

## HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE 'COLONY' REFLECTIONS ON FIELDWORK AT A 19TH-CENTURY SETTLEMENT IN RURAL SCOTLAND

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### ABSTRACT

What can archaeology contribute to the 19th-century history of Bennachie? A recent collaborative effort between the University of Aberdeen and the Bailies of Bennachie is beginning to shed new light on the cultural landscape of the Colony site. Two seasons of shovel test-pitting and a single season deturfing 19th-century crofting structures indicates a much richer and more ambiguous legacy of the so-called 'squatters', who once called Bennachie home. Initial observations suggest an interesting amount of internal variation at the site, hinting at various forms of social and economic distinction. At the same time, other patterns suggest important commonalities with contemporary rural settlements. The creation of a variety of data sets has prompted many new questions and has set the stage for future research collaborations.

### INTRODUCTION

Bennachie plays a time-honoured role as the dominant landmark in north-eastern Scotland. As a local cultural icon its commanding presence has figured large within local humanistic traditions of literature, visual art and folklore (e.g. Stark, 1923; Whiteley, 1979, 1983). While Bennachie has been something of a constant within the lives of those communities touched by its physical and cultural presence, much less is known of the communities who once called it home. Fortunately Bennachie is also a rich archaeological landscape, and material remains provide an important evidence base through which to assess hundreds, if not thousands of years of human histories. Previous work has documented a range of multiperiod landscapes spanning from prehistory to the very recent past, crowned by the early Pictish power centre at Mither Tap (RCAHMS, 2007). But surprisingly little archaeological research has been undertaken, presenting a unique opportunity to put historical communities into their landscape context.

This account charts some initial observations of the fieldwork undertaken by the Bailies of Bennachie and the University of Aberdeen who have embarked on a project to better understand Bennachie as a cultural landscape, a place that has been shaped by, and in turn, has served to shape different historical communities. Our initial research has focused on the historical archaeology of the ‘Colony’ settlement – celebrated in the north-east for having been the site of tension between nineteenth-century crofter-colonists and neighbouring landowners. Founded within the commonty of Bennache in the first decades of the nineteenth century, the improvised community attracted small-scale farmers and wage labourers who may have been pressured off the land elsewhere. In 1859 the commonty was famously carved up between local Lairds, with the Balquhain Estate taking ownership of the settlement. From this point in its history, the Colony attracted a range of more popular commentaries, focusing on themes of class conflict and economic hardship (Allan, 1983, 63; Carter, 1983; McConnochie, 1985).

While the Colony provides an important anchor for discussions of social injustice and economic adversity, a salient theme of nineteenth century historiography, the landscape hints at a much richer and more complex set of stories easily overshadowed by grander narratives. Hidden beneath thick stands of modern conifer plantations, the Colony is composed of a wide range of different settlement features, mainly the ruins of cottages and outbuildings spread through a landscape of former fields, yards, gardens and track ways, defined today by tumbled dry-stone dykes. These remains speak to a variety of issues about the texture of everyday life in the Colony: from the way the character of dwellings are suggestive of certain cultural norms to the way that field systems provide the spatial architecture for the ways people organized themselves and interacted as a community. At wider scales of analysis these vestiges of past human activity indicate important links outwith the Colony, demonstrating how changes on the ‘mountainside’ were influenced by events farther afield.

Our work builds on the research of others who have begun to tease something of unspoken community lifeways on Bennachie’s lower slopes, notably that of Jennifer Fagen (2011), who has served to flesh out significant details about the genealogical history of families who settled here. It also serves to significantly expand on earlier archaeological investigations undertaken at Cairn Cootie, one of the smaller dwelling structures in the Colony (Bogdan *et al*, 1999), as well as work by Colin Shepherd and the Bailies, who in recent years have augmented this information with the first offset survey of the broader Colony landscape.

The collaborative investigations described here began tentatively in 2010

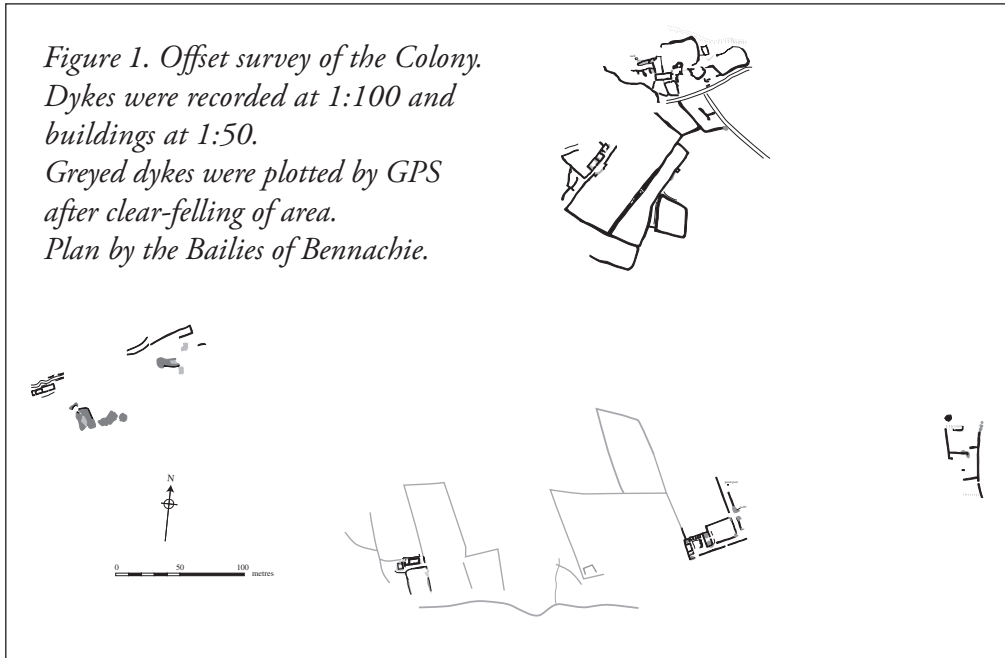
and gained pace through a series of discussions with the Bailies about developing a co-produced project on Bennachie's history and archaeology. While our initial interests were sparked by the possibilities of beginning a local landscape research project in rural Aberdeenshire, from an early stage our interests quickly moved to engage the participation of local people and to create a long-term sustainable strategy for community involvement. Our collaboration, therefore, has been as much about developing field work skills and an interest in local history, as it has been about answering questions about the past. As such, our progress has been slower than what might be expected for other university-based projects and certainly those undertaken within the commercial archaeology sector. Our slower pace, however, has allowed us to experiment with a number of different approaches to investigating the historic landscape, which have taken us in directions we did not at first anticipate.

