

Mischief at Muir

by Richard Shirreffs

The Club Journal has done a good job over the years in chronicling the major stages in the life of Muir Cottage, but little has ever been recorded about some of the lesser events and trials and tribulations of Custodians.

On one occasion in the 1970s a school party (not from Aberdeen) staying at Muir contrived to fell one tree and severely mutilate another on the land next to Muir then belonging to the Mar Estate. The Club was left having to write in apologetic terms to the Estate, as well as writing in critical terms to the head teacher of the school in question. There was a similar occasion a little later when a party of French scouts had been allowed by the Estate to set up camp in the field to the west of Muir, with the Club allowing them the use of some of the facilities at Muir. Wanting a campfire for the evening, some of the scouts found and cut up a recently fallen pine tree on the east side of Muir, and used some of it as campfire fuel. The Estate were not amused. After some correspondence the scout group was obliged to pay compensation for the lost timber value.

Within Muir, fire has only twice been an issue. On one occasion, in early 1979, the wood panelling on the wall around the stove caught fire, presumably from careless use of the stove, but happily it was quickly brought under control. Less quick though was a decision on how to make good the damage, with insurers taking several months over their input. It was only at the end of 1979 that a decision could be reached to remove the panelling altogether and to leave the wall with a hard rendered surface. Some years later, when the dormitories still had fairly primitive tube heaters, someone in the two-bed room left wet socks drying in a position where they dropped onto the heater, catching fire and causing the curtains above to catch fire and crack the window glass. Fortunately this was quickly detected and the fire extinguished, but the scorch marks above the window are there to this day. This mishap led to the taking in of more fire extinguishers (with insulated boxes to prevent them from freezing) and to efforts to make the drying room more effective.

Over the years Muir has seen a range of different types of stove. One stove could take coal as well as wood but it was realised that this led to unwanted sooting of the white paintwork. The next stove worked well enough but eventually had to be replaced. At one side it had somewhat

inconspicuous and unhappily flimsy airflow control vents which few users understood. The next for some reason had front doors that we were not supposed to open, with refuelling through the lid potentially hazardous, especially after a careless user managed to break off the lug on the lid for lifting it open. More recently, possibly from users running the stove too hot, firebricks have had to be replaced. And still more recently the doors have been shut with too many logs in place, with the glass in the doors cracked and having to be replaced. So far replacement stove parts have been sourceable when needed, but that may not always be the case as there come to be fewer stoves in use and fewer stockists.

In the late 1970s, there was quite an issue over the acceptability of members having young children with them at Muir. One school of thought was that Muir was a climbing hut and no place for young children. The other view was that members' children might become members of the future if afforded the opportunity in their formative years to experience the outdoors. Given the extensive debate and lack of an outcome, it seems with hindsight to have been much ado about nothing. Discussion within the committee led to a suggestion that family weekends might be tried on a purely experimental basis for one or two weekends over a six month period. The Custodian at the time was opposed to this and arranged a requisition for a general meeting, but withdrew it when the committee agreed to leave matters until the next AGM on the basis of something already said in the Members' Handbook about the Custodian's discretion. The topic ended up not even mentioned at that next AGM, but it resurfaced a year later, with a rather odd outcome. Two motions were proposed, one suggesting specific circumstances in which young children should be allowed at Muir and the other suggesting a remit to the Committee to formulate guidelines for the assistance both of the Huts Custodian and of members. After some initial discussion, doubt emerged as to the order in which the formal proposing and seconding of these motions had occurred. Before the Chairman could rule on which should first be put to the vote, a member who clearly thought that this was not something to take up AGM time moved a motion of "next business". There was an equality of votes on this and the Chairman exercised his casting vote in favour of the motion, stating that he regarded the matter as one calling for further discussion by the Committee. The matter was on the committee agenda in March of the following year but there was no time to discuss it and there is no further mention of it in the minutes!

