

A CLOSE ACQUAINTANCE WITH BENNACHIE

CRAIG THOMSON

It's Sunday evening, after dark, and I'm on one of my traverses up and over Mither Tap. This is my favourite route for a short and very enjoyable hike on Bennachie. It's a circuit, almost 4 miles in distance and takes one and a half to two hours. You start in the car park at the Centre and follow the Gordon Way for a mile or so through the forest before turning right and climbing the hill by the Heather Bridge path (photograph 1 below).



1 Heather Bridge Path

Craig Thomson

At night it's darker round this side of the hill. The many lights of Aberdeenshire's towns and villages, farms and farmhouses, are mostly hidden from view here. These stay out of sight until you're nearly on top and you reach the crest of the bulky granite tor that forms the summit of Mither Tap. However, when the panorama eventually opens out and the lights come into view, they illustrate how really very populated is this rural landscape below.

As I walk up the path, heavy clouds are drifting over and just as I emerge through the treeline and onto the hillside, snow starts to fall. It begins to get heavier and soon all I can see in the light of my headtorch is a myriad of bright white lines as the snowflakes streak through the air. It becomes quite a blizzard and as I continue my climb the path starts to get a covering of fluffy new snow. Then after a while, just as I reach the top of the path, the snowfall eases and then stops. The clouds are much lighter now, but they've left an inch-deep white blanket lying over the rocks and slabs at the top of the hill. As I push on up to the summit, the tread of my boots leaves an impression in this fresh new snow. It's an exhilarating experience being here, with the darkness of the sky above contrasting with the bright snow-covered ground. Then I think to myself, I might well be the only person to make footprints through this snow: by morning it will be gone. It's the 11th of April after all and we're into spring, Bennachie hasn't seen any snow for several weeks now and the overnight temperature that's forecast won't hold this covering until tomorrow. As I stand by the trig-point, I can't help but think that I've been treated to my own personal snow covered Mither Tap. I'm feeling happy as I make my way off the top and start down the steep rocky steps that descend to the forest and the path back to the car park. I'm glad I made the effort to come out tonight: this has been a very satisfying hike. On my way back I reminded myself of something I've often thought while walking on this hill, no two trips up Bennachie are ever the same.

The first time I walked up this famous hill was as a youngster. I grew up in the North-East but not near Bennachie. I have memories of one or two visits on fine summer days with my parents and as a boy, I seem to remember thinking the top was very rocky. I was also on the Ben when I was in the Scouts doing the bronze Duke of Edinburgh expedition. Our group of 1st Fraserburgh's finest headed off from Daviot one weekend to

hike over Mither Tap and Millstone Hill and fend for ourselves overnight somewhere on Donside before returning to Daviot the following day. I have great memories of that trip.

Later in life when I lived in Aberdeen, I would occasionally travel out with friends to bag the hill. For several years in a row, we made it a New Year's Day pilgrimage. I remember one January the First, on a night-time descent, we strayed quite far off the path that was hidden under heavy snow. That evening we adopted the theory, if we're going downhill, we must be heading in the right direction. It was heavy going from what I remember, but we eventually managed to re-join the path somewhere in the forest.

Back then trips to Bennachie would have amounted to a few per year. Not so nowadays. For the past decade I've lived in Kemnay and these days I'm frequently getting the boots on and heading out for another climb. In the past 6 or 7 years I've been up Bennachie hundreds of times. In 2018 I gave myself the goal of doing 100 trips in



2 100 Bennachie's in 2018

Corrie Cheyne that year. This culminated on December 30th, with a group of friends and family, including several Club members, joining me on the final walk to reach that tally. I felt quite proud that day and was very appreciative of

everyone's company as I touched the trig-point on top of Oxen Craig, which at 528m (10m higher than Mither Tap) is Bennachie's true summit, (photograph 2 previous page).

Over the years I've become very familiar with the various routes on the hill, particularly the paths that lead to Mither Tap. I've walked these so often that I'm now well acquainted with every turn they take. The steep sections, the flatter sections, the numerous waymarking trees and boulders are all well known to me. I would go as far to say that these days, surely the chance of me losing the path under a bit of snow is very unlikely.