In the remainder of this report we outline the fieldwork achieved to date. We begin with the survey undertaken by Shepherd and the Bailies immediately prior to our broader collaborations, which helped us to imagine the potential of a landscape project in the first place. We then provide a detailed description of a programme of shovel test-pitting undertaken in the autumn of 2011 as well as our investigations at Hillside farm that took place in the summer and autumn of 2012. Finally, we conclude with a number of observations that serve as the basis for future work.

#### INITIAL FIELDWORK: PROMPTING QUESTIONS

A taped offset survey, supported by hand-held GPS, of the south-facing hillside of Bennachie was undertaken by Colin Shepherd and the Bailies of Bennachie between 2009 and 2010. Undertaken alongside an analysis of early Ordnance Survey maps, the results of the survey have provided a picture of a former working landscape defined by a complex arrangement of enclosures and field walls. It also picked out the unique character of former dwelling types and outbuildings, which range from small single-celled structures to larger range-type structures with multiple rooms or 'apartments'.

This phase of work has served not only to reinscribe historical features into a landscape forgotten by living memory, but provided a crucial stimulus for devising research questions and more importantly for imagining what a community archaeology project might actually look like. Our subsequent site visits granted us a more tactile sense of the survival of different features, their variable internal



*KEY TO PLAN:*

*'A-Frame'*

*Shepherd's Lodge*

*'West End'* *Gowk Stane*

*Burnside* *Hillside*

arrangements, and more importantly how they related to each other. Broadly speaking the Colony's individual farms demonstrate certain similarities in their historical development. Overall there are few physical correspondences between homesteads; they are relatively well-spaced, meaning the development of yards and enclosed fields was not significantly dictated by the previous exploits of neighbours, though the abutting walls of individual farmstead certainly show how earlier structures determined, to some extent, the location of later ones. Closer attention to individual farms, however, begins to reveal important differences between sites. A number of sites demonstrate what landscape historians describe as classic characteristics of 'improvement', while others suggest a far more ambiguous legacy.

Notably purposeful features like agricultural revetment walls and consumption dykes, such as is evident at Shepherd's Lodge, or the uniform geometry of Hillside, fulfil this criteria, whereas the apparently improvised organisation of sites like A-Frame contradict any clear-cut narratives of 'progress'. At the same time, even where apparently improving measures have been incorporated, there is a great deal of variability. Indeed, the contrasts within the Colony have provided us with much food for thought; attempting to provide some form of typological classification for its residents, whether as 'marginal crofters', 'wage labourers' or even 'rural poor', hardly captures the internal tensions that once defined this busy little world. It is with these ideas in mind that we began to look more closely at the Colony.

### SHOVEL TEST-PITTING

With the landscape features planned on paper our work proceeded to move beyond what could be seen and plotted on the surface to sampling the subsurface variability. A programme of shovel test-pitting with the Bailies and other members of the public over two weekends in the autumn of 2011 produced our first glimpse of the range of artefact diversity and the first hints of the material remains of the settler's daily lives. The field methodology was devised in order to achieve three primary goals: the first being to assess the extent to which the broader Colony landscape was implicated with the activities of colonists. The second being to collect artefacts that would assist in dating the Colony, including helping to clarify whether earlier phases of occupation pre-date the known 19th-century history (one possibility is that the Colony may have had earlier post-medieval antecedents – such as a shieling settlement, occupied seasonally for pasturing animals). And finally, we also wished to assess whether resulting distribution patterns might reflect a degree of internal differentiation.

To serve these ends three settlement foci and their surrounding enclosures were initially selected for test-pitting: Shepherds Lodge, A-Frame and Gowk Stone. At Shepherds Lodge and Gowk Stone a 10m x 10m grid system was used to control sampling and shovel test-pits were laid out at 10m intervals. At Shepherd's Lodge our investigations covered the large enclosure to the south of the settlement grouping; a further east-west transect bisected enclosures immediately adjacent the ruined croft. At Gowk Stone our sampling grid was laid over the remains of low dry-stone dykes to the east of ruined buildings. Test-pitting at A-Frame on the other hand was more selective to accommodate the multiple ruins and stone-littered ground, which made adherence to a strict grid impossible. This preliminary

