

Was it Just a Rumour?

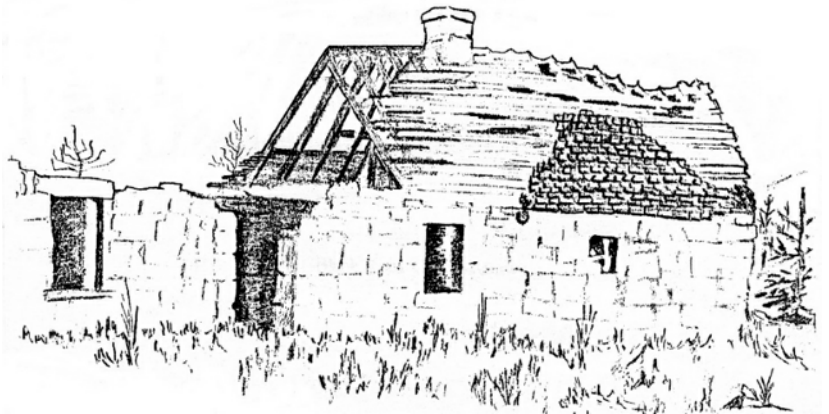
Richard Genner

Rumours - some hobbies have them, some don't. Football supporters will pass on a rumour to friends about a really decent pie shop near a football ground, or these days perhaps, a really decent bistro or gastropub; Campaign for Real Ale enthusiasts will tell friends about a drinking hole with top notch ale and liberal opening hours; Anglers will talk of a dream spot on the river where the fish love the bait.

The MBA was a bit like that when I first joined in the mid-seventies, talk on projects of 'secret bothies'. For 'secret', read non-MBA maintained, or often, not maintained. Most are gone now. Some are no more, the men (invariably) who maintained them either passed away or simply too old. Some were maintained by the Estate. They had a use, or perhaps the factor's grandfather was born in one, or the Estate's handyman's dad had been a shepherd at another. But time marched on, the new factor was 'from away', contractors took over the maintenance. During the 50s, 60s & 70s, when a cottage, previously used half a dozen times a year by the estate and by walkers a dozen times more, was now longer needed by the estate but was now used by walkers most weekends of the year, it became seen as a liability; the Estate took off the slates and the weather did the rest. It happened all over the UK, wherever the MBA now operates and many of the 'secret' bothies in our wild and lonely places in the MBA's youth are now just four bare walls or crumbling heaps of stones.

Other places for a dry and good night's kip, the subjects of word of mouth, have gone with the changes in society and business. Hamish Brown has written many good books, filled with excellent anecdotes, and added this one to the MBA Journal. It's easy to imagine the scene, Hamish told the story in Journal no 80, December 1986. Hamish and a gang of Braehead School lads are staying in a West Highland Railway lineside bothy, one lad is missing, John, despatched to Tyndrum for some messages (shopping). A train, unusually, rumbles to a halt at the bothy. There is a TV comedy style crush as the lads all try to exit together, to see young John grinning from the engine's cab. John dropped from the train's cab ladder, had the messages lowered down to him and sent the freight train on its way with a wave. He feasted well for years on the story of his train hitching. Why were they there? Well Rowan Tree Cottage was such a place on the rumour mill, a lineside cabin no longer required by the railway staff who trod the line. Those who stravaiged Rannoch Moor moved in, a bit of work, a bit of furniture, a simple but comfortable bothy emerged. But modern, quiet, diesel multiple unit trains and walkers don't mix. What age and weather did not claim, British Rail and its successors had to demolish. The incentive to trespass had to be removed. No doubt one or two bothy gangrels heard too late the rumours of the bothy at Rowan Tree Cottage.

Loraich and Lairig Leacach in Lochaber were 'not maintained' bothies. Lairig Leacach - half a bothy its structure suggests - came into MBA care. Loraich (also known as Black Rock cottage) didn't. But no matter, Simon Strachan, the MBA's seventh General Secretary, had heard the rumour that it offered accommodation, that it was good place for a night's kip for those with a need to escape Glasgow on a Friday evening. Read the story below to find how Simon found a rumour is worth the paper it is written on!



