



Shelter in wild and lonely places

From a comment in a visitors' book, the Mountain Bothies Association was formed in 1965, explains Denis Mollison.

When the first 'munroist', A. E. Robertson, and other late-19th century mountaineers explored Scotland's remoter glens they often made use of accommodation with gamekeepers and shepherds. The houses they stayed in were mostly fairly recently built, substantial stone cottages provided by the well-off owners of stalking and sheep-farming estates from which the original inhabitants had been cleared 50 or 100 years before.

Over the first half of the 20th century, however, and especially between the two world wars, social and economic changes brought about new clearances, as estate workers became fewer, and those that remained less prepared to live an hour or more from the nearest road. As they left, a new wave of mountaineers appeared, many of them adventurous and poor enough that they found the idea of free shelter in remote glens attractive. Interactions and responses were varied: friendships between recreationists and the last residents, vandalism of what were thought of as possessions of the selfish rich, camaraderie among young people finding freedom in the wild from their hard working lives.

Bernard Heath

By the 1960s, the weather had taken toll of most of the remote cottages. A few were cared for by groups, for example the Cairngorm Club who renovated Corroul bothy in 1950. But most would have been long gone by now if it had not been for the imagination of a 'rough stuff' cyclist from Huddersfield called Bernard Heath. Staying at the Backhill of Bush

bothy in Dumfries and Galloway, in midwinter, Bernard was inspired by a comment in its visitors book, suggesting that cooperation among users was needed to "save the old bothies from ruin". He sought out its author, organised the restoration of the nearby ruin of Tunskeen in the summer of 1965, and at the end of that year called a meeting at which the Mountain Bothies Association (MBA) was formed: to maintain simple unlocked shelters in remote country for all who love the wild and lonely places.

Over the next four years, Bernard was the driver in the renovation of 15 of the best known and loved remote cottages, from the gamekeeper's house of Shenavall under An Teallach in Wester Ross to a mine cottage just below the highest point of the Pennines in northern England. All the work was done by volunteers, and it is now hard to believe that the somewhat slower-moving committee of the Association complained about the costs, which totalled £500 for the 15 projects.

As well as motivating all who came within his reach, Bernard developed the successful formula for getting permission for all this work, which was to ask for nothing from the bothies' owners, simply to be allowed to do the work. Anything more would not have been possible: owners could not afford to give property rights to buildings that were at key sites on their large and valuable estates.

The downside of this successful rush to "save the old bothies from ruin" was that many of the repairs were of a somewhat temporary nature. After a recently repaired roof was blown off

in gales, Bernard's successors realised that higher standards of work and a commitment to ongoing maintenance were essential for the long run. Fortunately, the next wave of volunteers included professional joiners happy to demonstrate and pass on their skills.

Today, the MBA maintains around 100 shelters, from Cape Wrath to southern Wales. The majority are on private estates, but there are also a fair number owned by the Forestry Commission and other public agencies, and by crofting and community trusts.

Responsibility

The MBA is still almost entirely voluntary, with just the membership records and payment system out-sourced. The complexities of maintenance have increased, especially with regulations and safety requirements. But the idea is still very much that those who use and enjoy the bothies should take responsibility for maintaining them, with the inevitable hierarchy of maintenance organisers, committees and trustees concealed from the adventurer in the hills.

Bothy users continue to have very varied ideas of recreation, some just using the place for necessary shelter, while others treat it as a destination, a place for quiet thinking, or for partying. You may have the bothy to yourself, or share it with a crowd of strangers: the mixture and the uncertainty are part of the attraction.

As to the wider environment, they fit well in the palimpsest of our wild places, where nature and people have written alternately on the landscape. There are still people alive who were

Top: Bernard Heath (right) and Bill Mejury planning the roof at Bearnais, 1974.

A PLACE TO BE

brought up in some of these remote buildings, and they, their children and grandchildren are usually delighted to see them brought back to life to be used by anyone who passes.

The policy of only renovating existing buildings also sets a constraint on recreational development, ensuring that some glens are left bothy-free for those

who prefer that. Scotland's wild places are very real, part of the biological integrity of the planet that we need to conserve. But they are also part of our imagination, and those who intervene in the wild need to respect the other communities that share it.

mountainbothies.org.uk

Denis Mollison was chair of the Mountain Bothies Association from 1978 to 1994, and since then has maintained one of the bothies he was most involved with (see warnscalehead.wordpress.com). Denis co-founded the John Muir Trust in January 1983 and has been Chair of the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust since 2013. He is Professor Emeritus of Applied Probability at Heriot-Watt University.



Bothy Culture and Beyond

I was lucky enough to experience the GRIT orchestra live at this year's Celtic Connections festival: an epic theatrical arrangement, complete with aerial dance and trail stunt bikes, celebrating 20 years of the late Martyn Bennett's album *Bothy Culture* at the SSE Hydro in Glasgow.

The word 'bothy', from the Gaelic *bothan*, signifies a temporary structure or shelter without electricity or running water. While this may seem unremarkable in itself, the iconic bothy as a symbol resonates in our minds as the site and source of the most memorable or life-giving experiences of people's lives: an intense focus of gathering and companionship, of togetherness, of sharing music, song and stories. Such conviviality has created a culture that has enriched and inspired the poetic imagination of the nation.

Bennett's music emerges from an intimate experience of the landscape.

Above: The Grit Orchestra performing at the Hydro during this year's Celtic Connections festival. Photo: B.J. Stewart.

It is rooted in the traditional culture of the Highlands and Islands, inspired by the electronic rave and house scenes of the 1990s and embracing of other world cultures – Punjabi, Turkish, Scandinavian and Irish influences are all a part of his palette. He invites us to contemplate at once the difference and universality of human world culture and our connection with our own place.

In Glasgow, amongst all the spectacle and despite the flashing lights of the international stage, the most moving moment of the night was when lone piper Findlay MacDonald silenced the entire arena with a plaintively beautiful lament. It was just one of those moments: the sense of being blown away by feeling a part of something bigger than ourselves. Ethnologists might call it *communitas*. There is something magical, vital about it.

At the heart of it, this is what *Bothy Culture* is getting at: whether the rhythmic entrainment of the rave or the cultural intimacy of the mountain bothy, both are a

source of this vital experience – of connection outside and beyond our own individual existence. It is also about reconnecting with the ground on which we stand. Bennett writes: "I hope when you listen or dance to these tunes you get a sense of your own roots. If you push back the pressure of urban development for a second you might remember where you came from. Go climb a mountain and see."

The desire to reconnect is there in Reforesting Scotland's Thousand Huts campaign. This is not driven by any parochial nostalgia. It is not about re-constructing the imaginary past or mirroring earlier Romanticisms; it is about finding the deep poetic lifelines and drawing on this vital cultural energy to look forwards, outwards. It is about how we choose to live in this place; how we choose to inhabit the earth.

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