

# Deserted farms and shealings in the Braemar area of Deeside, Grampian Region

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## ABSTRACT

*A field survey of deserted settlement in the Braemar area of Deeside revealed around 70 settlement clusters. Those lying in the altitudinal band from 330 to 500 m above sea level are clearly deserted farmsteads many of which were associated with field systems and corn kilns. Those above 500 metres asl are interpreted as shealings and small enclosures associated with the summering of stock. The surviving structures are described in an inventory (see microfiche) and attempt is made to relate their chronology to the changes in population distribution and agricultural economy associated with the development of the deer forests.*

## INTRODUCTION

Upper Deeside offers a rich field for the mapping of historical settlement in areas at present under low levels of land-use intensity. As much of the ground below 500m is eminently plantable, the settlement evidence west and south-west of Braemar was mapped in the summers of 1983 and 1984. Attention was concentrated on the valleys of the Dee, the Clunie and the Lui which provide an altitudinal transect between 330 metres at Braemar village to 665 metres above sea level (asl) where the A93 crosses the old county boundary between Aberdeenshire and Perthshire. The old settlements in Glen Callater and Glen Ey are not considered in this paper. A total of 70 settlements were surveyed and details of most of these are included in the catalogue which is on microfiche (5: E1–F10).

Two basic settlement types were identified. Clear signs of former permanent agricultural activities were apparent in the altitudinal band between 330 metres to around 500 metres asl while summer shealings and small enclosures appear mainly but not exclusively in the band from 500 metres asl to 750 metres asl. The permanent settlements take the form of substantial clusters of longhouses and outbuildings around which stone clearance heaps, and furrow, stone founs and lime- and corn-kilns clearly evidence former agricultural activities. Several of the sites appear to show a sequence of occupation with older round-cornered longhouses overlain in part by square-ended rectangular longhouses. In the lower part of the shealing band, the oval sheals are associated with generally smaller longhouses and with evidence for small-scale cultivation in the form of stone-edged lynchets and garden plots. In the higher band up to 750 metres asl, activities appear to have been exclusively concerned with summer stock husbandry, typified by small oval sheals, generally 4m by 3m, frequently associated with enclosures for the temporary holding of

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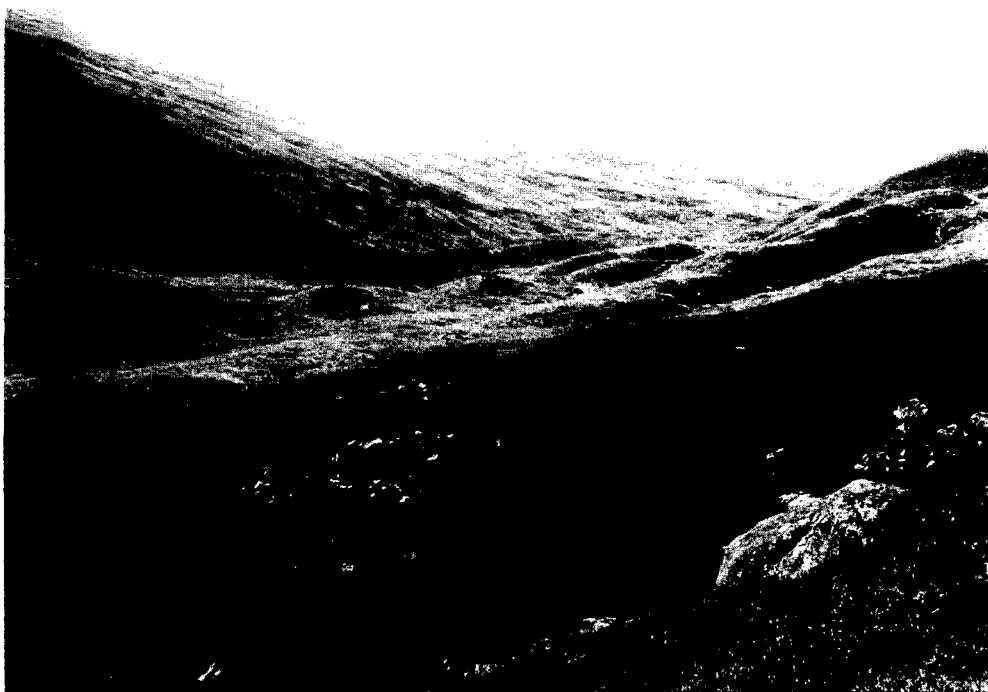
the animals. Documentary and map evidence suggests that the distribution had its maximum functional extent in the late 18th century, but was already beginning to contract by the time of the maximum recorded parish population in 1811. Subsequently changes in population distribution and a withdrawal of agricultural and shealing land uses were to result from the creation of deer forests in the middle part of the 19th century.

