

## **An Account of a Bothy Renovation**

### **The Renovation of Carron bothy**

Carron is one of those bothies that sits in our collection, not causing any trouble, not shouting about its existence. It is well looked after by its MOs and well appreciated by its users. It sits in a lovely spot, out of the forestry and looking over some grand and scenic countryside. Who would expect now that its renovation was one of the longest and most troublesome in the MBA's history? With the weather being horrible for most of the workparty days, those problems not caused by the building and by material supplies, were found and thrown at us by the weather gods. This is the story:

### **Stuttering progress at Carron, May 1996**

At the May Management Committee meeting, it was agreed that some renovation work would be carried out at *Carron* during the remainder of this year. This will entail rebuilding and stabilising the existing walling, including the fireplace gable which had collapsed over the course of last winter because of the poor state or absence of the mortar holding the place together.

It is proposed to rebuild the walls up to eaves level and protect the wall heads with polythene sheeting to prevent ingress of water into the structure. The building will be left in this state until the Spring of 1997 when its condition will be reassessed to see if there has been any further deterioration or collapse. If this is found to be the case, then the project will have to be reviewed and possibly abandoned.

At the moment, no firm dates have been identified for the workparties to carry out these tasks. However it is expected that the work will be scheduled for some time during August, September or October, depending on the wishes of the landowner. Much work will be required to return the existing structure to even its former ruinous state, before the main renovation in 1997. Please help this summer/autumn if you are able.

Reproduced from Newsletter No. 117, June 1996



The ruin of Carron, circa 1994

But back to the beginning of the tale:

### **Walls of Jericho (Part 1)**

**Jim Ross**

In a fit of Fawcettomania in the Spring of 1992 while Craig Caldwell's expedition were hacking their way through the conifer jungles of Argyll looking for ancient Celtic monuments, they emerged upon some open hillsides and set their eyes upon the ruins of *Creag an Iubhair* and *Carron*. The discovery coincided with the fleeting vision of a beautiful blonde maiden astride a white horse which Craig took to be such a good omen that he suggested we renovate the former (*Creag an Iubhair*, not the maiden). Two Rights of Way meet at this location where an old stone bridge crosses the River Add. This bridge up in the hills seems incongruous now, more suited to a main road, but testifies to the importance of these routes in the past. It also could do with restoration. The paths to Auchindrain and Kilmichael are mostly in forest but over the hills to Kilneuir at Loch Awe is open and attractive.

*Creag an Iubhair* is mentioned no less than nine times in the annals of Committee and Area meetings until April 1994 when Hamish Thompson was empowered to seek Forestry Enterprise approval which was finally received just in time for a visit by Alistair Dickson, Andy Mayhew, Leslie Barrie, Jim Ross and co. They condemned the ruin and suggested *Carron*, primarily because 'the walling of *Carron* is in better condition. Only one gable with fireplace remains at *Creag an Iubhair* and the back wall is collapsing into a morass.' The prosecution will bear these statements in mind.

The confluence of rivers bounds three estates and permission had to be sought again from another owner for *Carron* but this was soon granted and the Committee approved £2,500 from the Bruce Wallace bequest in February 1995 not long before Calum White became Central Highlands Area Organiser.

In April 1995, when I visited *Carron* with the owner, the easternmost gable had collapsed. This didn't matter. *Carron* is two cottages in line, we'd noticed that end was dodgy, so we'd chosen to renovate only part of the west end. The owner agreed to us re-using the slates which was ideal, but he expressed concern over the MBA's ability and perseverance to take on such a daunting task. "Don't worry," I replied, "the MBA's well-organised and resourced. When we take on a job, it gets done." The reckless statement goes a long way to explaining the apparent bone-headedness now about to be displayed.

MBA Vandals Inc. spent four days 'preparing' the ruins in November 1995. The plan called for pointing the walls and capping them with mortar as winter protection for the major workparty the following summer in 1996. Hamish Thompson hoped to bring the materials across the hill track from Loch Awe which rises to over 1,000 feet and is described as 'hard on vehicles'. Half way up it became too hard even for his 4WD. After some hurried relocations, we ended up with bags of cement and sand spread around a large acreage of Argyll, a practice with which we were to become familiar on this project. A two-person all terrain barrow was used to rescue the materials.

