

The Mountain Bothy - a changing world?

by Neil Reid

It's been raining for hours. Everything you wear is saturated and there's a sodden dullness about your brain as you trudge on, failing to react when the rain gets heavier or even lessens. When you reach the river you don't hesitate before committing yourself to a knee-deep or more crossing: you'll get no wetter.

There's the bothy now. Last time you were there – some years ago right enough – it was a cold, damp hole of a place with no fire, and you expect no more now. You'll be out of the rain though and just maybe that drybag has kept your spare clothes dry. Oh, how good that would be!

But as you approach you smell smoke. Smoke? You burst through the door with unintended drama as your rucksack catches on the doorframe and suddenly releases, and then you're in the middle of the room with people in chairs all around you and... oh glory be! A fire! A good one too – you can feel the warmth even though your sodden clothes.

"Want a cuppa tea, pal? It's grim out there."

Not long after you're ensconced in a chair by the fire with dry clothes on and a mug of tea in your hands, listening to how the bothy was renovated a couple of years back and now has a fire and sleeping platforms, and even a toilet. As the evening wears on you'll get round to comparing hill tales and searching out mutual acquaintances. Maybe a dram or two as well. Bothy life – nothing like it!

It's a scenario familiar to many reading this, particularly when in the Cairngorms, where the last two decades have seen a real renaissance in the standard of what used to be a set of pretty spartan bothies (The pre-2012 Hutchie Hut compared to today, anyone?). But it's an experience that's maybe not as universal as we like to think. Because, for every happy hiker cosying up to the fire in a Cairngorm bothy, there are several others eschewing the geographical limitations of a bricks and mortar doss for the go-where-you-will freedoms of canvas. Because it's not canvas any more, it's some nylon stuff far lighter and more waterproof than canvas ever was, so you can carry it and camp wherever you like: at the foot of tomorrow's rock climb, for a lochside idyll (forgetting the midges), or even for a summit camp.

And it's not just geographical convenience. Lots of folk pick a camping spot right beside a bothy – even one without a toilet. Perhaps it's for the comfort of company, illusory though it may be. You might not interact with any bothy dwellers or fellow campers, but it's nice to know they're there. Even if there's not another soul camped there, nor anyone in the bothy, you somehow feel less alone beside some sort of human artifact. Or maybe I read too much into it; maybe it's just that most bothies have some flat grassy ground around them, which is easier for a tent than lank heather.

In any case, that's a lot of folk not using bothies. To be fair they're maybe enjoying the lack of snoring, and the cumulative aroma of a dozen pairs of sweaty, peat-caked socks can be a hard sell for some. But surely it's worth it for the craic; for the simple pleasures of meeting and talking with others not just from other walks of life but from all parts of the world; for the exchange of ideas, the sharing of culture, the satisfaction of retelling all your favourite escapades to new people who aren't as fed-up hearing them as your friends are. Bothies are one of the few contexts where it's not just acceptable but expected to engage with complete strangers with a degree of openness usually only shown with close acquaintances. And as well as the social interaction you also have the convenience of being able to cook your dinner on a table, or at least a level floor, rather than wobbling on tussocky grass or heather; and when it rains all evening, instead of lying in a damp tent wishing you had brought a change of clothes, you can sit on a chair in front of the fire watching the flames and seeing your wet kit drying out.

Should we worry about people not using bothies? After all, it does leave more room there for all those who enjoy the craic and convenience. But it's not that simple.

Most of those who currently look after the Cairngorm bothies are people who have used them themselves, often for decades, before deciding to do their bit and look after them for future generations.

But if there are no future generations? What if all these people in tents never develop the love for bothies and feeling for bothy culture that so many in my generation took for granted? What if there's not enough people who have that attachment and feel strongly enough about bothies to physically look after them? Will bothies turn out to be just a temporary

phenomenon that filled in the period between people going to the hills for recreation and the development of (relatively) cheap lightweight tents?

Do I believe that myself? Sometimes in darker moments it is a fear: the only regulars I see at bothies these days tend to be my age and older – and my days of being mistaken for a spring chicken are long gone.

But I'm not without hope. When I recently had to advertise for a new joint maintenance organiser to help me at Corrour Bothy the one serious candidate was a youngster of just 28 years. And she's proven over the last year to be not just capable, but utterly dedicated and ridiculously keen. So maybe the future is secure. Maybe there's a younger generation of mountaineers and hillgoers just waiting in the wings for the old farts to die off and give them space.

I'd like to think so, if only for the sake of that younger generation and the sense of fulfilment and achievement that's there for them.

Some years ago I thought about why I devoted so much time to caring for bothies, and wrote this down, which I don't think I could better now.

"So why do I bother?"

"Lots of reasons really. Sometimes I tell people it's because I've used the bothies all my life and it's about time I 'put something back'. Corrour was, after all, where more than half a century ago my father introduced me to that unique Scottish bothy culture where every man was your neighbour and no-one was left needing. So that's true, maybe. Pride, certainly: pride that I, a wee bauchle who knew this iconic bothy when it was four bare walls, a roof and an earthen floor, have been able to help others more skilled than I to turn it into an exemplar of modern bothy culture and am entrusted to help look after it."

"It's for the craic, too. The craic and the company, for they're a rare gang of folk who use and who look after the bothies – like-minded hill gangrels with years of experience and tales to tell and share – and the Cairngorms crew are the best of all."

"The gratitude of my fellow hill walkers and climbers is nice too. It would be a lie to say I'm not chuffed when someone says well done, when people who have enjoyed a night's comfortable shelter and perhaps a dram and a tale or two around the fire say thanks for all the good work."

"But, at heart, it's because it is a chance, however small, to make a difference. By walking a few miles into the hills I love and doing a few hours of work, I can make a small part of the world a better place than it was. For the very existence of a bothy is a defiant subversion of the dog-eat-dog world of business and politics. Maintaining a place of refuge and shelter in the wilderness, open and free for all people to come together as strangers and share each other's company as friends, to help one-another and share tales and experiences, is a proud assertion and reminder of humanity in a world where humanity too often seems in danger of being overwhelmed by fear and greed."

"To be able to help in work like that is a privilege and a gift. How could anyone say no?"

So. What are you doing this weekend?