

THE SECRET HOWFFS OF BEINN a' BHUIRD

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Just as it says in the song - the howffs are not a secret anymore! But they were in the early 1950's and had I written this article then, I probably would have been assassinated.

The Aberdeen climbers in the Golden Age of Cairngorm climbing (1950-1960) had 3 main destinations when they left on "the 3.15 from Aberdeen". In the bad old days when climbers were forced to work long hours and nobody owned a motor car, everybody went to the hills in a bus run by Strachan Ltd. It left Bon-Accord Square at 3.15 pm every Saturday. Strachan's main garage was in Ballater in premises now occupied by the Co-operative Society and managed by a Mr Blackhall, father of Sheena Blackhall, the Doric poet and writer.

The climbers' destinations were Lochnagar, Beinn a' Bhuidr and Ben Macdui and her neighbours. For overnight accommodation, Lochnagar had Lochend bothy and Jock Robertson's barn at the Spittal of Muick. Macdui had Bob Scott's both at Luibeg and Derry Lodge if you were a member of the Cairngorm Club. Beinn a' Bhuidr was however devoid of any such conveniences, especially since the old shooting lodge at the head of Slugain Glen was rendered uninhabitable by Invercauld estate following the discovery there of silverware which had been stolen from the "Big Hoose". What to do? The answer was simple, build a howff. That's easy to say, but not so easy to achieve without the necessary materials readily at hand. Fortunately, an abundance of conveniently shaped flat rocks was available.

The new howffs were built between 1952 and 1954. Prior to that the well-known and respected character Mac Smith built a howff in 1949 somewhere 3,000 ft up in Coire na Ciche. I was never able to find it. In 1962 Mac Smith edited the definitive Climbers' guide to the area, published by the Scottish Mountaineering Club and now a much sought-after book. The only other shelter was the small entrance hall to the ruined shooting lodge previously mentioned, the doors to which had been blocked in, leaving only a window space for access (photograph 1 the following page). It could sleep 3 at a pinch.

The working-class climbers in the early 50's mainly belonged to Hall Russell's (shipbuilders) Climbing Club, Kincorth Mountaineering

Club (a district in the north of Aberdeen City) and the slightly more elite Etchachan Club. Members of these Clubs and sundry others



1 The "makeshift" howff at the old Slugain Lodge. photograph attribution unknown

transported building materials on the Strachan bus from Aberdeen, with materials being supplemented by what they could beg, borrow or steal locally. With Herculean effort, countless torchlit safaris, warily passed the Laird's door and up Glen Slugain, shouldering mighty beams of timber, window frames, stove piping and sheets of corrugated iron.

At the end of many months of hard work there were around 5 or 6 habitable howffs within a radius of some 4 to 5 hundred yards on the hillside to the north-east of "Fairy Glen". Most were partly subterranean and well-hidden. Some had glass windows and a small fireplace providing a degree of comfort during the winter months. Except for the howff that remains in use today there was no standing room, and the normal sleeping space was for 2-3 persons. At the height of their existence, Saturday night was like Hogmanay with climbers visiting their neighbours with much ribaldry, conviviality and singsong.

The largest and still going strong howff was built between 1952 and 1953 by Charlie Smith, Jim Robertson, Doug Mollison and Ashie Brebner. The fact that Jim Robertson was a stonemason with much building experience must have something to do with its longevity. The howff has been mentioned in many climbing books and journals and has been used by such notable mountaineers as Tom Weir, Hamish MacInnes and Chris Bonnington.

The other howff worth a mention was built by Raymond Ellis and David Gaffron, both colleagues of mine in Hall Russell's drawing office (photograph 2 on the following page). Raymond went off to Alaska to avoid National Service and built a log cabin for his wife and himself in the Alaskan wilderness. He passed away in 2019. David spent many years sailing with me on my small yacht on the West coast and has a house in Aboyne. He is still climbing Lochnagar at 84 years of age.

Without doubt, the Glean an t' Slugain howffs enabled the pioneer Aberdeen climbers to discover and achieve first ascent rock climbs both in summer and winter in the 3 corries of Beinn a' Bhuid just as they had done on Lochnagar and the high Cairngorms albeit from somewhat more comfortable and long-established bases.



2 Author emerging from Raymond and David's howff 1957 photograph attribution unknown.

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