

Caves and Howffs in the Cairngorms

by Mike Duguid and Ken Thomson

Given the troglodytic nature of the Club's creation after a night spent by its six founders under the Shelter Stone in 1887, it may be of no surprise that some current members are interested in discovering subterranean shelters of both historic interest and pragmatic function, lying within our area's mountains. Occasional discussion led to a realisation that the available information on many of these locations was sparse and rarely accurate, and in 2024 a loose project emerged to go forth, search for, and document our discoveries. Although the bothies and some of the howffs of the Cairngorms are quite widely known, caves in the range are less familiar, but there are a surprising number.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a 'cave' is "*a hollow place opening more or less horizontally under the ground; a cavern, den, habitation in the earth*", while a 'howff' is "*a place of resort; a haunt, a resort*", from the Dutch *hof*, or enclosure, with the "*first recorded appearance [in 1711, as 'howf'] as the yard of the Grey Friars*" in Dundee¹. Thus a cave, if large, accessible and comfortable enough, may be a howff, while not all howffs are caves, but simply shelters built up with local stones and perhaps some brought-in material (wood, polythene) against a vertical rock wall.

In this article, we exclude 'bothies', as originally being basic huts constructed for shepherds, farmworkers (especially in North-East Scotland), road-workers, etc., even though some have more recently been gentrified by the Mountain Bothies Association. We also exclude built shelters, such as the "secret" bothy in Glen Slugain, the half-ruined St. Valery's on Cairngorm, the ones in the Garbh Choire of Cairn Toul – Braeriach and on the Coyles of Muick, and souterrains (e.g. those near Ballater and Kingussie), as well as cave pitches on rock and ice climbs.

We take the Cairngorms as basically the area of the National Park, although there are some caves and howffs nearer Aberdeen, e.g. on Bennachie. Definitely excluded are caves and howffs further afield, such as the fine natural "Bone Caves" of Inchnadamph in the North-West, all sea-cliff caves, of which Scotland has hundreds, from Fingal's Cave on

¹ Scots Language Centre.

Staffa downwards, and well-known hill caves and howffs elsewhere, as in Arrochar, and under Schiehallion. The Grampian Speleological Group maintains a list² of some 290 locations throughout Scotland, and alleges over 3000 known natural caves in the country, usually in areas where soluble rock such as limestone is gradually dissolved by water over time (karst), although 'slip-faults', 'boulder caves' 'archaeological' (i.e. artificial) caves, and many disused metal and stone mines are also included. The Group's map of five "Caving Regions in Scotland" does not include the North-East of Scotland or the Cairngorms.

Granite is an igneous rock, formed when magma from the earth's interior slowly cooled and crystallized as it was forced ("intruded") as a "pluton" towards the surface through older Dalradian rock. As it contracted, vertical fissures appeared, and later, as pressure was released, horizontal ones; these fissures widened and deepened when exposed to surface erosion, as exhibited in the many cross-sectioned cliff faces such as on Lochnagar, but seldom sufficiently to form caves. Instead, most Cairngorm caves and howffs are found under large blocks, either deposited by glacial action some 11,000 years ago or fallen in more recent times from eroding cliffs (e.g. the Shelter Stone).

Other caves and howffs in the Cairngorms are found in the layered Dalradian rocks, composed of metamorphosed shales, sandstones and quartzites, and lying around the central plutons. For instance, at the Colonel's Bed in Glen Ey, slabs of flat-lying quartzite with intercalated schist broke off and left a sheltered area (recently reduced by further breakages) in the gorge where the Colonel apparently hid.

From man's first explorations of the Cairngorms in Mesolithic times 4000 to 10000 years ago, shelter would have been a high priority, and doubtless natural caves were used and improved by the earliest incomers. However, the limited number and size of these caves, and no doubt their repeated use over centuries, mean that no traces of early use have been found in the caves covered by this article³. Instead, early uses are known only from

² Scottish Cave and Mine Database (<https://registry.gsg.org.uk>). See also *The Caves of Scotland: a Bibliography* by Tony Oldham (2012), available at www.arbarama.com/cave/scotland/caves_biblio.html.

³ See 'Hunter-Gatherers in the Cairngorm Mountains', by Graeme Warren in *CCJ* no. 114 (2022), 130-143.

legends and accounts in historical times. Several were used by robbers, caterans, poachers, drovers and traders – the spectrum is wide and fuzzy – as they traversed wild country, not always keen to meet up with local authority. And after whisky began to be taxed in 1644, distillers and smugglers would have found it helpful to pursue their occupations in similar fashion. Shepherds and game hunters might also have used caves and howffs occasionally, though the estates in the nineteenth century provided better accommodation in the form of lodges and deer-watching shelters. The modern era has seen much use of caves and howffs by hillwalkers and climbers.

