Interest and the newly created Cairngorms National Park. Some even whispered the word demolition, but such sacrilegious

¹ 2,000 miles is, of course, a suspiciously round figure and is the result of gross misuse of journalistic licence. According to the records (themselves possibly subject to journalistic licence) 46 different people made a joint total of 113 trips over 18 working weekends, notching up 1,808 miles of walking in the process. However, as at least several walked in from the north on at least a few occasions, and at least one had to go chasing after an errant dog, and most went on several short walks with the bothy spade, an elegant but hard to typeset equation can be applied (you have to trust me on this) to give an actual figure for the total distance walked as ... well, as exactly 2,000 miles, actually.

talk resulted in an ambitious plan to build a toilet as part of a renovation of the bothy - a plan which seemed increasingly ambitious as more and more official bodies became involved because of the conservation concerns.

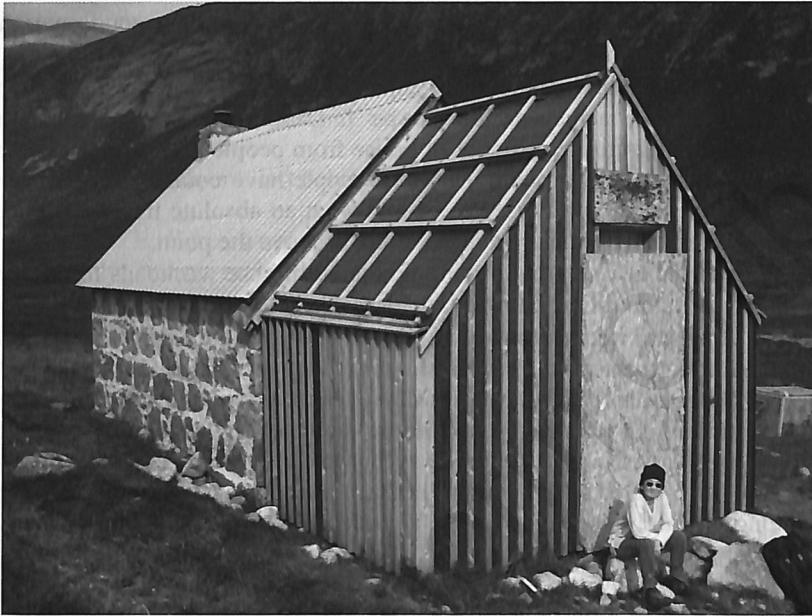
A huge organizational effort ensued. The back of a fag packet wasn't enough: proper plans and drawings had to be made, planning permission and environmental impact studies completed. Materials had to be begged, borrowed and ... bought. Finally, in May 2006, the tangible work began, though, oddly enough, it started nowhere near the Devil's Point, but in a garage in Kirkton of Skene, near Aberdeen, where Maintenance Officer Sandy Simpson and Kenny Freeman started prefabricating the surprisingly large toilet annex.

As the summer progressed, though, the action moved uphill. And, with five rough miles to go beyond the nearest vehicle track, arrangements had to be made to get the whole kit and caboodle up to the foot of the Devil's Point. Back in 1950 the Cairngorm Club had considered a helicopter, but dismissed the idea on the basis of cost. As mentioned above, a jeep took some of the load some of the way, and ponies were drafted in to take some of the heavier loads, such as cement; the Bren Gun Carrier was an experiment, and one which didn't quite work, although it sounds as if they had immense fun trying. However, the bulk of the carrying was done by manpower.

Some 50 years later, different economics applied and, through the coffers of the MBA and a sharing deal with path-builders, we benefited hugely from a number of helicopter flights taking the vast bulk of material and tools in. That's how the quiet of upper Glen Dee was rent first by helicopter flights and then by a generator and the cacophony of power tools, hammers and pick-axes that bemused many a seeker after solitude and quiet over the next 18 months.

The job was massive, the work demanding and hard, the midges at times utterly appalling, but the overriding impression left after 18 weekend work parties was what an absolute hoot it all was. Joiners, brickies and plumbers all had obvious value in the proceedings, but all sorts of folk came and lent a hand, whether as apprentice joiners/brickies or as labourers, carriers and gofers, with some (Okay, only the author) just specializing in asking daft laddie questions all the time to ensure the real experts never got any peace to work.

Sometimes conditions were arduous - the rain lashed down just exactly when the roofing panels had to go on, and a gust of wind lifted one panel right off the ground, nearly decapitating Kenny. And on several weekends passing walkers must have thought they'd come on the James Gang hideout, with us all masked up to try and deter several millions of incredibly persistent midges.



During the Construction, September 2007

Nor did it always work out quite right. On the second helicopter lift a door loaded on at Mar Lodge was missing by the time the 'copter reached Corrou - if you ever find it, check there's no-one underneath! The weekend the foundations had to be dug for the toilet annexe - a major excavation - only four folk turned up. When the 10-metre long trench was dug for the soakaway, before we'd actually got the pipework up - another major excavation - the helicopter firm went bust and one of Scotland's most well-used bothies spent all winter and a good part of the spring and summer with a huge great trench outside the front door. Work was finally completed and arguments had started over who was to get the honour (?) of the first 'usage' ... and we realized the 'faecal sacs' were the wrong size.