Three incredibly unsafe remnants of roof were de-slatted and brought down. A fourth part was so unsafe we were frightened to go onto it but it abutted an internal gable with fireplaces and served as an open-ended shelter from the strong cold winds, once the slates balancing on the ceiling joists had been toppled off. This gable stood only because it leant against the tatters of roof but it had more voids than a string vest. We sat on old rafters around the fire in the evenings like a bunch of bandits holing up from a posse and not daring to sneeze. The slates were carefully stockpiled but by the time we came to use them they were overgrown. A large corrugated askew-to was annihilated to enable its base to be used for mixing concrete.

The best quarter of the ruin was the SW end which had a nice gable and fireplace and a stone dividing wall which we could use as the new inner end. The exterior was so thoroughly pointed it was virtually rendered and the interior still possessed sufficient wood lining to conceal the awful truth. Removal of woodwork was always accompanied by the clatter or clump of disintegrating stonework. One side of the front window wall fell-in, leaving the lintel teetering on the outer leaf.

From inside the gable looked an impending pile of marbles. It was stuck together with a 1:500 mix of lime and earth clay masquerading as 'mortar'. But it was the dividing wall that inspired such immediate terror that we demolished what remained of the upper triangular part. A cap of mortar on all wall heads to prevent water ingress completed phase one. Geoff Moore, Richard Pelling, David Knox, Hamish Thomson, Alan Craghill, John Taylor, Susan Aitcheson, Calum White, Mike Pratt and myself retreated from the opening skirmish, honour more or less intact.

Mhairi and I took a stroll over from Kilneuair at the start of March 1996, following the trail of abandoned sand bags, and found that the fireplace gable had succumbed to gravity and gales and some miscreant had stolen two sets of ladders. I hadn't been there when they had been stored but sitting on the pile of rubble inside the bothy eating our pieces, out of the freezing wind, we thought it was deep enough to entomb ladders, if not a tramp or two.



Difficult of access - one of Carron's water-logged tracks

The May 1966 Committee meeting agreed we should revise the scope and costings, stabilise the walls, leave over yet another winter and report back in early 1997 (and provide a new set of ladders for the Area). So the 'architect' re-drew the plans, showing a new brick chimney, corrugated iron gables and a large contingency fund for hiring Land Rovers. Changes in MBA personnel also intervened and I became both the Project and Area Organiser when South West Highland and Islands Area was created and Calum's dominium shrank northward.

In late October 1996 Chris Stead, Clive Stevens, Mark Fitton, Dave Martin and I spent up to five days in dreich conditions, brightened by occasional thunder and lightning, quarrying-out the interior and re-building the walls. A large frame tent was carried in and was the setting for a bacchanalia of Baxters best jam and a bonanza of biscuits. I'd planned for more volunteers. No tramps had been interned but the skeletons of the ladders did finally emerge, mangled by tons of falling rock.

Towards the end of 1996 the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers contacted the MBA asking if we had anything they could take on as a 'community project'. Only *Carron* was available and Captain Emil Tessem-Cotton and A.N.Other drove up from Hampshire for a recce. We splashed in at the end of January and surveyed the dribbling grey walls with their 'protective coverings' of tattered polythene flapping in the breeze. I was amazed when they agreed to take it on. A blizzard of paperwork hit us in February and March 1997 while shortages of men and machines in Bosnia whittled away at the available manpower, public liability insurance was arranged and I tried to put on paper what I'd hoped to carry in my head because I couldn't be there weekdays at the REME workparty.

Three tons of wood, cement, sand, bricks, fixings and corrugated-iron were delivered to Brenchoillie Farm for safe-keeping in mid-April. The weather had been dry for so long that even the river which runs from the end of the forestry track to *Carron*, a Right of Way fit only for fish, had dried out in places. Predictably the day REME arrived saw the heaviest concentrated rain in living memory, or so the folk at the farm told us. They also said the Army had a "big yellow machine with lots of wheels on a trailer".

You may note in Captain Emil's account of Exercise Carron Carpenter below any absence of mention of the misadventures of this monster, and this can only be construed as due to the Official Secrets Act, so I say no more!