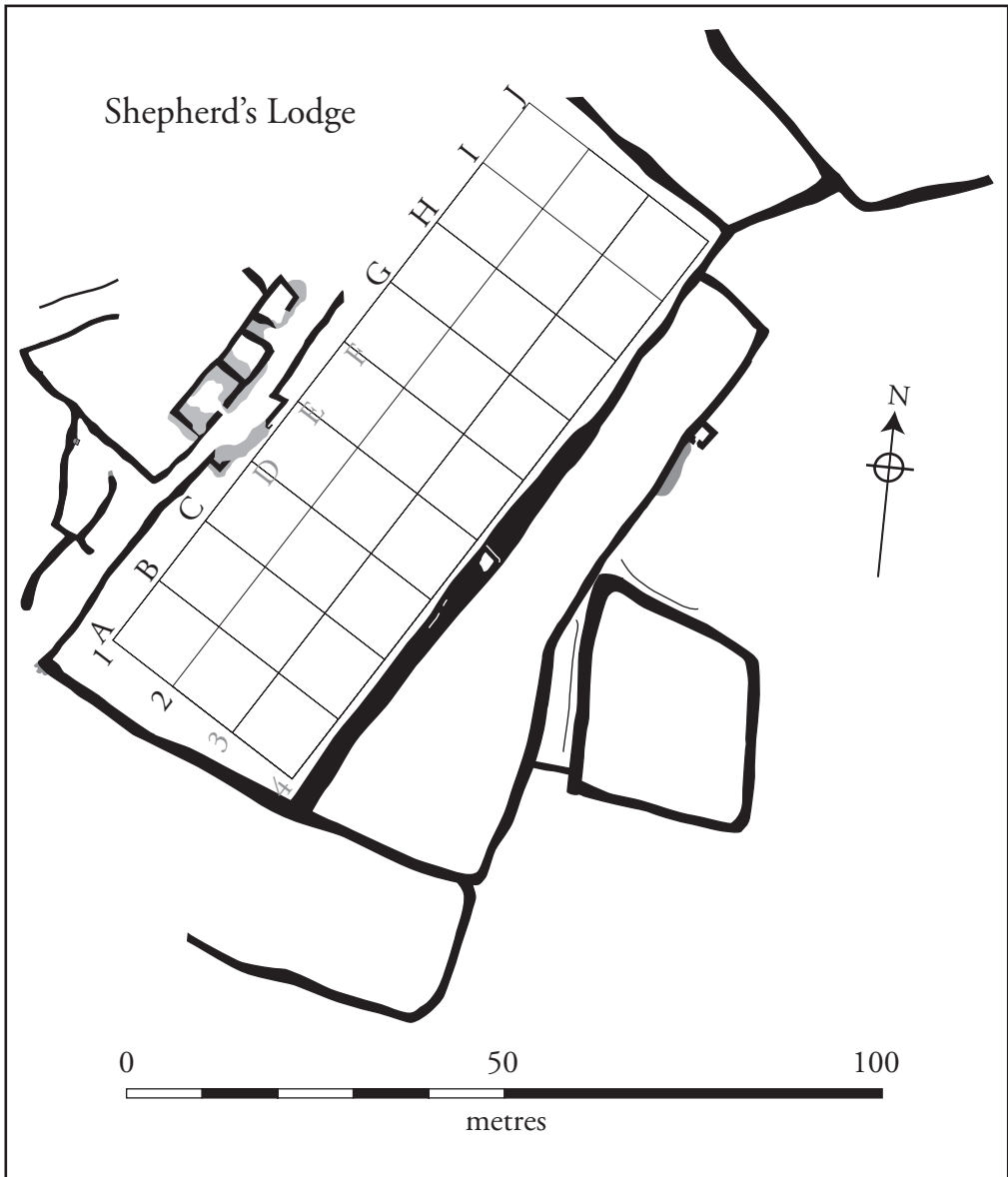


Figure 2a. Areas within the Colony targeted by shovel test-pitting. Shovel test-pitting at Shepherd's Lodge and Gowk stone was undertaken at 10 metre intervals within a gridded out area. At Hillside (2b) test-pits were laid out at 5 metre intervals within the enclosed area east of the dwellings. Further test-pits were conducted where possible in the thick wooded field to the west of the dwellings. A less regular method of shovel test-pitting was adopted at A-Frame where uneven ground prevented the use of a grid.