Winter

It's a dark February night and I'm out of the trees on open hillside and I've lost the path. Or rather we've lost the path. There was one other car parked at the Centre when I set off and I met its occupant close to the treeline. The guy had decided not to carry on, but on meeting me making my way up through the forest he changed his mind, his confidence boosted at the thought of another walker keen enough to attempt a push for the top. However, as we traipsed on through the drifting snow, we became aware that reaching it was probably not going to happen that night. This rare (for Bennachie that is) accumulation of snow made the going just too difficult. Eventually we stopped at one distinctively shaped boulder, a huge slab of granite that sits upright on the hillside, that I've respectfully named The Statue of Thor. It was here we acknowledged that Bennachie had got the better of us, so we turned around, said farewell to the mighty Thor and made a retreat down (photograph 3 the following page).

February 2021, the snow was earlier and the Bennachie range experienced an unusually long spell of snow cover. It had been 10 years since I'd seen snow of such depth on the hill, and I'd never known it to last as long as it did that year. For a month and a half everywhere over 200m was blanketed with snow and after a while this 1700-footer had the winter conditions you'd normally find on much higher hills. Walking on Bennachie at this time felt exciting and adventurous. At times the routes through the snow had been trampled by others, which would help progress, but at other times you needed to create your own trails by



3 The Night Bennachie Beat Us

Marco Ferrara

pushing through the ridges of drifting snow that had been sculpted by the wind. On bright crisp days people were visiting the hill with their skis and their snowboards to indulge in their sport. I even met a guy on top who had carried a kayak up and was intent on sledging down parts of the hill in it. Surely something I'm not likely to see again.

One day I met a couple wearing snowshoes and I must admit feeling a tad jealous of their ability to walk across the snow instead of wading through it. For the first time ever on Bennachie, one or two of my walks needed an ice axe and crampons. On one exceptionally windy day it was so ferocious that bits of ice flying through the air would have blinded me:

it would have been impossible without snow goggles as the wind was so strong.



4 Rime Ice

Craig Thomson

The isolated trees on the upper parts of the hill became other worldly sculptures as thick ice weighed down their branches and snow drifted up against them, and the rime ice that formed on the signpost just below Mither Tap was a new sight to me on this hill of modest height (photograph 4 above). I had not seen mountain hares up here before this winter either, but during this cold snap I caught sight of several, the odd

grouse, and the odd mouse scurrying around looking for a way through the snow and ice to some shelter.

Eventually, as we moved through March, the temperature rose, and the thaw came. The abundance of snow was quick in disappearing. The paths on Bennachie re-emerged from their temporary hiding place, but for the following week they became treacherously slippery with compacted ice still clinging to them. Before too long though all the white stuff had gone and as the days got longer, this uncommonly deep winter came to an end. At times over those last few months walking on the hill was more akin to being on a Cairngorm Munro and these conditions on this Aberdeenshire pimple are certainly not, in my experience, an annual occurrence.

Spring

My walks over Bennachie are normally during the evening, between 8 and 9pm is the time I usually set off. Consequently, for a large part of the year I'm on the hill after dark. As a result, I've become more aware of the lunar cycle and when clear skies permit, I get to see the moon in all its phases. Cloud free nights when there's a full moon, or at least the nights either side of a full moon, are the best. I thoroughly recommend a trek up on a moonlit night, it can be quite magical. Spring's Worm moon which occurs in mid to late March has rewarded me with the brightest of moonlit nights and when conditions are right, you find yourself following your shadow up the steep path on the east side of Mither Tap. There is no need for your headtorch on nights like these as the rocky steps are fully illuminated and the surrounding hillside is so bathed in moonlight that you can make out its colours. Then from the top looking down, the rural landscape, the fields and the forests take on a cold but comforting glow. It's always worth lingering for a while to enjoy the sight, and on returning downhill, I always feel my spirits lifted on nights such as those (photograph 5 on following page).

Nature becomes increasingly more active at this time of year. As March moves into April, frogs become brave and, in the evening, go roaming around in search of a mate. You see them dotted around on the paths through the forest and must take care not to stand on them. In mid-



5 Worm Moon.

Craig Thomson

spring the cuckoo's song can be heard in the woods. They have returned from migration and are working on their dastardly plan of laying their eggs in other birds' nests.