## Exercise Carron Carpenter

Captain Emile Tessem-Cotton

After driving from our base in Bordon, Hampshire to Garelochhead on the Thursday, Friday 24<sup>th</sup> April was our first day in the Highlands, and proved to be rather eventful. We took our tents and gear to establish 'base camp', which involved hair-raising cross-country driving in Land Rover and ATV, which became stuck on several occasions requiring plenty of self-recovery. Neil Evans, our very own recovery mechanic, was kept exceptionally busy, and the slightest shower turned the track into a quagmire. However we did manage to transport the majority of the sand, cement, bricks and chimney flue-liners to *Carron*. When Neil wasn't busy winching vehicles out of the mud, he and Ross cleared the bothy of rubble and timber to give us a clear view of the task in hand.



A clutter of materials as the work progresses

On Saturday, the remainder of the materials were brought in and the rebuilding work started. 'Skid' and Neville took down the end internal wall and made good the footing to block up the door way. Starting from a 'nil-experience' level, they soon grasped the idea of building with stone. Some of the tie stones were exceptionally large, and the make-shift scaffolding showed the strain as they pushed themselves up for the big lifts. MBA members Jim Ross and Mark Fitton took down the window end wall. It was quite entertaining watching the bothy fill back up with stone and rubble.

Sunday saw eight people working in three teams on all the weak points in the walls. Skid and Neville finished off blocking up the doorway. Neil and Ross started rebuilding the window end, with much scrounging around for suitable stone lintels. Some serious demolition of the un-required sections of wall produced a gravestone lintel requiring a 4 man lift to put it in place over the corner window. By the end of the day all the weak walls had been repaired, and were now built up to a good height.

The continuous rain on Monday caused disaster as the Land Rover became bogged down up to its axles and snapped a half shaft. It took four hours to winch it out stage by stage up the track, only for it to become totally stuck at the bothy when the winch broke. Ross, Skid and Neville attempted to point the outside bothy walls under a plastic sheet. The winch was removed from the Land Rover and taken away for repair.

Tuesday saw the winch fixed, and the Land Rover dragged out of its overnight resting place. The fire plinths were set, and the walls levelled in readiness for the wall-plates. The squad left the bothy for a day-off on Wednesday to tackle Ben Nevis, in snow and high winds.

On our return to *Carron* on Thursday (1<sup>st</sup> May) the weather improved dramatically, and it was hot and sunny. The wall-plates were set, and Glen co-ordinated the timber required for the roof trusses which were built by myself. Ross and Neil built the fireplace, and every one mucked in to finally pointing the walls and having a go at the chimney.

Gavin Queen and friends appeared on site on Friday when it was very hot, too hot! More heavy roof timbers were carried in, and roof trusses built. Plenty of heavy lifting got them into place on the wall-plates and securing pegs were hammered into the walls. The chimney had been built to one-third height and suddenly the former mound of rubble began to look like a shelter.

On Saturday, yet more timbers were carried along the affectionately named 'silk trail', both for the trusses and the sarking boards. The chimney builders were racing the roof truss fabricators and installers to see who could complete their task first before the final truss was required to be placed. The chimney builders just lost out in the race to build it to ridge height. By the end of the day both gables were in place and all trusses were in place and tied down. All the sarking was on site, but doubts were raised about the amount of timber available! Make-shift windows were fashioned, and one of the old doors was restyled to fit the doorway to keep out unwanted animals.

The sarking was completed on Sunday and the boards covered with roofing-felt, before the squad packed up for our long journey south. Unfortunately we didn't quite complete our aim - the weather hampered the transportation of materials to the bothy and we were a few less in number than was originally planned. Good luck to the MBA workparty in July/August.

Reproduced from Newsletter No. 121 June 1997

## **Walls of Jericho (Part 2)**

**Jim Ross**

Precious few MBA members were able to turn out to help the REME, but those that were there at the end of their stint felt a bit guilty watching the Engineers retreating, bereft of their Land Rover and heavily burdened. We were left frantically trying to make the bothy waterproof with sarking, roofing felt and battens. This was made difficult because I'd ordered only half the required amount of sarking. Old stuff was temporarily resorted to. With normally only six men on the project, REME had achieved a great deal in 10 days, delivering two tons of materials and four almost safe walls, erecting three-quarters of the chimney, cutting and fabricating the roof structure and rebuilding the fireplace.