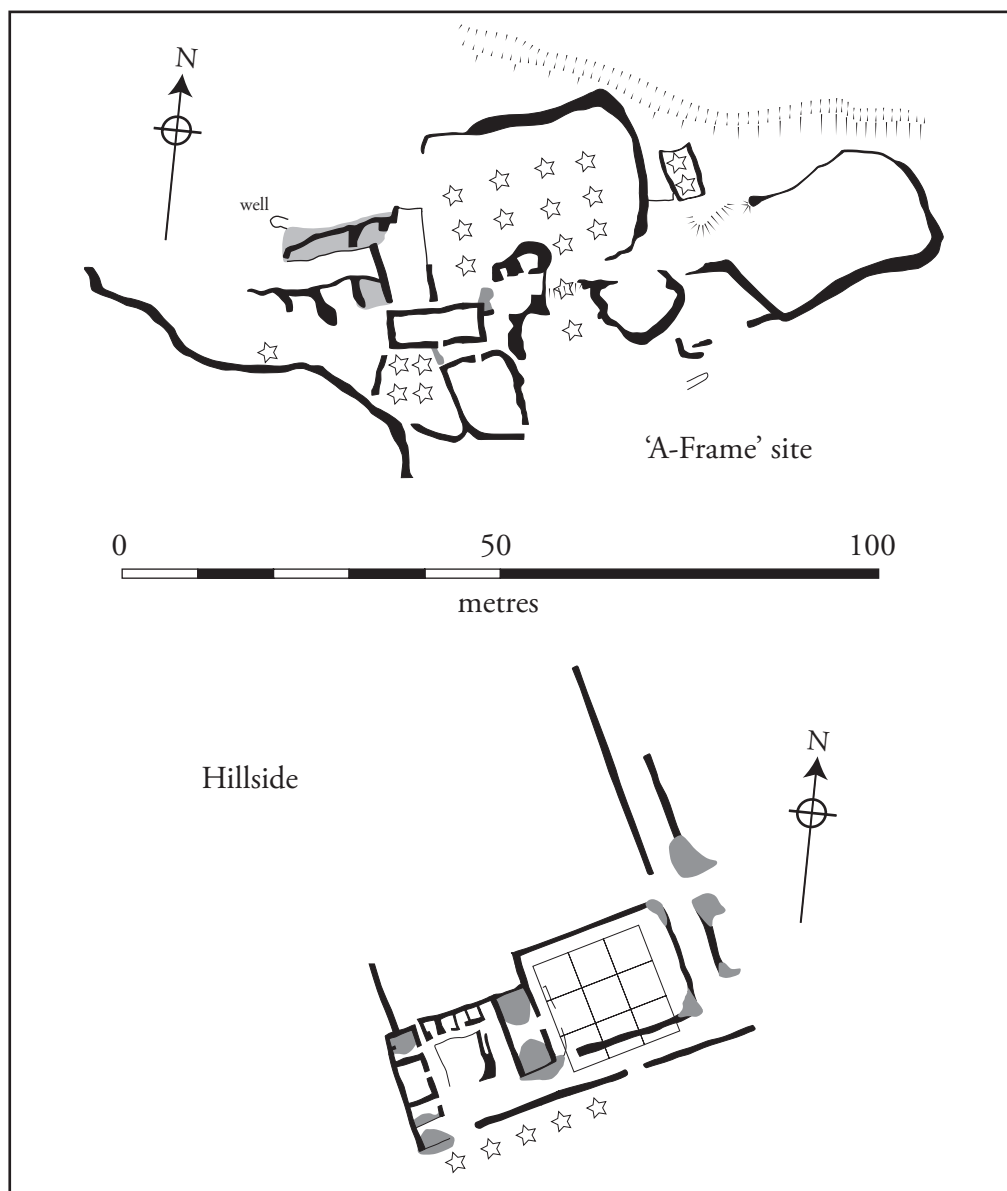


Figure 2b. Shovel test-pits at 'A-Frame' and Hillside.

stage of sampling was later extended to Hillside once more focused investigations were commenced at this site (as described below). In this most recent phase of work, completed in the autumn of 2012, a 5m x 5m grid was used to test the small enclosure east of the main buildings – possibly a kale yard or stack yard

– and a more selective series of transects was used to sample the large enclosed field to the west of the steadings. At each test pit location, teams of two or three people excavated and sieved a 20 litre sample of soil, bagging any finds according to sampling location.

A detailed analysis of the finds has yet to be undertaken, however, sampling has begun to shed light on the spatial and chronological extent of the deposits. The four areas selected for shovel test-pitting produced an uneven artefact distribution, with moderate quantities revealed at Shepherds Lodge and A-Frame. While test-pitting in the vicinity of Hillside has so far been on a smaller scale, finds have been more limited. At the other end of the spectrum, and despite the eagerness of our school volunteers from Aboyne Academy, testing at Gowk Stone produced only a handful of artefacts. Although we await a more detailed report of the pottery distribution, the relative abundance of finds from the enclosed field at Shepherds Lodge is probably linked to regimes of manuring for improved soil productivity. On the other hand, the lack of finds amongst the dry-stone field walls at Gowk Stone may suggest the pasturing of animals or more limited use as arable.



Figure 3. Illustrative examples of the artefacts recovered from shovel test pits: a) sponge-stamped white ware; b) transfer printed earthenware; c) pearl ware; d) kaolin pipe bowl.



Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of finds are dominated by historic ceramics, primarily refined earthenwares. Fragments of undecorated and decorated white wares predominate, the latter made up of sponge-stamped and hand painted designs; inexpensive and mass produced types that would not be out of place within the majority of 19th-century rural sites in both Scotland and Ireland (Orser, 2010). This is followed by lesser quantities of transfer-printed wares, pearl wares and unrefined earthen wares and stonewares possibly from local producers in Aberdeenshire, such as the Seaton pottery in Aberdeen. Preliminary analysis has not yet revealed any reoccurring decorative patterns, suggesting that the ceramics were acquired singly rather than as matched sets. Smaller quantities of glass, both coloured and transparent, have also come to our attention. Window glass is present along with fragments of liquor and medicinal bottles. Dark glass liquor bottles at the site exhibit substantial use-wear on their base which indicates long reuse and possibly episodes of refilling. Kaolin pipe fragments are also present in small quantity. Finally, a complete mid 20th century pop bottle, apparently discarded on the forest floor of the plantation south of Shepherds Lodge, reminds us about the changing character of human interactions with this place: from life-long investments in the land undertaken by the crofter-colonists to the transitory visits of foresters and walkers.

#### INVESTIGATIONS AT HILLSIDE: THE MACDONALD AND MITCHELL HOUSES

Given our initial observations about the different ways that colonists established, expanded, reworked, and eventually abandoned their life projects, the next phase of our work highlighted the need for more detailed, comparative investigations. With its conspicuous geometric layout, combined with some tantalising evidence about its former residents, our initial efforts in this matter have focused on the homestead of Hillside.

The site is located on a terrace overlooking Clackie Burn to the south. To the North, east and west it is bounded by rectilinear fields defined by dry-stone dykes. While views from the terrace are now hemmed in by modern plantation and deciduous regeneration, during the mid-nineteenth century, as a former colonist put it, Hillside 'commanded a grand view of the country to the East', taking in the 'charming' and 'extensive woods of Pittodrie and Monymusk' (Mitchell, 1988, 7). The principal buildings of the farm are organized in a U-shaped fashion around a courtyard. Indeed, if emphasis is placed on form (e.g. Dixon and Fraser, 2007), Hillside's layout suggests an 'improved' type of settlement, certainly the most



*Figure 4. View of Hillside Farm facing south; the courtyard midden is in the foreground and the Mitchell house is in the background.*

conspicuous in the Colony, which was becoming increasingly common in parts of the north-east by the mid eighteenth century, a point we shall return to.