Surrounding the forest paths, gorse bushes are beginning to flower. The small clusters of delicate petals grow denser as spring continues until they become a thick bloom of eye-catching bright yellow flowers with their distinctive coconutty perfume. Seas of bright green ferns are also emerging from the flattened brown remnants of last year's growth. There is great beauty in the way they unfurl and stretch out their infant leaves, however I'm cautious of these plants, or rather the ticks they will harbour for the rest of the year. However lush a crop of ferns might look; I would never decide to take a short cut through it.

By the time May comes around I've noticed in the evenings that bats fill the air. Just as the light in the forest is fading, they can be seen all

over the place. There's a junction on the path that has a large flat-topped boulder in the middle. On several occasions I've lain on this and looked up to watch the aerial acrobatics of these little creatures as they put on a display. Dozens can be seen at the same time, elegantly swooping and spiralling as they chase the wee flying beasties that become their supper (or would that be their breakfast?). They provide great entertainment and it's worthwhile stopping to watch.

With the longer days and warmer temperatures another change is very apparent on Bennachie; it's getting busier. This is a hugely popular and very accessible hill and as the weather improves, more and more people dot the paths that lead to its summits. Spring has transformed the slopes that skirt the hill into a spectacular fresh green landscape which draws folk from miles around to walk in its forests, over its peaks and breathe it all in.

Summer

As the year progresses and late May moves into early June the hours of daylight in the North-East of Scotland become dramatically longer. By the summer solstice in the second half of June there is barely any nightfall at all. Visitors to the hill are now heading up later in the evening and it's not uncommon for there to be dozens of people on Mither Tap, chilling out and watching the sunset at 10 o'clock at night. Witnessing the long arc of the summer sun end as a huge ball of orange light nestles behind the horizon is quite special. It's hardly surprising that on fine summer evenings so many folk climb the hill to see this. Then after the sun disappears there's still enough light in the sky to get everyone back down the hill to wherever they started from.

Mither Tap is well known as being the site of an ancient Pictish hill fort that dates from the 7th to 8th century. Today the summit is still partly surrounded by a ring of piled up rocks that are the remains of the huge ramparts that defended the fort. In June 2019, during my evening walks I was privileged to witness a sight of great antiquity. Archaeologists from Aberdeen University were given permission to excavate several places in and around the fort. The weather was unkind, and it rained for most of their 2-week dig. However, the result of their efforts were astonishing, and in one area they unearthed a beautifully built well that would have been a water source for the Pictish settlement. What the archaeologists



6 Pictish Well

Craig Thomson made visible by their digging was a wonder to see. During their time there I visited a lot. Each evening the results of their daily progress could be seen. At first a large boulder was lodged within the well, I understand this was placed there in Victorian times to stop animals falling in. With the use of some clever rope skills the team managed to remove this and reveal the well. A short spiral staircase led down to the water source and each time I saw this I was amazed at what had been hidden underfoot for so long (photograph 6 above). By the time their dig came to an end and all their trenches were back filled, this pretty, little ancient well was once again buried out of sight.

Bright and warm summer days on Bennachie are a delight. At times I've sat on top feeling the heat of the sun with butterflies floating hither and thither through the calm air and bees buzzing about the place. To rest a while and enjoy the views after a hot walk up is very rewarding. If time allows, a longer walk taking in the other tops is very tempting. With excellent paths connecting the various peaks, I can recommend spending an afternoon doing a high-level crossing of the whole range.



7 Bivvy Sunrise

Craig Thomson

Another temptation in summer is to spend a night on the hill. I've twice done this, however on both occasions the weather hasn't been so kind, and a night spent under the stars that I'd hoped for hasn't quite turned out that way, with no stars being on show at all. The last occasion

was in July 2020 when I arranged a late hike and summit camp with a fellow Club member. Derek is a veteran of Bennachie bivvyng, and it was a fine summer's evening when we met at Inch station and started our walk towards the hill. As we climbed higher though, the mist decided to come down and sit, rather disappointingly on the hill's tops. It was getting dark when we reached Derek's favoured bivvy spot on Oxen Craig. With some good banter and a couple of beers it was a pleasant night, but we were denied the sight of the stars above and the views of the landscape below due to the cloud that stubbornly had no plans of shifting. After a short night's sleep however, we were awarded a worthy view on waking early the next morning. The mist was thinning and as the sky to the east started getting lighter, we could clearly see the Neowise comet which we had heard reports about during that month. A glorious sunrise then compensated for the lack of views the previous evening (photograph 7 on previous page).