The field survey revealed a pattern of a string of clachans in lower Glen Clunie, the Dee and Glen Lui, some of which were associated through estate map evidence with higher level shealings in the Baddoch and upper Clunie. More specific linkages between parent clachan and shealing territory must await analysis of the Invercauld Estate Papers.

The historical background to the *modus vivendi* revealed by the field survey is typical of Highland Edge communities in Scotland. Pre-improvement populations tended to be high in relation to the limited availability of cultivatable land. At altitudes above 300 metres asl (and on occasion below), grain harvest frequently failed and a considerable amount of community effort was concentrated on stock rearing. The operation of a clan society with its military requirements also tended to result in relatively high populations in relation to the available resources. Most of the clachans in the main glens enjoyed animal grazing rights on the hill which permitted the breeding of cattle which offered a form of realizable wealth for payment of rent. In a remote location, cattle had the obvious advantage of being able to walk to market while foraging en route. The economic necessity of droving was recognized by laws in Scotland established as early as the 13th century which permitted the grazing of drove cattle on common land provided it did not carry meadow or corn. By the 18th century, droving was firmly established as a professional occupation with drovers exempted from the *Disarming Acts*. In 1725, Wade issued over 200 licences to drovers and dealers which were valid for two years and gave the holder the right to carry weapons. Thieving of cattle remained commonplace in the 18th century and was one of the factors behind the location of a Hanoverian garrison at Braemar Castle following the battle of Culloden. A series of ill-defined tracks acted as rights of way for cattle droving and several focused on the Braemar area en route to the Cairnwell pass. Gathering of the mature cattle commenced in springtime when local sales were advertised by posting bills on churches such as Crathie and Tullich. According to Haldane (1952), droving via Glen Muick was still practised in 1887, and across the Lairig Ghru in 1873. The Deeside droveways were utilized by cattle droves from Moray and Banff as well as cattle ultimately gathered in the remote parts of the West Highlands. The main southern markets were sited at Grangemouth and Falkirk. The ability to produce surplus cattle stock in upland areas where limited agricultural inbye ground had to be exclusively devoted to the production of essential food resources depended on the practice of shealing – the summertime use of the higher pasture.

Although traditionally a feature of the Atlantic seaboard of Scotland (Miller 1967; Love 1981) and enshrined in Gaelic song and culture, shealing was also widespread in eastern Scotland. On the western seaboard and islands, the sheals were often sited close to sea level, but in Perthshire and Aberdeenshire, shealing activity took place at altitudes in excess of 700 metres asl, well beyond the highest levels reached by permanent agricultural settlement. The evidence for this system of land use rests on the physical remains of the sheals, estate documents and maps, and the often green nature of the vegetation around the sheals amongst the heather-dominated moorland (illus 1). Early travellers like Pennant visited Highland shealings where ‘the families of one or two hamlets retire to with their flocks in summer’ (Pennant 1774).

The Deeside shealings appear to have been built of varying combinations of stone and turf, and their foundations are today represented by the lowermost stone courses. Plan shapes vary from round and oval to bow-ended and rectangular small longhouses. The round and oval sheals



ILLUS 1 Typical bow-ended shealing in Glen Baddoch set into natural knoll, adjacent to the stream and the 'greens'

are single-celled, but the small longhouses contain internal divisions and often have more than one entrance (see site catalogue fiche 5: E3–F10, in particular sites 46–53 inclusive and sites 57–64 inclusive). The best preserved of the Braemar sheals survive only to several stone courses and only one to a height where a mural alcove may be identified. The shealings are characteristically sited near streams, above the flood level, and the sheals are sited on knolls. Such site characteristics are particularly well demonstrated in the sheals of Upper Glen Baddoch (illus 2) where the valley floor above the floodplain is diversified by mounds and hollows of fluvio-glacial origin. Where the ground is broken by rock outcrops or scattered with large boulders (sites 46 and 47), the sheal foundations are tied on to these to form a natural wall. On occasion, sheals are associated with small stone-edged lynchets and plots which appear to have been designed to produce a garden crop during the summer occupation (site 50) (illus 2). In the majority of shealing sites, a variety of small enclosures of stone are built nearby, frequently using natural hollows in the ground. These appear to have acted as calf pens when the milk cattle were turned-out to graze or as reception areas where the gathered stock would await their turn for milking. The best constructed and most substantial enclosures probably reflect the robbing of earlier stone structures, and some are likely to be associated with the development of commercial sheep hirsels in the early 19th century. One or two sites may also have been reoccupied by deer-watchers in the later Victorian period.