The summer workparty now had to complete the chimney and the roof, slate it and fit corrugated-iron gables, a wooden floor and ceiling, two windows and a door. But most of the required materials now lay abandoned and vulnerable a mile and a half away to the north. Three years earlier Forestry Enterprise had indicated that they might help with transport. I wondered if they'd remembered. They did, and also that they'd said that you'd have difficulty getting either ATVs or Land Rovers down that track! If we could get the materials to another track-end they'd take it from there. This was a 46 mile journey to get the materials to within one and a half miles to the south of *Carron*. A mid-week visit found us blundering about the forest in the dark with a roll of Keyline tape and a felt pen to mark the route for the lorry delivering the extra sarking and which Keyline had kindly, if unwittingly, agreed would pick up the old materials and relocate them.

A few days later, Colin Scales, Alistair Dickson and Alastair Lings (with Land Rover) were diverted after the Roybridge Committee meeting to do something useful for a change, moving the materials to the utter limits of the track which even Keyline lorries couldn't reach. The foresters used a quad bike with trailer and an Argocat, then Lorn and I had a day visit to stash it all in the loft until August. Talk about double-handling!

Recruitment and training went on apace during June and July of the hordes, unfortunately, not of men but of midges. It could have been worse though, if the deluges hadn't been accompanied by the occasional breeze. The Organiser's car-full of communal scoff and portable kitchen, shiny new ladders, travelling wardrobe, chest of glass, helmet's in this years' fashionable green and a clavicle-creasing rucksack of tools were portaged piecemeal through the Land Rover-swallowing swamps by Tony and Jo martin, Mark Fitton, Dave Hunter, Amy Carless, Jim McKenna and Mhairi Ross. A macabre evening's topics included Burke and Hare, family skeletons in cupboards and the wisdom of cooking steaks over a fire of tantalised wood. The weekenders removed the roofing felt and temporary old sarking and re-sarked with new. Half a plank extra was all that came between the Organiser and an even brighter 'brasser' than before. The heptuple-handled timber was evicted from the loft, pancakes and tea wolfed down, tilting-fillets and gutter-irons fixed, pointing and window painting, more scoffing of pancakes and an orgy of slate sorting. Outside the gable a siege-tower was constructed and bricks, chimney liners, rolls of lead, mortar and men dispatched to its airy platform to progress the stack skyward. A wooden mould was made and a capstone for the chimney cast in reinforced concrete. Those who, as it turned out, were fortunate to have work the next day left in ones and twos until only Jim McKenna and I remained, erecting the first of four scaffolds which would be required.



Slating work well-progressed

After a night's heavy rain cleared in the morning, the day was good enough for two thirds of the front roof to be slated. Several parties of young people passed like pilgrim companies on their way to Kilneuair but none came up to visit. By evening, the Organiser had become too clarty for his own comfort and the midges frustrated by the diminishing stocks of blood. There was no wind. So he stripped to buff and boots and jogged down to the river for a frantic bath, having forgotten that Jim is an

inveterate practical-joker, and returned just in time to catch him wiring up the door.

Tuesday was gloomy and windy but not enough to prevent completion of the chimney stack. There was no-one extra there to record the lifting of the capstone by ropes and brute strength to the chimney head and the pot, after festering in the shed for two years, being finally placed. Then the August monsoon set in while we dismantled the tower. It wasn't much drier inside, what with the felt having been nailed twice, the roofing-irons bashed into the sarking and most of the roof still unslated. Lunch was accompanied by a Chinese torture of dripping and the trickle of a streamlet across the bothy floor. And finally a loud knocking at the temporary door. There were ten of them, so it couldn't be the Apocalypse and thus emboldened we asked that their horses be tethered outside the paddocks lest our tents be eaten. The strangers spoke with American accents and we expected a 'Wanted for Horse Rustling' poster to be unrolled at any moment but they just wanted to eat their lunch in the 'dry'. We cleared our scraps of mouldy bread and cheese off the table and provided a table-cloth of ex-WD pale-blue kitchen roll. A cornucopia of sandwiches were laid out - egg and mayonnaise, salmon and parsley, paté de foie gras, smoked ham and lettuce, pineapple and cream cheese, watercress and walnut - washed down with Beaujolais and Chardonnay. Or so it seemed to us, salivating like dogs in the corner. And you know what wet dogs smell like! However, despite our troglodyte appearance they were very friendly and Mrs T.B. Gray-Stevens of Castle Riding Centre offered to help us with transporting materials in the future. The clatter of horseshoes was muffled by hill fog as they descended the trail and the Organiser plunged into the dribbling



