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## **The Bennachie Colony: A Nineteenth-Century Informal Community in Northeast Scotland**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper we explore the intertwined issues of improvement and community relations within the context of the Colony site, a nineteenth-century informal settlement in Scotland best known through caricatures of the poor and stereotypes of rural living. Drawing on a multidisciplinary

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and interdisciplinary research framework, a collaborative initiative involving academics and community researchers has begun rediscovering and rethinking the history of the Colony. Our investigations have established a rich and unexpected tapestry of life that played out at multiple scales of analysis according to a variety of issues. The settlement's rise and fall was shaped by wider improvement processes impacting parts of Europe and beyond, but it is also an example of how outside influences were adopted locally, resisted and adapted; material conditions that played directly into the way community relations were themselves constituted. The lessons learned have implications for the archaeology of improvement and the study of informal communities on a global scale.

**Key Words:** crofter-colonists • improvement • informal communities • Scottish rural settlement studies

## **Introduction**

At the foot of Bennachie, Northeast Scotland's most iconic landform, lie the ruins of the Colony. While the granite tor of Mither Tap crowned by a Pictish hill fort tends to draw the eyes of visitors to the hill, the attentive observer will notice other signs of past activity here as well. The subtle remains of tumbled-down drystone walls—"dykes" in this part of the world—and linear banks of earth and stone peek out from forestry plantation and waist-high bracken. Given time and reflection, these enigmatic forms begin to reveal geometric patterns: the remains of more recent settlement features, mainly cottages and outbuildings spread through a landscape of former fields, gardens and trackways.

It is within this setting that the Bennachie Landscapes Project, a collaborative research initiative between the University of Aberdeen and the Bailies of Bennachie—a community group founded in 1973 and dedicated to the conservation of the hill—has been rediscovering the

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Colony and the historical community that once called it “home.” For a small mid-nineteenth-century agricultural community, we probably know more about the Colony than many contemporary rural communities of its size. It was founded on the “commonty” of Bennachie above the fertile lowlands of Northeast Scotland (Fig. 1) by landless agricultural laborers. As an informal settlement founded on ‘waste’ land, and under the shared control of neighboring landlords, it attracted the dispossessed and flourished until the latter half of the nineteenth century when the commonty was controversially divided among neighbouring estates, an event that presaged its decline and eventual abandonment.

{Fig. 1 near here}

The popular folk memory of the Colony tends to celebrate the social tensions between its crofter-colonists and landed interests, a half-written, half-remembered account shaped by over a century of retelling. However, given its rich archival records and well-preserved archaeological landscape, the Colony presents a unique opportunity to move beyond clichéd accounts of nineteenth-century class struggle. In particular, it provides an important context in which to explore the intertwined issues of improvement and community relations as these were negotiated within the context of a rapidly changing rural northeast. Although recent research within rural settlement studies undertaken by historical archaeologists and historical geographers lauds place-based studies, few have sought to unpick the way that the guiding principles of improvement were integrated at the level of a single rural settlement situated within the so-called post-improvement era. All too often, rural communities of the period are assumed to be relatively homogeneous and molded by outside forces, not only in terms of how improvement impacted local agricultural and domestic economies, but also in terms of how it is assumed to have reified particular social groupings; a point that is especially true among the powerless.

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We begin this paper with the premise that inspired microhistorian Natalie Zemon Davis's (1983) study of rural life, *The Return of Martin Guerre*. Rather than thinking about rural agricultural populations "as not having had much in the way of choices" (Davis 1983, p. 1), we explore the messy social and cultural world of the Colony, paying particular attention to the way that broader transformations both conditioned and enabled different ways of living and working; phenomena that are themselves bound up with the creation of ordinary forms of social distinction. Where it parts company with many other important works within historic rural settlement studies on a European stage is through bringing archaeological investigation and detailed archival research together with scientific analysis of environmental evidence (cf. Dalglish and Dixon 2008, p. 5); an approach that has lent our exploration of the evidence a more richly textured sense of the issues that helped to define and redefine rural society during a period of significant change. The multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary character of the project with its varied lines of questioning, source material, and scales of analysis points to a more complex picture of the Colony. Our collaboration provides not only an important degree of nuance to the more one-sided histories of the settlement as presented by outsiders, but a methodological framework that might contribute to the study of relations between so-called "marginal" communities and dominant power structures on a global scale (e.g., Green 2006; Turner and Young 2007; Voss 2005).