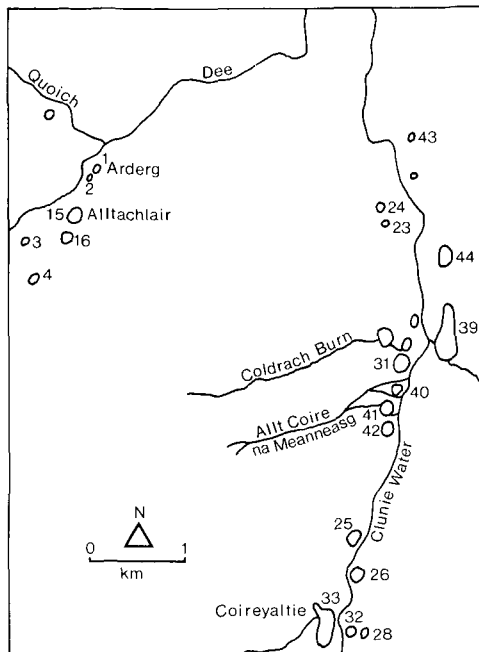
The sheals are characteristically grouped into clusters of six to eight foundations implying a defined shealing territory assigned by right and tradition to a particular parent clachan down



ILLUS 2 Sites 49 and 50 at Strone Baddoch overlooking the lower reaches of Glen Clunie

valley. The territoriality of shealing is confirmed by a contemporary set of estate maps for the Braemar area (*Invercauld Estate Map Volume*, Sheets 76 and 80). The maps were surveyed by George Brown and are dated 1807–9. Sheet 76 depicts the Grazings of the Baddoch. Site 59 is described as ‘the sheals of Castletown’ (the Invercauld portion of Braemar), while site 60 as ‘uneven ground belonging to the tenants of Auchindryne and Tomintoul’ (the Mar portion of Braemar). In both sites, the shealing cluster includes not only the oval 4 m by 3 m sheals, but also several longhouses, including a 15 m-long longhouse with three internal divisions.

In the absence of any sign of agricultural cropping activity in the form of stone clearance or lynchets, it may be asserted that shealing complexes included longhouses almost comparable in size to those characteristic of the permanent clachans (sites 25–33 Glen Clunie) (illus 3). On the same sheet, sites 63 and 64 respectively described as ‘uneven braes with moor and fine grass pasture belonging to Invercauld’ and ‘those of Tomintoul and Auchindryne belonging to Lord Fife’. As the two sites lie within a few hundred metres of each other, it would appear that pasture rights at that time transcended land-ownership boundaries. The map evidence for the early 18th century suggests that not every clachan in Glen Clunie possessed or made use of shealing grounds. True transhumance economies would have involved the careful management of the pastures by shepherding and the twice daily milking of the animals, followed by the preparation of butter and cheese. These activities would require relatively heavy human inputs supported in this case by the number of buildings in each shealing site, and may be related to periods of high population densities in the Braemar area. When population numbers were fewer, shealing

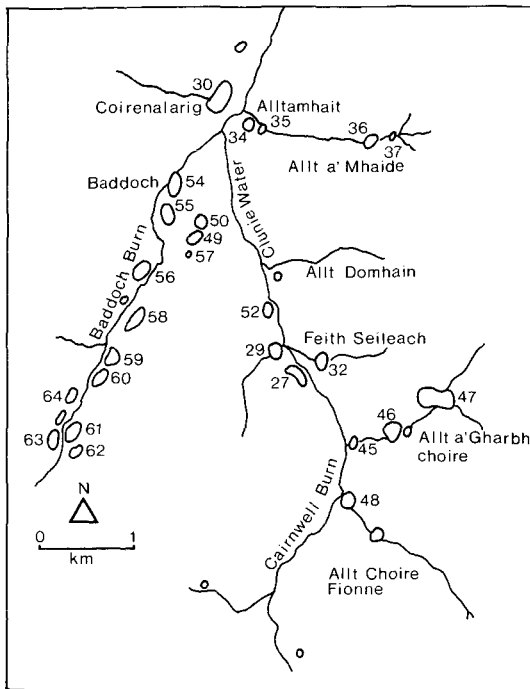


ILLUS 3 Deserted settlements of Lower Glen Clunie and Glen Dee

activities might be carried out on a less intensive scale and aimed chiefly at the summering of immature stock. The latter form of shealing land-use may be apportioned to a late stage in shealing occupation.