Loraich Cottage (See below for a bigger image)

Not too far south west of Lairig Leacach, on the north side of the Water of Nevis now lie the crumbling heap of stones which the OS map correctly identifies as the ruinous Steall Cottage. In his book *The Last Hundred*, Hamish Brown makes brief reference to bothying at Steall in his early years, but the cottage was too far gone by the time the MBA had the resources to look at the possibility of renovation. In December 1982 (MBA Journal No 63) David Campbell tells of bothies well known on the rumour machine. Of Steall, he said 'Sophistication is pure indulgence; when you are in need, four walls and a roof are as urgent as the Palace Hotel. Steall was that to me in '51. I was wet and weary and in no mood to go on, even the sight of heaving bodies, no windows, doors, fireplace or even an essential floor could turn me away. I found a 6' x 2' and

stayed. The wind came in and the rain stayed out and I loved it.' David's article also told of some of the post-war characterful Youth Hostels. Sadly David passed away before more of his many bothy memories could be committed to paper.

Irvine Butterfield, the MBA's second General Secretary (Becky Beale is now our seventeenth) became a well-known author, and like Hamish Brown made occasional contributions to the MBA's Journals and Newsletters. His last, before his passing in 2009, *The Lost Bothies of the Cairngorms*, recalled bothies no longer there to be used by Cairngorm stravaigers. The Cairngorms have recently been described as 'one of Britain's true wilderness areas'. This is very modern thinking, it wasn't always like that, the passes and glens of the Cairngorms have a good showing of MBA-maintained bothies and an even greater number of four bare walls and crumbling heaps of stone, homes and places of summer residence at one time. These places weren't just rumours - A E Robertson, Ronnie Burns, Affleck Grey, Tom Weir, they all wandered the Cairngorms, staying in the many now lost homes that dotted the Cairngorm straths and passes, Robertson and Burns as guests of the occupants, Grey and Weir later as bothy gangrels. In 1929 Jim Henderson and Jim Walker came upon the Lower Glen Einich bothy, as recounted in MBA Journal 168 Summer 2009. The two Glen Einich bothy were gone by the end of WW2.

Ryvoan could have had the same fate, given that for a long time after it was abandoned as a home it was un-maintained. Then the Creag Dhu Club stepped in and did their bit, although the Club was able to rescue only a part of the original cottage. In 1967 the MBA took responsibility, what is there now is much smaller than what Joe Owen-King used in 1935 (MBA Journal 195, Spring 2016).



Bynack lodge in 1962

Irvine includes Bynack Lodge in his article. There were three possibilities for the rumour machine at Bynack, the Lodge, Stables and Barns. Pity the walker who believed the rumour about Bynack Barns being a good place for the night - the Barns of Bynack, to give them their proper name, are big lumps of granite rock, in Devon they would be Tors. No shelter there, whatever the rumour-machine said! Bynack Stables were/was in all of living memory a crinkly tin (i.e. corrugated iron) shed which did give many walkers much needed, basic and (at the end of the last Millenium) deteriorating shelter. Around 2005, a winter storm removed any semblance to four walls, a roof and a door, and I read that the remnants have since been removed from this wild and lonely spot.

Bynack Lodge, a remote but well-built stone and slate lodge in its time, does appear in early MBA discussions but the MBA was at least 10 years too late for this lodge/bothy. Even in the 1930s, the best rooms for a comfortable night were in the roof-space, up the creaky stairs. By the 50s, the trip up the stairs was a precarious but necessary climb - too much tea and beer during the evening to be avoided for those with small bladders! In 1968, Adam Watson, one of the more recent of the Cairngorm Cognoscenti, stated that any prospect of shelter there was gone - pity also the early MBA member who translated the MBA's (unfulfilled) interest in Bynack Lodge as a rumour of a good place for the night.