The first time I stayed out on Bennachie didn't give me any bonnie sunset or sunrise. It was a Friday night after a week of perfectly warm and clear evenings. I knew some unsettled weather was forecast for that weekend, but I optimistically hoped for one more night of clear skies as I made my way up onto the hill and towards Harthill cave. Situated on the rocky crest of Craigshannoch, a short distance down from its summit, this spot gives fine views down towards the Back o' Bennachie. The cave is named after John Leith of Harthill. The story goes that in 1645, Leith who was heavily in debt and going a bit doolally, set his castle on fire to spite his creditors, then retreated uphill to the cave where he sat and watched the flames destroy his home. The ruined remains of his castle can still be seen today alongside the current Harthill Castle which was built to replace it. On the evening I chose to stay in the cave all I could see was mist and light drizzle to begin with, followed by heavier rain that lasted throughout the night. Although I stayed dry with my roll mat and sleeping bag pushed into the side of the cave, when I woke in the morning a puddle had appeared on the floor. I can therefore vouch that Harthill Cave is not watertight hill accommodation.

As summer begins to wane and the evenings get darker, it's worth looking out for the celestial display of the Perseid meteor shower. This annual event reaches its peak in mid-August and during a clear evening hike I've often stopped, looked up and counted many of its shooting stars

as they streak silently through the sky and seem to herald the changing of the season.

Autumn

I quite like the return of the darker nights. In early Autumn a 2-hour evening walk can start during daylight and finish after nightfall. It's time to pack the headtorch again and with the cooler weather, your jacket is needed once more. The nights when you can stride out in just a T-shirt and shorts are now past, but one noticeable advantage of this time of year is the midges are no longer a nuisance.

Walking up through the trees in late August and September you can see the abundance of mushrooms that cover the ground. At times I wish I was more adept at identifying edible varieties as I'm sure many a tasty starter is growing all around me. But sadly, the only ones I know are edible with any certainty are the Chanterelles and Porcini mushrooms, and I rarely see Chanterelles in the Bennachie forest, and the slugs always seem to get to the Porcini before me.

The colours in the woodland are changing as they do in every forest during Autumn (photograph 8 on the following page). As the season progresses the paths gain a layer of fallen pine needles that have turned an orangey brown colour. The heather covered slopes higher up are going the same way too, and the magnificent purple bloom of late summer turns the same colour as the pine needles on the forest floor.

The full moons of Autumn are big and bright. September's Harvest moon and October's Hunters moon will nicely illuminate a night-time walk, and when the loud hooting of owls is heard, which I've noticed occurs the most during these autumnal nights, it adds to the atmosphere. I'm convinced I once saw the night-time equivalent of a Brocken spectre by the light of one of these moons. A bank of mist had risen on the west side of the summit tor and positioned itself perfectly for my moonlight shadow to project onto it. There wasn't a ring of rainbow colours that you see when the sun's involved in this effect, but an eerie halo of white light could clearly be seen around my silhouette. A Harvest moon of course is no longer needed to assist farmers as they gather in their crops. During



8 Autumn Glow on Mither Tap

Craig Thomson

September, when gazing down from the hill, the super bright lights of their combine harvesters can be seen going to and fro across many of Aberdeenshire's fields as they work into the night.

A jaunt up Bennachie on November 5th can be quite entertaining when numerous firework displays can be seen all over the Shire. I've often watched fireworks from high on the hill and not only on Guy Fawkes night. At other times throughout the year, usually at weekends, wedding celebrations at Pittodrie House which is situated at the foot of the hill, will occasionally include a display. Many years ago, I used to be involved with the setting up and firing of these shows, and I once suggested launching some from Mither Tap to coincide with the display in the grounds of the hotel. I assembled a group of friends to assist in carrying the equipment up the hill and with the help of walkie talkies to converse with the firers down below we put on a synchronised display. By all accounts it looked quite impressive to the wedding guests who had taken a break from their partying and come outside to watch the show. Nowadays, although looking down from above on these pyrotechnic displays is no doubt spectacular, my opinion of fireworks has changed,

mainly because of the noise they make which disturbs the tranquillity of a night.