The occupation of the shealings began in May and continued into September. The removal of most of the clachan animals from the vicinity of the croplands was a necessity in an agricultural system where lack of enclosure meant constant guarding of the crops from trampling and grazing. The uncertainty of crop yields and the need to pay a rental to the laird must have tended to encourage the maintenance of as large a breeding stock as availability of winter keep allowed. It therefore follows that the black cattle stock, other than those destined for the markets and the milk cows, would be pushed up to the high pastures as early as possible to benefit from the first bite of the upland meadow spring grasses. There were also benefits in subjecting the clachan stock to a change of herbage which was a natural solution to diseases derived from the depletion of trace elements from the inbye or immediate outfield soils. The milking animals would follow the others up to the shealing whenever the completion of crop sowing freed additional members of the community from their duties in the clachan. In this area, the sheals lie within 10 km of the parent clachan permitting a daily contact if required. In other parts of Aberdeenshire, the distance between shealing and clachan was frequently considerably greater. The Monymusk shealings were sited in the Banffshire Cabrach – a distance of 40 km.

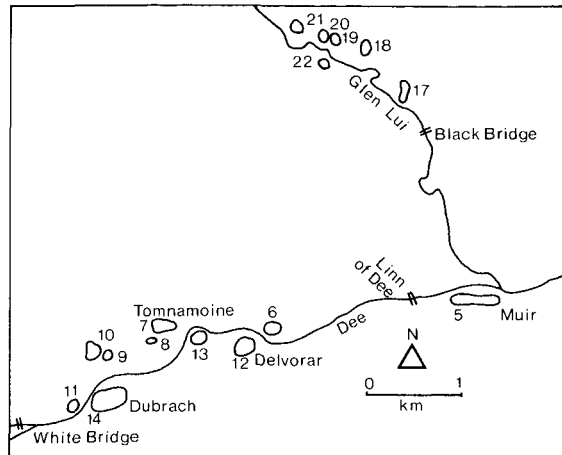
The density of the shealings in the Baddoch (illus 4) in particular suggests an intensive and carefully organized use of its 'moorgrass and fine pasture' which may pre-date the *Invercauld Estate Map* of 1807–9 which so describes them. It may be suggested that the evidence for catch-cropping in some shealing sites in the lower altitudinal band may also date to this intensive



ILLUS 4 Deserted settlements of upper Glen Clunie, the Baddoch and Cairnwell Burns

phase of shealing utilization. It is possible that attempts were then made to develop shealings into permanent settlements. With less severe population pressures, shealing reverted to a less intensive system. The main period of decay in shealing land-uses dates from the growth of the deer forests in the second decade of the 19th century. This period was also characterized by the introduction of commercial sheep farms into the upper reaches of the Dee and its tributary valleys, leading to the abandonment of crop-growing and clachans. Terse accounts in the *Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Game Laws* (1872) describe the creation of the Mar deer forest estimated by Skene (1811) as extending to 10000 acres but by 1872 as reaching 100000 acres. The process of deer forest extension is described as 'gradual' but taking place mainly after 1830. The depopulation of Braemar and Crathie parish from its 1811 maximum was attributed by one witness to the Select Committee as a direct result of the deer forest extension, although the Earl of Fife's factor at Allanaquoich strongly denied this. He commented on the problems of stock wintering and of successfully cultivating oats in upland environments and suggested that the main phase of depopulation resulted from the suppression of illicit distillation some 40 years previous to the main phase of deer forest extension.

Deer and sheep land-uses certainly effectively depopulated the floors of the main valleys where the parent clachans and farms were sited, notably in Glen Dee and Glen Ey. Their former presence is clearly revealed in the field survey and the growth of crops by the presence of both lime-kilns and corn-drying kilns. The evidence to the Select Committee confirms that eight families together with 3000 cattle and sheep stock were removed from Glen Ey in 1842, and two families from Glen Dee in 1829. By the latter year only three families remained in that stretch of



ILLUS 5 Deserted settlements on the Dee (west of Linn of Dee) and the Lui

the Dee between the Linn and the Geldie where field survey reveals nine clachans (sites 6–14 inclusive) (illus 5). The Delvorar (site 12) and Dubrach (site 14) farms became depopulated for deer forest in 1829 and Little Inverey in 1838. Glen Quoich, which retains substantial stands of native Caledonian pines, is conspicuously lacking in both sheals and clachans. It appears to have been a historical deer forest protected by the lairds from settlement encroachment. Twelve families from Glen Clunie together with 2000 sheep and 500 cattle were removed to make way for two large sheep farms in 1840. It may thus be concluded that the final desertion of the sheals was associated with the demise of the parent settlements in the early to middle part of the 19th century when rationalization of estate land-uses took the dual form of increased emphasis on the sporting side of the enterprise coupled with the development of sheep farms on a relatively large scale. From the relatively limited evidence for eviction at that time, and the high density of both shealing and permanent settlement remains, it may be suggested that substantial depopulation had already taken place prior to this date as suggested by the Earl of Fife's factor in his evidence presented to the Select Committee of 1872.

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