

The Balmoral Cairns

Back in *Stonechat 16* I mentioned Alberts cairn as being one of Britain's Walling Treasures. I have since discovered this is in fact only one of a set of 10 cairns on the Balmoral Estate, all dating back to Victoria's reign, of course actually finding out much has proved problematic. You'd think that having been built on a royal estate something would have been written down. Difficult to say really, all enquiries to the estate were met with stony silence until I stumbled upon the name of the Head Ranger... Glyn Jones in an article he'd written, which mentioned North Wales' own Carneddau Mountains, could it be? A little more digging and sure enough, it's the same Glyn one time National Trust warden on the Carneddau, a place where I seem to have spent a ridiculous large, wet and windswept chunk of my working life, now slumming it on Balmoral. Auld lang syne notwithstanding there was still a dearth of information.



The Purchase Cairn, atop Craig Gowan. © Glyn Jones

Balmoral's Cairn building all began with the "Purchase Cairn" erected on the summit of Craig Gowan (Grid ref: NO 21924,91102)¹, a high point on the estate. This commemorated the purchase of the Balmoral estate by Albert in 1852, it having previously only been leased from the Earl of Fife. Queen Victoria mentions it in her diary (thanks Glyn).

"Albert had to see Mr. Walpole and therefore it was nearly eleven o'clock before we could go up to the top of Craig Gowan, to see the cairn built, which was to commemorate our taking possession of this dear place. I placed the first stone, after which Albert laid one, then the children, according to their ages. All the ladies and gentlemen placed one, and then everyone came forward at once, carrying a stone and placing it on the cairn. At last when the cairn, which I think is seven or eight feet high, was nearly completed, Albert climbed up to the top of it, and placed the last stone, after which three cheers were given. This took about an hour during which the piper Angus McKay played, whisky was drunk and merry reels danced on a stone opposite."

In an account of the life of Victoria written in 1901 by Arthur Lawrence Merrill, he refers to this cairn which he says replaced an older one demolished to make way for it, as the "Queen's" cairn (all other references I've found stick doggedly to 'Purchase').² Merrill elaborates on Victoria's account:

*"After the family, the ladies and gentlemen each placed a stone ; then all advanced together. And so the cairn arose to the music of the pipes, and with much gay laughter and merriment. Refreshments were handed round, and all the people danced reels, including the old women in their mutches [close fitting linen caps], and the little children, among them Lizzie Stewart, with hair a flying, who was for many years one of the Queen's wardrobe maids."*³

Looking at the cairn you have to wonder more than a little about the accounts, and whether they really apply to the cairn as we see it today. 49 years after the event Merrill, waxing lyrical says "...and so it stands to this day. Lichens have gathered upon it, and heather has rooted itself in its crevices". Of course QV et al could have been pretty adept masons, even the two and a half year old Prince Arthur, but the level of finish, and the execution of the indent... Merrill mentions the indent in 1901 but is this



really the cairn as it was erected that day? Victoria estimates the cairn at 7 or 8 feet, my guess is it's nearer fifteen; could she have been that wrong?

There is a circular plaque inset within the indentation: "This cairn was erected in the presence of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert to commemorate the purchase of the Balmoral Estate, Oct. 11, 1852." Each cairn fortunately has a commemorative plaque, without them I'd be even more at sea.



There is a second "Purchase cairn" on a hill called Craig Doin (Grid ref: NO 21924 91102). This is the "Ballochbuie Purchase Cairn",

and commemorates the expansion of the estate in 1878 through the purchase of around 2500 acres of ancient Caledonian pine forest.

Above left: Purchase cairn; Right : Inscription plaque, Purchase Cairn both © Nick Bramhall

The land was about to be purchased by an Aberdeen timber merchant before Victoria stepped in. It has been trumpeted as one of the earliest acts of woodland conservation, and is one of the largest remnants of Caledonian Forest remaining. Many of its trees are over 400 years old and it is now classified as a Special Area of Conservation under the EC Habitats Directive being particularly noted for its importance for capercaillie and the extremely rare Scottish crossbill. The inscription on the plaque here reads, according to the one source I've found (and I can't get everywhere myself): QUEEN VICTORIA ENTERED INTO POSSESSION OF THE BALLOCHBUIE 15TH MAY 1878. THE BONNIEST PLAID IN SCOTLAND." Plaid???

Both the purchase cairns are built from rough granite, probably gathered from the area and are essentially conically shaped. This is the case with 6 of the other cairns each erected to commemorate the marriage of one of Victorias children, as evinced by the accompanying plaques⁴.



Princess Alice's Cairn (Grid ref: NO 24856,93726). Inscribed: PRINCE LOUIS OF HESSE D'ARMISTADT. THE PRINCESS ALICE OF ENGLAND. MARRIED 1ST JULY 1862

Princess Beatrice's Cairn (NO 26290,93934). HRH BEATRICE MARRIED TO PRINCE HENRY MAURICE OF BATTENBERG 23RD JULY 1865

Princess Helena's Cairn. (NO 25632,93837). PRINCE CHRISTIAN OF SCHLESWIG-HOLSTEIN. HRH PRINCESS HELENA OF ENGLAND. MARRIED [5TH JULY]186[6]"

Prince Arthurs Cairn. (NO 25380,94295). ARTHUR DUKE OF CONNAUGHT AND STRATHEARNE MARRIED TO PRINCESS LOUISE MARGARET OF PRUSSIA. 13TH MARCH 1870

Princess Beatrice's Cairn © Nick Bramhall



Above: Princess Helena's cairn; Right: Prince Alfred's cairn. Both © Nick Bramhall

Princess Louise's Cairn (NO 25613,93824). HRH THE PRINCESS LOUISE OF ENGLAND. THE MOST NOBLE THE MARQUIS OF LORNE. MARRIED 21st MARCH 1871

Prince Leopold's Cairn (NO 25529,94519). PRINCE LEOPOLD DUKE OF ALBANY MARRIED TO PRINCESS HELEN OF WALDECK. 27th APRIL 1882.



