

Quarrying on Bennachie

Quarrying has been a significant activity on Bennachie since the 18th Century. There are several major quarries on the hill of which the Lintel Quarry close to Little Oxen Craig and the English Quarry now show most evidence of quarrying activity. However there were many smaller quarries on the hill, which were used to excavate small quantities of stone for use close by. Most notable among these is the one beside the Colony House at Shepherds Lodge while the small Macauleyite Quarry near to the Rowan Tree Car Park is the only source of Macauleyite in the world.

The English Quarry is situated below Quarry Hill just below Garbit Tap (which in turn is between Mither Tap and Oxen Craig) close to the Gordon Way. It was worked by an English company (hence its name) and the granite from it was widely used across the country. Bennachie granite from the quarry was for example used to build the docks at Sheerness in Kent. The granite was transported by barge from Port Elphinstone to Aberdeen on the Port Elphinstone – Aberdeen Canal and from there by sea to Sheerness. There was a smiddy associated with the quarry and the ruins of the building can still be seen below it.

There are several photographs in the Bailies archive showing stone workers but there is no information to indicate if they were taken at the Bennachie Quarries. If anyone has photographs which they believe were taken of the quarries on Bennachie or other information relating to quarrying we would be very interested to hear from you.

In his article *The Mystery of the Lintel Quarry in Bennachie Again* (1983) Andrew Galloway Fordyce Jr recalls that his father, also Andrew Galloway Fordyce, was working at the lintel quarry when all workings were brought to an immediate halt by a sudden flood which washed away the road which had been built to take the lintels from the quarry. Mr Fordyce Jr says that the flood occurred 'just over' 90 years ago. We may therefore infer that the end of quarrying at little Oxencraig came in the early 1890s. We believe that the English Quarry may have ceased production toward the end of the 19th Century also.

Do you have knowledge or photographs of Quarrying on Bennachie?

We would be very interested to hear any reminiscences or receive information on quarrying on Bennachie to add to our knowledge of the history of the Hill. In particular we would like to hear from you if members of your family were involved in quarrying or other work on the hill.

The Bailies of Bennachie archive contains this torn newspaper cutting. It is not dated but we estimate that it comes from the mid 1930s as George Esson – the last of the colonists and the subject of the article - died in May 1939. In the article George regrets the end of quarrying on the hill and wishes for a return of the industry.



From the Aberdeen & Bon Accord Pictorial

Still Hope of Useful Development
(By a Bon Accord Reporter)

In a tiny croft set high up on the slopes of Bennachie I met a man who has nursed a dream for 50 years – the dream that some day Bennachie will be the quarrying centre of the building trade in Aberdeenshire.

Look at the Mountain

He is 75 years old George Esson, ex-mason, crofter and local historian.

"Come outside and look at the mountain", he said to me when I visited his croft this week. Pointing to the mountain towering above us he said, "Do you see these huge loose granite boulders? There is enough stone there to supply the building trade in Aberdeenshire for the next 100 years – and no expensive blasting is needed."

Mr Esson was born on Bennachie.

His Grandfather came there in 1826 and built a house of Bennachie granite. Since then there have been Essons in that croft – and they have followed the same trade – stonemasons.

Serving his apprenticeship in the trade, Mr Esson worked for some time gaining experience in America. Later he joined the Ayrshire constabulary and finally took over the family croft.

Many years before Kemnay became famous for its granite quarryings Mr Esson told me, Bennachie was in the running to become a quarrying centre. Stone was actually quarried there for some time but when the railways came the trade fell away.

Death Blow to Quarries

The Alford Line was built and building contractors flocked to Kemnay as the stone could be easily transported to Aberdeen and the south. The proposed railway line which was to be built near the foot of Bennachie did not materialise and this proved the death blow to the quarries there.

But Mr Esson still firmly believes in the potentialities of Bennachie as a quarrying centre.

If I Were Young Again

"If I were only young again," he said, "I would buy it and start a quarrying business. No expensive plant would be required and this would balance the cost involved through transport difficulties."

Mr Esson has two hobbies – the study of local history and the collection of antiquities

During his daily walk on Bennachie he has found relics of a lost civilisation including ancient stones which had at one time been used for grinding corn, battle-axes, creuse lamps and "fleuchter" wooden spades for thatching roofs of houses.

Daily Mr Esson works on the croft and then in the evening has a walk round Bennachie

"I have always intended to compile a book on the legends of the mountain", he said to me. "But somehow I never have the time to spare"

It is his proud boast that he knows every stone on Aberdeenshire's best-known mountain. To the children of the district, he is a veritable "goldmine" of stories and legends. To the people of the district, George Esson and Bennachie are synonymous. When natives, now spread all over the world, pause and sing and think of –

"O gin I were where the Gadie rins",

They Remember George Esson and his legendary tales of fairies and giants and lairds "At the Back of Bennachie"

This enlarged version of the newspaper photograph shows George Esson with the "fleuchter".