Some Selected Caves and Howffs

The Shelter Stone

This is of course the most famous of all the Cairngorms caves and howffs, not least as sheltering the six progenitors of the Cairngorm Club before their inaugural meeting on the shores of Loch Avon in 1887⁴. But of course it was known and written about long before that: the *Old Statistical Account of Scotland*⁵ says that *“at one end of this loch [Aven’], surrounded with vast mountains, is a large natural cave, sufficient to hold a number of men secure from snow, rain or wind. People often lodge here for nights, some for necessity, others when hunting or fishing. It is commonly called Chlachdhian, or the “Sheltering Stone.”* Since 1924, a Visitor Book has been placed below the Stone; 14 of these are in the Club’s Archives, and extracts have been published⁶.

Devil’s Point or Geusachan Cave

Given its location so near Corroul Bothy and the busy Lairig Ghru, this little cave is surprisingly shy. It has been mentioned in two Journal

⁴ ‘The Cairngorm Club’, by Robert Lippe, *CCJ* no. 1 (1893), 7-14.

⁵ *Old Statistical Account of Scotland*, Sinclair, 1794, in Vol. XIII, ‘Abernethy and Kinchardine, County of Inverness’, p.131.

⁶ *Chronicles of the Cairngorms: Stories from the Shelter Stone Visitors’ Book*, by Anya Hopkins;
<https://www.exploreyourarchive.org/chronicles-of-the-cairngorms-stories-from-the-shelter-stone-visitors-book/>

articles⁷, and lies about halfway up the south side of the Devil's Point. It is not visible until one is well up Glen Geusachan, being tucked into the west-facing wall of one of the many gullies on that hill-face. And it is not too easy of access, which requires first a rise through deepish heather and a small boulder field, and then some delicate upward traversing into the gully over slabs tessellated with thin lines of grass and heather. Once reached, it is just large enough to accommodate a body or two, albeit on a sloping floor, and exposed to the not-unusual westerly winds. Not a refuge to be sought in a storm!

Creag Ghiubhais Cave

There are a number of theories regarding this cave – it may have been used as an explosive store by lumberjacks of the Newfoundlander Overseas Forestry Unit who worked in this area during the Second World War, and others talk of gem mining or a Pictish hideaway. It's a tunnel (6.1m long, 1.1 to 1.6m wide, and 1.1m high) halfway up a steep gully, with a pile of timber debris remaining outside which may have lined the floor and walls.

The approach was described by one club member as a trial "over some of the worst ground I have ever been on", with the other saying "ach, it's not that bad a bit rough" despite falling down holes up to his armpits on occasion.

Balnamoon's Cave

This fine cave lies under a huge boulder a few miles up Glen Mark, on the north-facing hillside about 100m above the river – which can be hard to cross when the water is high but has some fine falls above and below the obvious crossing point. The cave mouth has been built up with stones to leave a narrow entrance, and the floor is remarkably bouldery: it is doubtful if many spend a night here! Balnamoon was the Jacobite James Carnegy, branded an outlaw following Culloden: unable to return home, he is said to have spent many months holed up here, with local people bringing him food and warnings about Government troops in the area.

⁷ 'The Cave on Bod an Diabhail', *CCJ* no. 68 (1929); a more successful (and exciting) expedition is described in 'Days on Devil's Point' by R. O. Mackay and J. B. McDonald, *CCJ* no. 82 (1941).

Rumour has it that the “real” cave may lie higher up amongst steeper ground, providing a better viewpoint to spot any approaching threat.

Caves and Howffs on Ben a'Bhuird

The corries of this hill hold several shelters, of which the best known is the Smith-Winram bivouac, whose discovery and excavation is the subject of a classic account in the Club's annals⁸. It lies under a huge boulder directly below Dividing Buttress between Coire an Dubh Loch and Coire nan Clach Bhuird, and a stone wall protects its interior and contains its hatch-like entrance. Inside, it can hold two persons lying down, or one in rather more comfort, and it was the base for exploring climbing routes on the cliffs above, and no doubt in Garbh Choire over the shoulder to the north. Some smaller howffs are in the boulderfields nearby, with others in Coire an Dubh Loch and beside Dubh Lochaine. A through-cavity too small to be a howff lies on the rim of that corrie, and was apparently excavated by hunters of cairngorm stones in the nineteenth century⁹.