The two largest buildings, with north-south axes, represent the arms of the ‘U’ and face each other from their positions to the east and west of the courtyard. A smaller range, oriented east-west, sits to the north of the courtyard, joining the larger structures at their terminus. Census information gathered by Fagen (2011, 43-45) indicates that by 1861 the farm was occupied not by one, but by two families: the Mitchells and the MacDonalds. The Mitchells occupied the smaller dwelling to the west of the courtyard, while the MacDonalds occupied the larger one opposite. Information about the two families is relatively spare but nevertheless provides details comparable with the archaeology. James Mitchell was a local labourer from Premnay who had married Sarah Littlejohn, a domestic servant, and a member of the Littlejohn family, one of the founding kin groups of the Colony. They had apparently located to Hillside in 1850. John MacDonald, a carpenter originally from Sutherland, brought his daughter Sarah with her son John to live at Hillside as tenants of the Balquhain Estate around 1859. By 1863 the Mitchell family, had

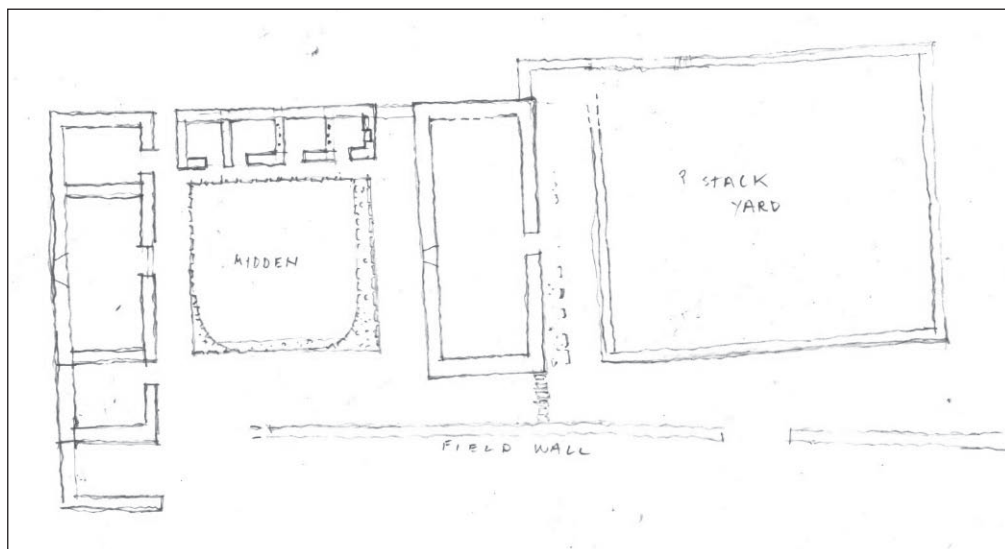


Figure 5a. Plans of Hillside Farm; each method offering a different perspective of the archaeology: a) sketch plan, b) plane-table plan, and c) 1:20 scale plan.

succumbed to a catalogue of unfortunate illnesses, leaving the MacDonalds sole occupants, a fact confirmed by the census of 1871. The MacDonalds are known to have held the largest patch of land in the Colony and possessed several head of livestock.

To gain a clearer understanding of its historical relationships Hillside was cleared of vegetation and planned by our community volunteers during the summer of 2012. Over a century's worth of soil accumulation and plant growth had obscured its architectural details under a thick layer of turf and shrubs. Over four weekends, the trowelling efforts of Bailies, university members and additional volunteers cleared an area of approximately 190 square metres. With the site exposed, a protracted phase of planning the revealed structures was undertaken. Our focus on the development of skills and research-quality data has meant from the very beginning that we have adopted a reflective process of fieldwork, meaning that we have been able to experiment with a wide range of recording activities, resulting in an interesting spectrum of settlement plans, each with different agendas and conventions. Under the guidance of the RCAHMS, sketch plans were produced to focus our attention on salient architectural features, such as abutting walls, which have helped clarify issues of chronology. Sketch planning was then followed by a 1:200 scale plane-table drawing of the farm in its landscape context.