But despite the odd mishap and disaster it was all done, and in the process Corrou gained a new front door, an inner storm porch with door, wooden floor and wall-lining with sheep's wool insulation, a sleeping platform, a multi-fuel stove with a new flue, and an opening window. The outside walls have been completely repointed (long overdue) and, of course, the whole building is now a third longer with the addition of the wooden annex which houses the dry composting toilet. (Technical specs are available for those with an interest in such things, but since the author

has often been told he “doesn’t understand sh*t”, that’s a good enough excuse to leave it out here.)

Those who took part have developed a rather ridiculous level of pride in what they’ve achieved, but, to be fair, that’s largely due to the incredible and gratifying amount of praise from people passing through or staying at the bothy. Again and again people have commented on how cold and unwelcoming it used to be and what an absolute treat it is now. And there’ve been some great nights there to prove the point.

Ostensibly, we were all going up there all those weekends to do our social duty, to do lots of hard work. But really, we were all up there for the craic. A typical weekend might have seen everyone gather at Bob Scott’s on the Friday night for a few refreshments and a social soiree (or was that swally?) before an early start for a day of hard work at Corrou and then serious ceilidhing until half-past collapse-o-clock. At the ceilidh would be all the work party (anywhere between four and a dozen or so) and all sorts of ‘guests’ come to stay the night, perhaps expecting peace and quiet, but finding themselves caught up in a riot of story-telling, reminiscence, laughter and song.

They were nights that made all the hard work worthwhile, nights that epitomized what bothy culture is all about: far more than just a shelter from the elements. Where else do you find groups of folk, from 10 year-olds to over-70s, from all walks of life and all corners of the globe, pitching in together, sharing songs and experiences, food and even dry clothes on occasion. (No-one knows whether the false teeth left on the sleeping platform one weekend were meant to be shared around or not...). If that all sounds like an egalitarian idyll (apart from the teeth), well maybe it was, but we were all too busy just having a good time to worry about the theory of it all. That and figuring out where everyone was going to sleep. Sometimes the sleeping plan had to be very carefully worked out several times before everyone fitted properly... and then someone would get up for a pee! It was a chance to make new friends and discover things about ourselves and each other: I would never have believed before that I would ever end up spending a night in a toilet with a Dundonian called Sinbad, but, hey, at least he didn’t snore. Above all, it was just one humungous party.

Yeah, sure, some of those who were there for most weekends did weary now and then, of the walk, of the work, but implausible amounts of alcohol (astounding amounts smuggled into at least one helicopter load, and a truly awe-inspiring load consisting of 30 tins of beer, one box of wine and a hip flask - as well as weekend gear and 3 metres of soil pipe - carried in by one stalwart) and an entertaining mix of characters, foreigners, lost souls (anyone remember the two ‘Weegies’ with the multi-

pack of crisps?) and dogs, not to mention guitars (not always playable), pipes and vocal chords, all given added zing by morning fry-ups and plenty of brew-ups through the day ... all fuelled a truly memorable two years which will be treasured by all concerned.

The five star bothy we left behind? Almost incidental really.

FOOTNOTE: Since work was completed the bothy has performed well, with only minor maintenance being required and (touch wood) no vandalism or instances of folk burning the wood lining in the stove. The toilet is still an ongoing experiment, but has proved more popular than anyone dreamed and a rota of volunteers has had to be set up to change the sacks and keep the whole affair sanitary. Whether the filled sacks will, as originally intended, decompose enough to be safely scattered on the ground, or whether they will have to be totally removed somehow, remains to be seen.

THANKS: All those who took part in the Corrou project, from planning to completion, are due thanks, but a few people and companies should really be mentioned by name:

The family of James Lenegham, a climber who knew Corrou well, but who died in the Alps several years ago, donated a four-figure sum to the renovation;

Eddie Balfour, manager of James Jones and Sons of the sawmill at Dinnet on Deeside, who donated all the 'off the saw' wood that was needed, again worth a four-figure sum;

Wellheads Electrical, of Aberdeen, gave the use of their truck to transport materials;

MCI Electrical, of Aberdeen, gave the loan of a generator for the whole two years;

Friends of Bob Scott's supplied all the insulation (environmentally friendly sheep's wool) and loaned all the power tools required for the project. (In fact, Friends of Bob Scott's were a huge inspiration to the whole project, many of those involved having 'cut their teeth' on the reconstruction of Bob Scott's Bothy, and gained the confidence to tackle what was in reality a major undertaking);

Bert Barnett, besides volunteering on-site, helped design the toilet, did the drawings and guided the project through the planning process;

John Cant, the expert on composting toilets, worked with Bert on the design;

Stan Stewart, one of the many on-site volunteers, deserves mention for his dedication: not enough that he's fast approaching his 70s, he walked in to help just three months after his second hip operation!

Sandy Simpson: at the other end of the age range, MO at just 18, he has been in so often he can now make the entire walk from Derry Gates to Corrou blindfold - and still dodge the puddles;

Peter Holden, the head ranger at Mar Lodge, was also a great help throughout the project.