Clais Fhearnaig Cave

This sheltered pass formed by a glacial outflow channel will be familiar and regularly strolled by our members over the years, unaware of a nook high above. It took a tip-off from a knowledgeable Wanderer, and a dreich Sunday at Muir when bigger hills were out, to tempt our explorers to rummage over the upper rocky clefts of the pass. Our author initially scoped the rugged terrain and pondered “this could take all day and probably a few scrapes”, but Ivan Hiscox knocked that for six and opened his cave-finding account by finding it within 5 minutes.

Conclusions

Discovering caves and howffs is good fun, and can be useful: as Andrew Nisbet has written, often “*The only accommodation is the howff, draughty*

⁸ ‘Be It Ever So Humble’, by Malcolm Smith, in *CCJ* no. 87 (1950-51), 169-173.

⁹ See photograph in *Crystal Mountains : Minerals of the Cairngorms*, by Roy Starkey, Bromsgrove : British Mineralogical Publications (2014).

*and barely watertight, [but] as close to nature as you might wish*¹⁰. The activity often takes one well off the beaten tracks, and there is always the chance of finding a new location, and/or items left behind by earlier explorers. The better-known caves have legends attached; these can be chased up in literature searches during the winter evenings at home.

As we have accumulated too much information to share within the limits of this article, we provide further detail online – extra photos, exploration reports and a list of over 60 locations. Investigation of these will be ongoing for many years yet, so if you are interested in assisting please get in touch.

¹⁰ 'Cairngorm Climbing - a Contribution', by Andrew Nisbet, in *CCJ* no. 98 (1980), 3-13.

Selected Cairngorms Caves and Howffs

The caves and howffs listed below are only some of those in the Cairngorms area; a longer list, with more information on many, is available at <https://cairngormclub.org.uk/caves>.

* A legend is associated with this cave/howff ** Visited by one or both authors.

<u>Cave/Howff Name</u>	<u>Location (with OS grid ref.)</u>	<u>Notes</u>
Balnamoon's Cave*, **	Glen Mark (NO 3959 8326)	Above meadow above Water of Mark rapids. Small caves in rocks around.
Castle Wilson**	Morven (NJ 3470 0570)	At Slacks of Glen Carvie; more vertical than horizontal; not capacious.
Cateran's Cave*, **	Loch Esk (NO 2370 7950)	In large boulders below a small crag, also a small howff with a slightly built-up wall lies across the nearby loch.
Colonel's Bed*, **	Glen Ey (NO 087 872)	Overhang in the gorge, still reachable despite collapse.
Colonel's Cave*, **	Inverey (NO 0870 8870)	Overhang at upper tree edge on Creag a' Chait; one person.
Creag Liath	Speyside (NJ 0062 3138)	Small rock shelter 3km NNW of Grantown on Spey, on S side of summit
Devil's Geusachan Cave**	Devil's Point (NN 972 948)	On S face, facing W; small; sloping floor

Fairn or Fearn Cave**	Creag Ghiubhais (NO 3140 9560)	A natural cave, but excavated for store; difficult access ground
Gryp's Chamber*, **	Glen Lee (Esk) (NO 3960 7940)	Difficult to find amongst overgrown boulder field. 1km WNW of Inchgrundle
Harthill's Cave*, **	Bennachie (NJ 6715 2336)	160m N of Craig Shannoch; entrance 0.79m but 1.36m inside
Hole o'Veerns*	Glen Clova (NO 2950 7550)	Large boulder cave 1km E of Braedownie. Holds 6-8 people.
Huntly's Cave (North)*	Grantown (NJ 0469 3599)	On the E side of Carr a' Ghille Chearr. Recess "at the left end of the crag".
Huntly's Cave(s) (South)*	Grantown (NJ 0248 3265)	On the S side of Allt na Fhithich gorge. Another nearby at NJ 0256 3273?
Laird's Chamber*	Glen Clova	Small hollow 1km NW of Hotel. In outcrop rocks on S face of Ben Reid.
Lochnagar Howff**	Lochnagar Corrie (NO 252 864)	Under large boulder; low; 2-person
Lonavey's Cave*	Carr an Righ	Has interesting tales of poachers evading capture. Said to be on Carr an Righ
Quartz-Diggers Cave**	Coire Domhain (NH 999 019)	Man-made tunnel at foot of route, Stag Rocks
Shelter Stone**	Loch Avon (NJ 0019 0159)	Our well-known place of foundation. Other howffs nearby

Smith-Dey Bivouac**	Braeriach (NN 947 985)	In Garbh Coire Dhaidh, under large boulder; 2-person
Vat or Gilderoy's Cave*, **	Loch Kinord (NO 4250 9961)	Tiny cave behind waterfall
Smith-Winram Howff**	Beinn a'Bhuird (NO 907 996)	Under a large boulder; 2-person; not "Freddie and Sticker's Howf"?