conifers to rendezvous with Geoff Harrison and three lads - Richard Arrams, Michael Brummitt and Robert Plant - all of Grantham Adventure Club.

The real rain waited until we'd left the car, that Argyllshire rain with no spaces between the drops, and I wondered what it was like at 1,000 feet on a horse. Jim had a fire going and drying-lines at the ready but the lad's gear was in need of a tumble drier. It was too wet to pitch tents so the boys slept on plywood sheets in the loft and Geoff on the table, which turned over during the night, trapping him in the streamlet against the wall while the boys' snoring and the roar of the torrential rain on the roof prevented his cries for help from being heard.

During the next three days the weather fluctuated between bad and terrible though the work went slowly on. Richard fell ill and spent a day in his bed in his tent. Eventually we kept a permanent fire going to dry clothes and keep us cheerful. Finally both sides of the roof were slated and the incessant dripping onto clothes, bread, bedding, cement, biscuits and whatever you like to name, ceased. Then the mice came out to play and ate our biscuits, cheese, bread, flour, cement, nails ..... is there anything these voracious rodents won't gnaw at? Great was the pancake making during all this time and of glazing into the glowing heart of the fire.

No fresh volunteers came at the weekend but it stopped raining and Geoff and the lads went swimming now that the river wasn't likely to take you to Crinan. Corrugated iron was cut and fixed to the south gable. At 4 o'clock on Sunday afternoon the floor was started and, at the end of a thirteen and a half hour day, was half finished. On Monday a dazzling yellow disc was observed in a blue heaven and we went outside often to look wonderingly and to be warmed, between banging nails into boards and iron. On Tuesday Geoff and the lads had to leave for the long journey back to Grantham by public transport but not before making three trips to carry out equipment. I left them at Auchindrain, assuaging the pangs of withdrawal from canned drinks. I'm not sure how much they enjoyed themselves at *Carron* but they must have learned a great deal. The MBA are greatly indebted to Geoff, Ricky, Michael and Robert for their contribution and gladdening the heart of the Organiser during what otherwise would have been a pretty miserable period alone. As indeed he was for another day and a half, completing the gable, dismantling the scaffold, fitting and glazing windows and carrying-out the remaining gear. But although *Carron* lies below ramparts of hills and behind screening trees, it has a wide open aspect, the sun shone, the birds sang, the river sparkled and the peace was ineffable.



The end, nearly...as tools and equipment start going home

Believe it or not, Geoff returned on the Friday with three younger lads, Marks Lyon and Fletcher and Darrol Hargreaves who did some pointing and tidying up, but otherwise enjoyed themselves, I hope.

Since then two weekend workparties consisting of the usual suspects plus Terry Shaw, Robbie Livingstone and Euan Hannah have fitted a new door, finished the floor, most of the ceiling and the windows, fitted gutters, made a new table and continued pointing. The Organiser's most frequently rehearsed nightmare consisted of a pile of rubble with two boots sticking out and of the roof being found on top of the sycamore tree outside the bothy. Not until the final day were these exorcised by the tying-down of the roof by tensioned wires and the apparent return to the very beginnings of *Carron* when a chunk of the back wall was demolished and spread all over the floor. No virgins were sacrificed and placed in the cavity - although four Scouts from Port Glasgow appeared on cue - and it

was rebuilt in time for the Area meeting - after which they may have wished they had been. The Project organiser handed over the bothy to its first maintenance Organiser, Amy Carless, and heaved a mighty sigh of relief. Ahaaaah!

Parts 1 & 2 reproduced from Newsletter No. 123, December 1997

All illustrations from the MBA slide collection, photographer(s) unknown

Compiled for the MBA web-site by Richard Genner