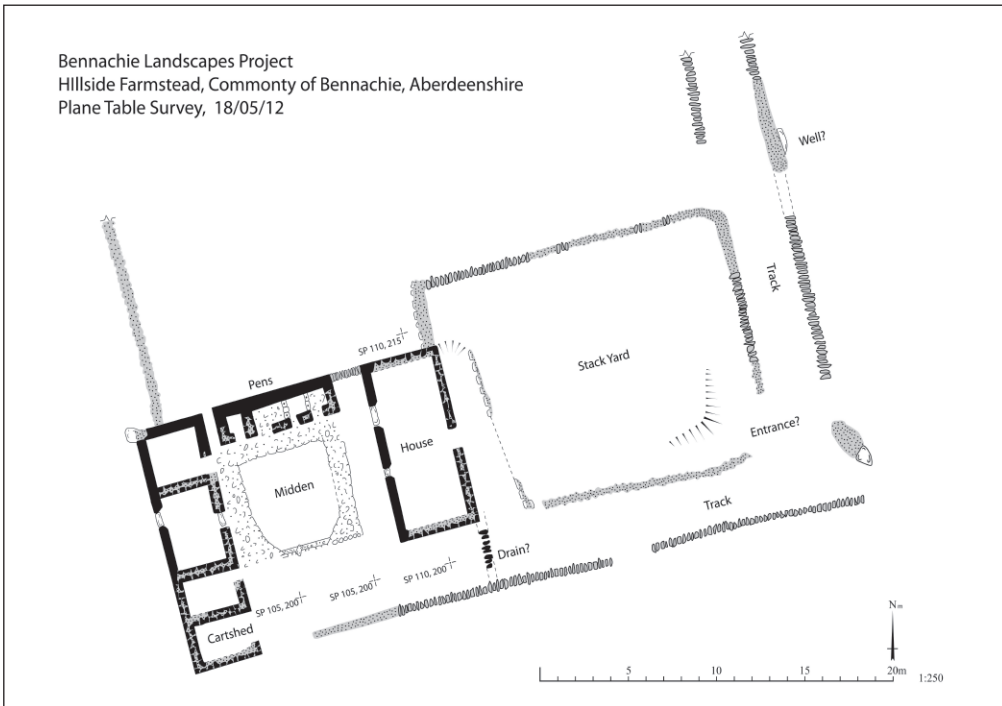
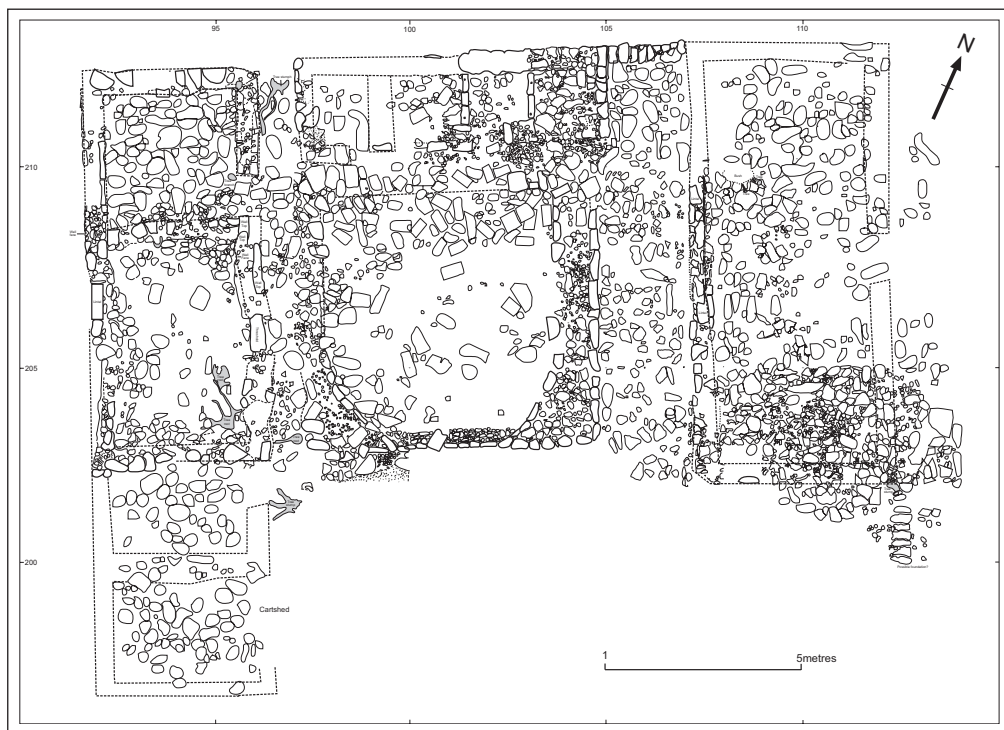


Figure 5b. Plane-table plan, surveyed and drafted with the assistance of the RCAHMS.

The resulting plan is interesting because it provides a comparative overview of the site at different levels of preservation. Finally, a detailed 1:20 scale plan of the exposed architecture was produced using metre-square drawing frames; an exercise that will give the site a greater sense of ‘stability’ for future users (Figure 6). This latter phase of site representation was undertaken over a number of weekends and finally completed on a snowy Saturday in October by a large team of University of Aberdeen students assisted by members of the Bailies.

While the overall organization of the settlement was previously visible as turf-covered banks or exposed masonry, a more detailed understanding of the changing history of the site is now emerging. The farm was built on a levelled stance dug into the gently sloping hillside. At its northern margin a substantial dry-stone wall was built into the underlying glacial till and has subsequently served as a revetment to hold back hill erosion, as discovered through the excavation of a soil test pit on the uphill side of this feature. On top of this manmade surface, the buildings at Hillside survive to a height of up to a little over a metre. They were largely constructed of both quarried granite and fieldstone of both irregular and



*Figure 5c. 1:20 scale plan, drawn using planning frames and off-sets. Further details were added using vertical photography. Drafting by Jenny Johnson.*

regular courses, with the angular detritus of quarrying used for infill or 'hearting'. Their current ruinous state is partly open to question. One story has it that men from the Balquhain Estate toppled the upper wall courses of Colony dwellings after they were abandoned to put off future squatters (Allan, 1983, 63). But whether this was the case at Hillside is difficult to be certain.

The largest structure, the 'MacDonald house', flanking the courtyard to the east (10m long x 5m wide), was occupied at least into the 1870s (Fagen, 2011, 44). Indeed, the presence of two granite window sills, overlooking the courtyard to the west, one associated with fragments of window glass, combined with an entrance threshold located in the east-facing wall help to confirm its role as a moderately sized single-storey cottage. Although census records indicate a structure of at least two rooms, no obvious evidence of internal divisions has yet been discovered given the floor is covered by stone from the collapsed gable ends. The chance find of what appears to be a fragment of writing slate could be argued to provide further support for the previous 'domestic' function of this building. Turf stripping

immediately to the south of the MacDonald House revealed what may be the top of a stone capped drain leading away from the building, suggesting that it could at one time have served a different function, possibly as an animal byre. Alternatively, this feature may also represent the foundations of an earlier structure, underlying the MacDonald House. What is more, a linear arrangement of turf-covered stones roughly parallel to the dwelling, two metres to the east, reminds us that there are yet further structural relations here, which will only be worked out through further investigation.