By the time November's full moon (the Beaver moon) appears we are back to short days and long chilly nights. Winter is approaching and the solstice is just one month away. It won't be long until the first flurries of snow land on the hill and a year on Bennachie has come full circle.

This journey through the seasons will hopefully go some way to explain why this iconic hill in the heart of Garioch is a favourite place of mine, as well as countless others. I enjoy hiking on Bennachie, it's close to home and provides unrivalled local walks. It's a fine way to exercise too and undoubtedly helps the hill legs prepare for longer walks and higher hills. As you've read, it's mainly Mither Tap I find myself on but that's only due to its place in relation to where I live. If I stayed in Insch it would no doubt be Oxen Craig I would head up regularly. I do sometimes choose that walk, and Millstone Hill which lies to the south of the main range and gives fine views of Bennachie. But Mither Tap is the main one for me. I've watched sunrises and sunsets from this peak. I've flown over it in a microlight and seen hidden secrets under it. I've witnessed cloud inversions and Brocken spectres, full moons and lunar eclipses, shooting stars and aurora. I've stood atop this, the finest of mini mountains with many good friends and I've raised a dram to absent ones. Here's to you Bennachie.

Postscript

The day and night of Friday 26th November 2021 saw the ferocious winds of Storm Arwen blow down from the north and cause much havoc to our corner of the country. Many of the forests across the Northeast of Scotland were decimated as the tall pine trees with their shallow root systems were unable to withstand the force of these 100 miles an hour plus gales. Across the region hundreds of thousands of trees were toppled and many rural power lines were knocked out in the process. Large parts of Aberdeenshire experienced power cuts in the

wake of this turbulent storm. The following day the storm had passed, and daylight revealed the results of its power. A multitude of fallen trees could be seen in the forests around Kemnay. I had never seen anything quite like it.

Several days after Arwen struck warnings were issued by the landowners and the Bailies of Bennachie of the dangers of the damaged forests around the hill and the public were urged not to visit. The car parks were closed, and the news was that Bennachie was out of bounds until the mess could be assessed and a clear up could be done. This was going to take some time.

I had been organising a Club Day meet on Bennachie scheduled for December. Unfortunately, under the circumstances it had to be cancelled and an alternative location for the walk was arranged. The planned traverse of the hill range from west to east, crossing all its tops and ending with a visit to the picturesque, ruined Fog house and waterfall has been re-scheduled for December 2022, but for the time being this extraordinary storm had put paid to the outing I'd been looking forward to.

As I write this, I acknowledge it could be a while before I get back to my regular hill walks, but for now the advice to stay away must be respected. However, I must tell you that I did venture out, prior to these warnings, on the night after the storm.

From home I could see that the first snows of winter had fallen on Mither Tap, and I was anxious to investigate. I embarked on my favourite circuit from the Centre to Heather Bridge, up to the summit, then back. I saw the damage to the forest first-hand: there were numerous fallen trees. Around nine or ten blocked my regular path and needed to be climbed through or walked around. Smaller pieces of tree debris lay all over the place, no doubt this place would have been in chaos 24 hours ago. This evening though it was very still and after the turmoil of the previous night the forest felt quite benign and at no point did, I feel in danger. Further on there was snow and it was good to hear its crunch under my boots. Then once I climbed up onto the granite tor at the top of the hill, an unusual sight met my eyes. Large swathes of the landscape down below lay in darkness because of the power outage. Inch, Oldmeldrum, Inverurie and further away Aberdeen were lit up as normal, but surrounding the hill was an inky black expanse. From Kintore to Alford

everywhere was dark. This vast rural area, including the village where I lived, seemed to have disappeared. I thought to myself, this is as close as I'm ever going to get to seeing how the countryside would have looked to the Picts who gazed down from the fort at night, many hundreds of years ago. Then I was reminded of something I've often thought. No two trips up Bennachie are ever the same.



9 Mither Tap Sunrise

Michelle Ironside