Geldie Lodge, which takes its name from its Glen, Altanour Lodge and Auchelie, both in Glen Ey were oft included in post war bothy rumours and use but were too late to receive the MBA's care; Irvine Butterfield and David Campbell told of their use when they did provide shelter in wild and lonely places.

A few of the 'secret bothies' passed into the MBA's care, the maintainers of the secret bothy conceding that 'their' bothy's time was up unless the place received the necessary intensive care from the MBA. Easan Dorcha is one such bothy - David Campbell described it as 'a charming place'. Surprisingly a few 'secret bothies' live on, especially in Knoydart, not as bothies but as renovated, occupied and maintained homes; wind and solar power, satellite phones and modern fuels and insulation giving the occupants a lifestyle that previous residents could not have envisaged. A few more have been expensively renovated and are expensively let to those seeking a 'get-away-from-it-all' holiday experience!

The infant MBA was not immune to the ill-advised rumour. The second bothy list published by the Association in 1972 included 'In Glen Trool No. 352 Glen Trool, N of Loch Trool, bothy, roadside'. A subsequent update noted : 'No 352 : 3 sided bus shelter - literally'!

Thanks to television, international reporting and the internet, the world is now a much better informed place. The rumours have been replaced by the MBA's success as bothy maintainers and internet research : estates, events and weather have seen to the rest. Nowadays, only the unwise venture into the hills on the strength of a rumour, or perhaps we do really now have a diminished sense of adventure, cosseted by domestic comfort and a nanny state.



Altanour Lodge in 1952

[Footnote : the author was the Association's fifth General Secretary, the current Journal Editor our ninth]

Pictures taken by and © : Bynack Lodge - George Adams; Altanour Lodge - Colin Campbell, both sourced, with thanks, by Neil Reid of the cairngormwanderer website; Loraich Cottage - MBA archive, artist unknown.

June 2022

Misplaced Confidence

Simon Strachan

It all started with a note in the MBA Committee agenda (that's my excuse anyway!). A list of bothies which were potential candidates for renovation had been circulated prior to the Committee meeting and, had I attended, no doubt I would have been enlightened as to the state of the place I was interested in. However, on the basis that I'd never been to a ruined bothy and didn't have any experience of the extent of the MBA major renovations, I happily added it to my list of potential dosses for the future.

Casually mentioning the cottage to a friend, I was pleased to hear he had met a couple of people who'd stayed there. No excuse now – if other folk had stayed there it must be okay, according to any logical reasoning.

With ever increasing confidence in my 'knowledge' we left Glasgow early one evening last December. Questions such as "Have you ever been there before?" and "it doesn't seem to be in the MBA bothy list" were nonchalantly brushed aside. "It must be Okay" I said "after all, Graham knows a couple of guys who stayed there this summer." Suitably assured, Ron agreed to join me.

A quick pint in Fort William soon turned to slow progress in Glen Spean as heavy snow started falling and slowed us down to 15mph. Eventually we had to leave the car a mile short of the road end at Fersit, after it nearly left the road attempting a steep hill. By this time, however, the snow had stopped and the clouds cleared to allow us to walk in without using our torches. Passing through Fersit, we managed to wake up the village dogs and hurried on embarrassed at causing such a noise after midnight. I wondered if Ron knew about Nancy's bunkhouse* nearby; if he did his confidence in my 'knowledge' was enough to prevent him mentioning it.

About an hour, and a 'fifty-fifty' choice at a track junction not on the map, we came across Lairig Cottage in a clearing of young fir trees. The end nearest to us was incomplete, there was no roof at all and the wall was more in need of rebuilding than repointing. It was obvious that the habitable part was at the other end.