Opposite the MacDonald House, turf stripping at the 'Mitchell House' indicates a more complicated architectural story. This long and narrow structure (14m long x 4m wide) began life as a much smaller single-celled building, almost certainly a cottage judging by the window sill positioned in the middle of its east facing wall. Indeed, according to census information, it was being used as such by the Mitchell family between about 1850 and 1861 (Oyne Parochial Board Records, 1851, 1861). At a later date an internally abutting wall was constructed, subdividing the dwelling into two rooms, each entered from the courtyard. By this time the former cottage may have been used by the MacDonalds for storage purposes or possibly to house animals. The Mitchell House was also extended to the south to include two additional rooms, including a cart shed, both accessed from the courtyard side. The cart shed has a characteristically wide bay entrance, which lets on to a trackway that runs east, away from the farm. The collapsed gable ends of the Mitchell house have largely filled in the southern extension, which contains the cart shed, as well as the most northerly room, leaving the larger central room free of stone. Here, a small 1 x 1 metre test trench excavated to a depth of 0.5 metres was placed beside the threshold, though no evidence of a surviving living surface was found.

North of the courtyard, and forming the base of the 'U', a narrow range structure (7 metres x 2 metres) was built against the site's revetment wall facing the hill slope. The building is separated into four small cells, each with openings onto the courtyard to the south. The three eastern-most cells are separated by low foundation stones pierced by regular sockets, which were probably designed to hold metal or wooden posts, suggesting that each cell was separated by a metal or wooden partition. The two central entrance ways to the courtyard appear to have been subsequently punched through the former wall of the structure as wall infill is clearly visible along the thresholds. Additionally a number of small drains have been located leading from the entrances to the courtyard, suggesting that the range was used as a series of animal pens.



*Figure 6. View facing south with exposed midden in the foreground. University of Aberdeen students and members of the Bailies of Bennachie pose in the Background.*

The most conspicuous feature, largely defined through turf stripping, was the stonework of the courtyard itself: a finely cobbled apron surrounding a large sunken area, ostensibly the farm midden (Figure 6). Indeed, its aesthetic qualities reveal an unusual level of craftsmanship, which we did not expect to find in the Colony, and certainly influenced our decision to begin site-level investigations here. The apron forms a perimeter on three sides of the midden space and is defined along the inner edge by a kerb of stone. The northern kerb gives way to a terrace, which contains the stone lined drains leading from the pens described above. The sunken floor of the midden space has a squared northern edge c. 6 metres wide, while the opposite side arcs inward so that its southern edge is less than less than c. 4 metres. At this point a cobbled ramp has been constructed leading out of the midden and towards the track way running to the east. Inside the midden, adjacent to the ramp, turf stripping uncovered a metal spade, possibly a flaugher-spade, for cutting turf. As much of the northern end of the midden is covered by tumbled building stones, from the north range and the east wall of the Mitchell House, excavation may

help to further reveal the precise temporal relationships between these structures. However, initial assessment suggests the midden postdates the Mitchell house as a dwelling, given the main entrance to the former cottage exits onto the centre of this feature. Soil samples taken from the interior of the midden and central apartment in the Mitchell house may help to further explain the how the buildings relate to each other (Milek forthcoming).

## DISCUSSION

Recent fieldwork at the Colony site provokes more questions than answers at this early stage of investigation. Our initial observations suggest patterns in keeping with historic descriptions of the Colony, however, they also highlight a number of interesting differences, some of which may well prove to challenge, or at least provide a degree of nuance to historical conventions about life on the 'mountainside', and perhaps also to our understanding of rural settlement more broadly.

Historical sources about the Colony paint a picture of a society living on the edge: at best as 'squatters' of 'limited intelligence' scratching an existence from poor quality agricultural soils; at worst, as licentious and morally reprehensible. Contemporary accounts tend to drive a wedge between the activities of the colonists and neighbouring communities, however, the archaeological evidence suggests significant commonalities with rural settlements outwith the Colony.

While analysis of small finds from shovel test pitting is still at an early stage, artefact types are broadly of a character that would not be out of place in many other rural contexts in the north east, and in particular among small tenant farmers, the settlements of wage labourers and others who practiced different degrees of subsistence agriculture. Indeed, the relatively large proportion of inexpensive white wares, both undecorated, sponge-stamped and hand-painted forms, echoes the character of finds from many other rural locations, especially in northern and western Britain (Orser, 2010; Webster, 1999). The wares represented appear to have served both 'domestic' as well as broader 'utilitarian' functions; indeed they may have served a variety of purposes during their use life, though further analysis will help to confirm this.

Architectural traditions are also representative of 'vernacular' building styles in the north-east (Fenton and Walker, 1981), though as one might expect, they demonstrate a degree of flexibility in terms of how broader traditions were locally interpreted. Dwellings appear to have been constructed of both quarried and scavenged stone to approximately waist or shoulder height, while turf or stone



(as seen at Hillside) was used to finish the sides and gable ends. Roofs would have been made of wooden trusses, resting on wooden posts, however the method of connecting these supports to dwelling walls seems to have varied widely. In some examples from around Huntly, for example, the posts appear to have sat on pads completely inside the wall line or slightly recessed into it. Further west it was common to sit the posts a couple of stone courses up from the foundation and to have recessed these completely into the wall. There is no evidence of post holes or recessing within the Colony structures to date, suggesting that they may have sat on top of the stone walls, with turf filling the space in-between. A further possibility is that they sat on post pads adjacent to the wall, which remain buried along with the 19th-century floor surfaces.

Roofing material was very likely to have been a thatch composed of heather and broom laid on top of sod 'divots', which were themselves resting on a framework of purlins and smaller cabers fixed to the roof trusses; indeed nineteenth century photographs of dwelling houses in the vicinity of Bennachie suggest a similar construction. According to historical sources this technique was typical among 'common people' of Aberdeenshire from at least the late 18th century and well into the 19th (Allan, 1983, 54; Fenton and Walker, 1981, 75-76; Walker, 1979, 50). And what can be gleaned from the size and shape of field walls suggests a form of small-scale agriculture and gardening quite familiar to broad swathes of the rural population.