In general, things that belong at Muir seldom go missing, but there was a time when the abundant stock of teaspoons shrank to a miserable handful. Some may inadvertently have been left in the instant coffee jars of departing users, but we will never know. However, some cheap adequate replacements were sourced by a member at a Spanish street market. Another more important thing which temporarily went missing was the key for the woodshed. When it was traced and returned, the Custodian of the day fitted it with a bright orange plastic ball 6 cm in diameter - too large to fit in anyone's pocket and too noticeable to be left inadvertently in someone's car boot. These instances of things going missing are perhaps understandable, but on one occasion when bedding was being laundered we were found to be seven pillowcases down.

Notices for users to read and observe have been a constant problem, especially those about the use of the stove and the need not to interfere with the heaters relied upon for prevention of frost damage in the winter. On one occasion the last of a visiting group to leave in winter was the custodian of his own club's hut. He decided in his wisdom that despite all the notices beside the heaters, it would be unsafe to leave the electricity on. Fortunately our own Custodian had reason to visit Muir not long afterwards, found the cottage uncommonly chilly, and got the power and heating back on before any damage was done. In another instance winter visitors from another club had ignored the signage in the kitchen and switched off the heater there; again by good fortune a Club member arrived a day or two later and found some of the plumbing positively frozen, but at least not spawning any leaks when brought back up to temperature. Then, to add insult to injury, a group from the club with the meddlesome custodian was back two years later, again in winter, and again left Muir with no heating. This time they did not just switch off individual heaters but "untripped" nearly all of the tripswitches in the meter cupboard, which would have left any new visitors arriving in darkness hours without any lighting and with the remedy not exactly obvious. The problem with notices for users is that if they are too wordy or too numerous they do not get read, but if they are not there at all users assume that they just use heaters, cookers, and fridges as if they were in their own permanently occupied homes. One past custodian had a very apt term for visitors who create problems like these - morons!

On another occasion the hallway was found to be abnormally hot and the thermostat was found to have been tampered with - something possible only by undoing the four screws of the ventilated metal box around the thermostat. Whoever was responsible for this might be forgiven for wanting a little more heat, but he/she could surely have had the sense to undo their tampering. There has also occasionally been tampering with the plumbing, one instance leading to a discharge from an overflow, another stopping the flow of water to the wash-hand basins in one of the washrooms.

When it was decided in 2005 to replace the fixed bunks built in at the time of the 1972-73 extension, it was agreed that the 30+ year old flooring in the bedrooms should also be replaced. On starting to lift the old flooring, the contractor found that the concrete underneath was wet, meaning that his glue for the new flooring would not take. The matter was of some urgency as the flooring had to be down and the new bunks in place before the next visitors arrived and while the flooring contractor could still be available. Word was relayed to the Custodian (the present writer) at his office desk, and after he had made enquiries of industrial equipment providers four heavy duty dehumidifiers available for hire were collected and taken to Muir within the day and left to run overnight to await the contractor's return later next day.

Until a new source of water was found and connected up in the context of the refurbishments in 2004-05, the water supply was a constant source of problems. A mini-weir in a small stream in the area across the road from Muir (then a newly planted plantation) diverted water into a small settling tank which fed a copper pipe down to and under the road, and thence to the cottage. Every so often the catchment had to be cleared out, with care taken not to upset any of the adders which lived close by. If there was any restriction in the flow, it could be exacerbated by the catchment point being only marginally higher than the reservoir tanks in the roof space at Muir. And over time, as the growing trees drew more water from the ground and the removal of fencing allowed access for deer and potential contamination of the water, this source proved to be simply insufficient. The new source, found by a dowser, has so far been plentiful and largely problem free, but it led to one amusing incident in the days before the fence was provided with a stile. A young council official sent out to inspect

the catchment could not get across the fence until she was shown how to do so by an octogenarian member!

A new form of mischief has come to afflict us with the advent of electric cars. Although Braemar does have charging points, these are five miles away and often in use. So some visitors with electric cars have devised their own solution – running an extension cable out through a kitchen window from one of the sockets there! One at least has offered some money for the privilege, but others have not.

No doubt new forms of mischief at Muir will crop up over the years ahead. But we have a good record of Custodians coping with them, and hopefully that situation will not change.