Finally, as a collaborative venture between academics and community researchers, the project also presents an important context to reflect on the process of community archaeology and heritage research. Work on the hill by both community and academic researchers has provided multiple checkpoints for thinking and reflecting on how changing relationships with the

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hillside and with each other have served to underwrite the very nature of the history we are able to tell. From this perspective, this paper also tracks in a documentary mode how a collaborative community archaeology project can produce distinctive insights into the past. We build on recent work (e.g., Dalglish 2013; Janowski and Ingold 2012) to challenge notions of expertise and status in the practice of archaeology and think afresh about the inclusion of voices in the past and the present.

### **Setting the Scene: The Historical Context**

The broad outlines of the history of agricultural improvement in rural northeast Scotland are well-known (Carter 1979; Devine 1989, 1994; Fraser and Morris 1990; Hunter 1976; Newby 2007; Whyte 1995). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Scotland and its neighbors witnessed dramatic social transformations precipitated by “improving” processes, which ranged from the introduction of new farming technologies through to different forms of land organization (Pretty 1991). The outcomes of this revolution in human-environment relations saw the Scottish lowlands, including those of the Northeast, change from one of the least modern to one of the most advanced systems of agricultural production in Europe. Broadly speaking, it reflected the transformation from local subsistence economies, largely reliant on communal agricultural practices, to a system designed both for surplus production and the availability of part-time rural labor to serve an increasingly regional and international market-based trade. These changes were not without consequences. One effect was the dramatic re-organization of land holding. Although varying from place to place (Carter 1979), in many cases this process saw small-scale tenant farming abolished in favor of larger and more rationalized farms (Campbell and Devine 1990; Dixon and Fraser 2007, pp. 194-195; Kay 1962; Turnock 1977). In human terms it resulted in a period of increased social tensions, itinerancy and rural

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outmigration. Those unable to shoulder the burden of new (and often more onerous)

improvement tenancies, which not only required the payment of rent but the physical

improvement of the land, found themselves as landless wage laborers, or they chose to migrate:

to cities or abroad (Gray 1952, 1957; Harper 1988, 2012).

Between c. 1790 and c. 1830, the Northeast underwent an overall increase in the size of farms, but it also saw the introduction of a new class of smallholding—the croft, which became available to landless wage laborers. Crofts served an important function in the agricultural economy, providing a means of bringing waste land into cultivation, and supplying labor to the larger farms (Gray 1976, pp. 89, 93-94). The economic life of the “crofter” was generally part-time subsistence farming, and part-time rural labor on larger farms and estates. The creation of new crofts, especially on “waste” moorland, is a phenomenon that helps to contextualize the Bennachie Colony. This process had positive aspects for both landlords and crofters, though negative connotations of the crofters as “squatters” often makes us blind to these. From the perspective of the gentleman landowner or prosperous farmer, “colonies” of tenant crofters on previously unfarmed land posed an opportunity to improve the productivity of their estates (Gray 1976, p. 93). For the displaced migrant workers trying to improve their chances of survival in a period of social upheaval, marginal uplands were often an attractive location to settle and cultivate the land. In many cases the establishment of informal settlements was tolerated by landowners due to the benefits afforded by the reclamation of unimproved land. At the very least, colonists could eventually be recognized as tenants, as was often the case, increasing the rent rolls for landed families (Kay 1962, p. 105), though we are unaware of any direct evidence that might point to such tolerance at Bennachie. It is within this setting of social and economic reorganization that the history of the Colony is situated.

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## **Outline History of the Colony**

While the Bennachie Colony has been described in a variety of popular sources from at least the late nineteenth century, our understanding of events has been most significantly shaped by the work of Fraser (1984, 1985a, 1985b), Bogdan et al. (2000), and especially Fagen's (2011) detailed analysis of census and parish records, undertaken in collaboration with the Bailies of Bennachie. The work of other community researchers in the current project has also been vital: here we draw in particular on an examination of estate records (Ledingham 2014) genealogical investigations (Kennedy 2014) among other lines of enquiry (Miller 2015; Shepherd 2013).