So on one level Bennachie provides a picture of 19th-century rural society in keeping with many other parts of the north-east. The colonists seem to differ little from what might be expected amongst those deemed as being representative of the growing ranks of rural wage labourers and the lower end of the tenant farming spectrum in the region more broadly, though much can still be done to flesh out the details of how this situation varied. What then are we to make of the rather populist accounts of the 'marginal' and sometimes romanticised lifestyles attributed to the colonists commonly emphasized by nineteenth century writers? One wonders to what degree these rather selective comments are more symptomatic of the prejudicial views commonly held by outsiders; neighbouring tenant farmers resentful of freeloaders with no obligations to the local Laird, or parish administrators resigned to share limited resources with unaccounted-for residents, particularly those supported, at times, by church benevolence. To be sure, similar views are commonly held about communities as diverse as the Roma, Travellers and other informal communities today. Among middle-class worthies, the authors of nineteenth century travel guides for example, one suspects such

comments are tinged with the desire to fulfil preconceived notions of an 'exotic' rural poor, an ethnographic 'other' that reminded the new urban classes of their urbanity. At the very least they are symptomatic of an undeterred class-based consciousness, telling us more about how authors viewed themselves and much less about the rather more complex circumstances that served to mark out colonists within their own social worlds.

At the same time, although we suggest that the Colony shared certain things in common with other rural communities, there is also much to be said about divergences within the settlement, which provide it with its own sense of internal characteristics. We have already had opportunity to mention the point that dwellings vary from single-room cottages to range-type structures to the single example of a courtyard farmstead at Hillside. Given this rather ambiguous state of affairs, it seems somewhat artificial to force the Colony to conform to 'type' (Dalglish, 2003). Among those who study such historical communities, the analysis of settlement patterns requires, to some extent, the use of typological classifications, which are themselves rooted in the study of issues such as class and the legal niceties of land tenure; for example terms like *fermtoun* and *cottartoun*, typical of earlier 18th century settlement studies, have played an important role in interpreting broader landscape characteristics from that period. Likewise, the criterion of assessing 'improvement' has been crucial among those concerned with changes over time across the 18th and 19th centuries; post-improvement sites are said to demonstrate evidence of the enlightenment principles of rationalism, capitalist modes of production and individualism, while pre-improvement sites, are distinguished by vernacular cultural forms, subsistence production and communalism. While typologies have their place, the unevenness of the archaeology at the colony is hardly accommodated by any such broad-brush categorization. Indeed, it is rather difficult to unpick, exactly, what might count as pre-improvement versus improvement, a fact which is further confounded by the observation that some so-called improving technologies, such as drainage, seem to have much older roots (Shepherd, 2012, 59). Therefore, something more akin to the micro-history approach is called for.

It is quite tempting to suggest that the archaeology expresses, in varying ways, locally informed examples of differing choices, agendas and conditions. To come briefly back to Hillside, we are now in a place to begin moving beyond the spare textual descriptions about its one-time residents and to start thinking about some of the changes that occurred on the site and what these might have meant. It would seem that the singular craftsmanship of the courtyard midden, with its fine

cobbled perimeter, suggests an awareness of improvements certainly widespread on contemporary model farms (e.g. Symonds and May 2012; RCAHMS, 2007), but, also on the farms of smaller tenant farmers from an earlier period (e.g. Shepherd 2012, plates III and IV). The integration of cobbled walkways along the edge of courtyards helped not only to keep farmer's feet out of the muck but may also have symbolized an increasing awareness of issues of hygiene. Though the use of cobbling is not uncommon in rural farmsteads from different periods, its peculiar craftsmanship is quite unlike any known from the region more broadly (Dixon pers comm.). If social status was partly shaped by issues of cleanliness, we might begin to speculate about interpersonal relations within the Colony and the kinds of social hierarchies which served to mark out the so-called 'commoners' in ways that distinguish them from the crowd. In this respect historical accounts serve to provide additional support. Records indicate that the colonists were not of equal means: some were better off financially, reflected to some degree by higher status occupations as well as certain material possessions. What is more, there is also an indication of changing fortunes and influences on the Colony through time (Fagen, 2011).

Such arguments could no doubt be fleshed out significantly and expanded across the hill. The key point that we would like to underline here is that the variability across the Colony prompts us to move beyond less helpful static typological classifications and to consider how archaeology provides clues about a dynamic range of social norms and cultures of appropriateness in relation to how the colonists conducted their affairs. And what is more, that these relationships not only cross-cut the Colony, but were themselves connected to the swirl of influences that served to reshape the nineteenth century world more broadly.

## CONCLUSION

Our collaborative investigations are still at an early stage; however, fieldwork over the past two seasons suggests that while life in the Colony might have been hard, it likely shared many things in common with rural communities throughout the north-east. If life here was 'primitive' as some commentator's would imply, it was probably no less so than amongst those deemed as wage labourers and the lower end of the tenant farming spectrum in the region more broadly, though we still have much work ahead of us in order to assess the degree to which things were similar or different. We have also come to realise that life within the Colony varied a great deal at a household scale. A long tradition of rural social history has served

to flatten out what were potentially highly diverse social arenas filled with their own on-going fluctuations and tensions. To this extent, future work will continue to investigate patterns internal to the Colony and to attempt to arrive at a much clearer resolution about how different forms of patterning, such as the integration of improvement features, may be linked into locally situated decision making processes. What is for certain is that the colony site, and its complex arrangements of material culture holds great promise for telling new stories about life in the north-east.

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