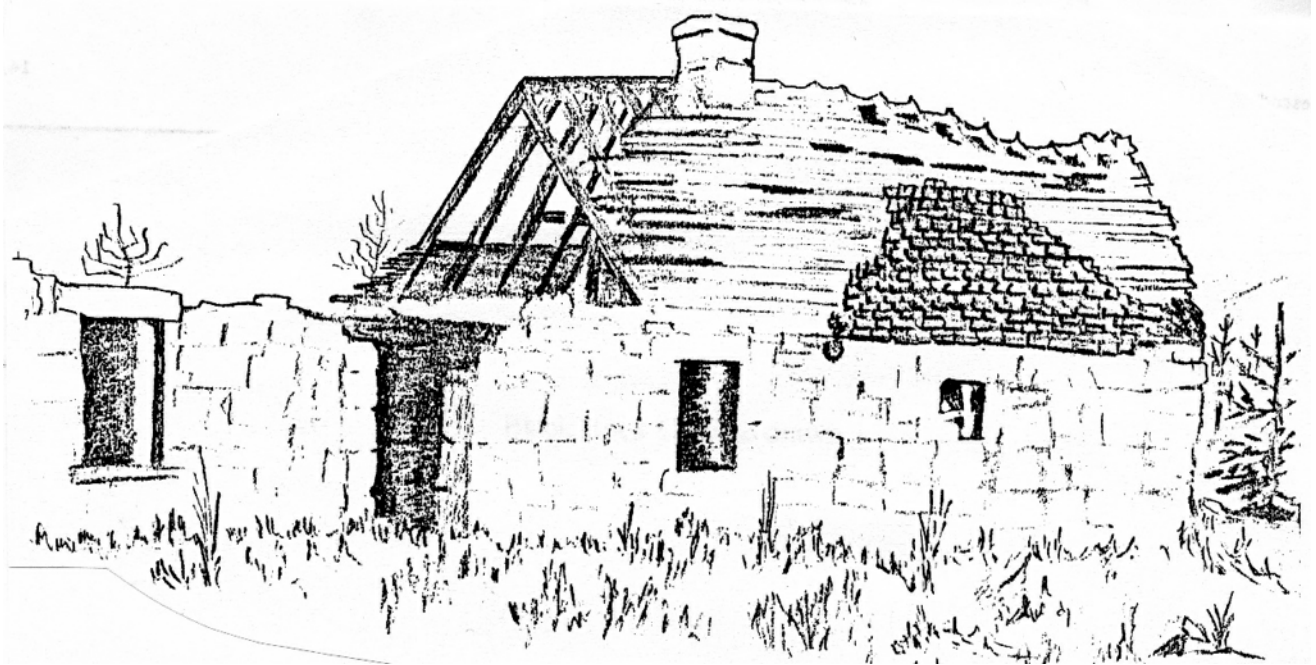
Going round to the door, or rather the doorway, Ron noticed that the window had fallen out. I didn't say a lot as the state of the floor had forced my eyes upwards. You could certainly see that it was a starlit night, especially through the north facing side of the roof. Before long we had cleared the driest corner and being the culprit, I was invited to spend the night in the draughty and messier part. I couldn't really complain about this given that Ron was being so restrained with his language. In retrospect, however, I should have seen that producing a recently acquired Gore-tex bivvy bag was not terribly tactful.

Next morning, however, made up for the rather basic accommodation. The view down Lagganside was beautiful and there was more to come. Just as we reached the south top of Chno Dearg we stepped out of the cloud. It was the first time I'd ever been above a sea of cloud and this shattered my conclusion that guidebooks etc. had touched up some of their photos at the behest of the Scottish Tourist Board. We enjoyed fantastic views along the grey corries to Ben Nevis and over to Ben Alder – a really memorable day.

Driving back to Glasgow, Ron asked in a matter of fact sort of way what I would have done if the rain had been driving down. I don't think either of us was taken in by the answer this time.

*Sadly, Nancy Smith's Fersit Bunkhouse, one of the first independent hostels in Scotland, closed a number of years ago.

Reproduced from MBA Journal No 86 Dec 1987
Simon was the MBA's 7th General Secretary, 1989 - 1993



The bothy in which Simon had misplaced confidence