Princess Royal's cairn © Nick Bramhall

There is a cairn commemorating the marriage of Victoria's first born, also Victoria. The "Princess Royal's cairn", as with the Purchase Cairn, is a little distant to the other 8 built on a hill called Canup (Grid ref NO 23872, 92923). Like all the other cairns this too is built of granite, but in this case semi-dressed and with a square cross section, rather than what was to become the norm with the later marriage cairns. It is not clear why the subsequent marriage cairns were more subdued For the record the inscription reads: PRINCE FREDERICK WILLIAM OF PRUSSIA. THE PRINCESS ROYAL OF ENGLAND. MARRIED JANUARY 25th 1858

Victoria had 9 children so what of Albert Edward her first son, later King Edward VII; and Prince Alfred. Albert Edward's cairn is on the Birkhall estate, which he owned at the time of his marriage. This is sited on the highest of the three "Coyles", local peaks. According to Merrill it was originally built on the lowest peak by the tenants of the estate, but fell into disrepair⁵. Victoria commissioned the later cairn, complete with dedication "Erected by command of Queen Victoria in remembrance of the marriage of Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, AND Alexandra, Princess of Denmark, 10th

March, 1863." I have been unable to trace any reference to a cairn commemorating Alfred's marriage to Princess Maria of Russia in 1874. Examination of the cairns' chronology shows that one (Leopold's) was built after this date. One of the few interesting things my research did throw up of which I had not previously been aware... whilst there's no cairn to commemorate the marriage, there was a biscuit, the "Marie". I suppose there could have been a cairn somewhere, even on Balmoral which collapsed, but then surely it would have been restored. Surely there would be records. Oh I remember.

Prince Albert's memorial cairn sitting on top of Craig Lurachain (NO 25963 93434), is by far the most spectacular of the 10. It's a 4 sided pyramid, built from coursed, dressed granite. Albert died of typhoid in December 1861 at the age of just 42. It is said the pyramid is 41 feet by 41 feet at the base, to mark Albert's age. Should I get all pedantic? Along the east side is a series of stones with initials carved in



Prince Albert Memorial Cairn. Both © Nick Bramhall

them, VR at one end of Victoria. 6 others are the children, each laying 'their' stone. Why only 6? The dedication plaque reads TO THE BELOVED MEMORY OF ALBERT THE GREAT AND GOOD PRINCE CONSORT. ERECTED BY HIS BROKEN HEARTED WIDOW VISTORIA R. 21st AUGUST 1862. There is a further hard to read inscription running around (I think) the pyramid HE BEING MADE PERFECT IN A SHORT TIME FULFILLED A LONG TIME. FOR HIS SOUL PLEASED THE LORD THEREFORE HASTENED HE TO TAKE HIM AWAY FROM THE WICKED. WISDOM OF SOLOMON IV.13.14. Who built it, how long did it take, where did the stone come from? Obvious questions, no answers, as yet. Tracey Blackwell who was working with Norman Haddow on the Balmoral estate when I asked him a series of questions about the cairns reported *"Whilst we were up at Albert's cairn one perfect sunny evening after work, a white dove landed up near the top and rested there, which was kind of special. When you put your fingers in the right joints, there is a chilly draught emanating from the heart of the structure and it feels quite surreal. I was in solid gold dry stone anorak Heaven."*

All except the Ballochbuie Purchase Cairn are recorded in the Listed Buildings Recording Programme (LBRP) of Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCHMPS) – well at least I haven't been able to locate a record. Why the omission? As usual there are more questions than answers. Despite their residing on a royal estate there does not seem to be much information available. Seems to be ever thus with walling treasures, which for time immemorial have been treated as just piles of stone... There is a rumour that a booklet might appear from the Balmoral Estate. Within weeks of my writing on the `9 standards` a book had appeared, a few months after writing on the North Welsh Slate quarries world heritage status is applied for. Can it all be co-incidence?

8 of the cairns form a circular walk detailed at:

www.walks.able-technologies.eu/walks/dnloadfile.asp?ID=DessideBalmoralCairns.rtf, the Princess Royals Cairn and Ballochbuie Purchase are best reached separately, details on the same site.

Thanks to Glyn and Norman for information, and for Nick Bramhall for kind permission to reproduce his photos. Nick's website is <http://www.invertedworld.co.uk> the Balmoral cairns can be seen at http://www.flickr.com/photos/black_friction/sets/72157605520088268/with/2565383904/

Sean Adcock

NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

¹ all grid reference come from

www.walks.able-technologies.eu/walks/dnloadfile.asp?ID=DessideBalmoralCairns.rtf extracted 2.4.11

² Arthur Lawrence Merrill . *"Life and times of Queen Victoria ... to which is added the life of King Edward VII, and sketches of the members of the royal family"* . National Publishing Company, Philadelphia (1901).

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³ Merrill pp.331-2 ⁴ all plaque info from

www.walks.able-technologies.eu/walks/dnloadfile.asp?ID=DessideBalmoralCairns.rtf extracted 2.4.11

⁵ Merrill p.332