The Colony appeared on land shared between nine landed estates, of a type known as "commonalty" (McConnochie 1890, pp. 89, 105-107), a Scottish legal term for "land possessed in common by different proprietors" (Adams 1971, p. vii; Callander 1987; Houston 2011, pp. 52-53; Wightman 2013, p. 66). In origin, commonalties typically encompassed uplands situated beyond the infield and outfield of a town or settlement (Dodgshon 1981, pp. 157, 165, 191, 194; Whyte 1995, pp. 137, 141, 330, 340), and should not be confused with "commons" (Armstrong et al. n.d.). The proprietors of a commonalty (and their tenants) were free to exploit its resources, chiefly in the form of fuel, stone and grazing. Since the creation of the great landed estates surrounding the hill in the medieval period, the uplands of Bennachie had provided an important shared resource for neighboring landowners and their tenants, but by the nineteenth century it also became known for other uses: settlement.

Before proceeding it will be useful to offer a skeletal outline of the ebb and flow of the Colony's fortunes between its foundation and its abandonment. Details of the origins of the Colony at Bennachie are scarce. The earliest known reference to a settlement on the hillside

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dates from 1801 (Allan 1983, p. 62). Later sources suggest that informal settlements were present by the early decades of the nineteenth century, suggesting that Bennachie had played a role in harboring the disenfranchised well before the Colony's own foundations (Allan 1983, pp. 62; McConnochie 1985[1890], pp. 91-92). The hill provided not only rent-free living, but also, over time, an important degree of independence. The first documented family to break ground within the Colony were the Littlejohns, who relocated their family from the neighboring Balquhain estate sometime between 1834 and 1838. Over the next two decades, a word-of-mouth inspired chain migration resulted in at least 11 households putting down roots, many of whom were from other parts of the northeast. Among them were the family names of Christie, Cooper, Emslie, Esson (Fig. 2), Findlater, Garden, Gardiner, Lindsay, Littlejohn, McDonald and Mitchell. By 1851, there were 56 documented people living on the hillside, a number of whom were the offspring of local intermarriages (Fagen 2011, p. 5-6; Kennedy 2014), who lived by crofting and

{Fig. 2 near here}

supplementing their income as quarriers, stone masons, stocking-knitters, house servants and drystone dykers—the latter being a skill for which many of the Colonists were particularly renowned (Allan 1983, p. 62). The establishment of this irregular community led to a response from the surrounding landowners. In 1859 the undivided commonity of Bennachie was carved up. The partition (first planned in the 1840s) was grounded in the Act for the Division of Commonities (1695) and formed the legal grounds by which the Colony lands passed into the ownership of Col. Charles Leslie of Balquhain. The “theft of Bennachie” (Carter 1983)—as it was later popularly called—signaled the beginning of the end.

A number of factors contributed thereafter to the steady sapping of the Colony's

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membership. The imposition of improvement tenancies meant that some crofters began to fall behind in their rent payments, resulting in at least one locally famous eviction, that of the elder Littlejohn in 1878 (Fagen 2011, pp. 7, 41, 52; Ledingham 2014, pp. 21-22). While the burden of rent was clearly a hardship for some, the agricultural depression of the 1880s (Allen 1983[1927], p. 54) probably reduced the earnings of farm laborers in general. This period is also marked by the beginning of a new phase in the environmental history of the Colony. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, gentlemen farmers across Aberdeenshire were actively converting stony, unimproved land into plantations of Scots pine and larch (Kay 1962, p. 107). Following this general pattern, the Balquhain estate began to establish plantations in the open ground around existing tenancies, and later within extinguished tenancies, until the remains of much of the settlement were hidden under a canopy of trees. By the time the plantation had begun to mature, in the middle of the 1880s, the colony was virtually abandoned.

### **Views of the Colony**

Of significant interest to our project are the attitudes recorded by outsiders who (unwittingly or through design) left to posterity their views of the Colonists. Surviving accounts accord a particular identity to the Colonists that set them apart from others. This, as Fagen (2011, p. 13) suggests, was drawn from the Colony's status as an informal settlement operating on the margins of society. Prevailing interest focused on the apparently primitive nature of life on the hillside, while others fixated on perceived moral failings of its inhabitants. The fact that the Colonists lived in conditions physically separate from neighboring estate tenants helped to set them apart. For some, their humble dwellings of the "meanest description" legitimated a view of the Colonists as a race of "mountaineers" (Anonymous, cited in Fagen 2011, p. 12). For other commentators, it was crude agricultural methods and the perpetuation of "antiquated" practices,

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such as the continued use of narrow rigs and the “clumsy wooden plough” that set them apart (Allan 1983[1927], p. 57). Such backwardness suggested “limited intelligence and fixed belief” not only in the perceived conservative methods of agriculture, but in “the popular rights of the commonty,” an anachronism that for many had little place in the modern land system (McConnochie 1985[1890], p. 93). If the backwardness of the Colony helped to mark it out in the minds of the rent-paying tenants on surrounding estates, then parish records concerning certain moral indiscretions helped to seal their fate. Kirk session accounts highlight reprehensible behaviours, namely numerous “fornications” amongst the unmarried and a rash of illegitimate children (Fagen 2011, pp. 20, 28-29, 38-39; see also Smout 1976, p. 78). Such perceived misconducts helped to explain other failings: a number of “paupers” lived in the Colony and were supported, at one time or another, by the local Poor Relief Parochial Boards. Due to ill health, some of these indigents were removed to the Poor House in Aberdeen or Ryehill, Oyne (Fagen 2011, pp. 68, 87). In the worst cases, impoverishment also led to criminality, a charge not uncommonly levelled at the poor. Writing about the Colony in the late nineteenth century, after most of its buildings were abandoned, McConnochie (1985[1890], p. 108) suggests the settlers were a source of annoyance to the local lairds, one of whom accused them of being “as great a thief as there is in [all of] the Backhill of Pittodrie.”

Such negative views contrast with a more romantic appraisal: a characterization of the Colonists as a hardy and pure folk; an innocent people who symbolized perseverance and independence (e.g., Carter 1979, pp. 62-65; Whiteley 1976, p. 106). As early as 1889, during a period marked by crofter land agitation, “the theft of Bennachie” caused a stir among city dwellers, provoking class-conscious social action that included the “raid on Bennachie,” a mass protest on the hill itself, which sought to highlight the outrageous actions of certain lairds. This

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event subsequently spurred a flurry of newspaper columns that pitted conservative landed interests against a more liberal and egalitarian cause (Carter 1983). Indeed, due to the popular view that the division of 1859 was a “theft” or unjust private appropriation, the tendency to symbolise the Colonists as both the last remnants of a bygone age and the victims of exploitation continues to infuse attitudes towards the Colony today. The settlement was undoubtedly important in symbolic terms for the way in which rural land and politics were understood in Northeast Scotland. Yet these “outsiders” views’ are also in many ways simplistic. They risk either demonizing the inhabitants of the Colony as a subversive underclass, or mobilizing them as peasant heroes for a history of class conflict. One of our main purposes is to work beyond these stereotypes.

### **Lines of Questioning**

Since 2011, our efforts have focused on digging deeper into the history of the Colony. The settlement is situated on the lower slopes of Bennachie, beneath the commanding heights of Mither Tap, within an area of modern forestry and recreational footpaths on land managed by Forestry Commission Scotland (Fig. 3). Spread over an area of approximately 100ac (40ha), the Colony is composed of at least nine ruined crofts or farmsteads, made up of dwelling houses, outbuildings and kailyards, set within a landscape of enclosed and partly enclosed fields, ditches, and trackways.

{Fig. 3 near here}

While often hidden from passers-by, the ruins of the Colony were not completely forgotten. Despite the passing of the decades, memories of the Colony and the Colonists remained strong among some members of the surrounding community, although those who directly remember its last inhabitants in the late 1930s and early 1940s are now few. Some local

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informants also tell of a purposeful forgetting of family ties to the Colony, by those not wishing to be associated with its perceived “backward” way of life, a point that reminds us about the inherent issues of positionality involved with storytelling (Tonkin 1992). Based on a contemporary re-valuing of folk and community heritage, the collaborative work on the Colony through the Bennachie Landscapes Project has served to bring out its hidden histories and make it “present” in the landscape once more.

This history is therefore important to communities around Bennachie. It attests to the longstanding interest in the Colony and what happened to it. Having settled on marginal hillside, the Colonists came to symbolize the values of hard work and self-reliance, which have a continued resonance in rural Northeast Scotland today (Vergunst 2012, pp. 23-24). The work has furthermore been oriented towards and influenced by the interests of community members and academics. A prevailing concern has been to blur the distinction between the two, where possible, though this has been realized more fully in some areas of our collaboration than in others, a point to which we will return.

Recent discussions of community archaeology have often focused on how to involve “the community” in research, noting that excavation can be a centerpiece for participation (Neal and Roskins 2013; Simpson and Williams 2008). Our work has attempted to provide a different configuration of research relationships. The goals were not only to deliver opportunities for engagement with archaeology as a means of community development or to improve senses of identity and place, although these are nevertheless significant. In addition we aimed to work with ideas and practices of “co-production,” which emphasize how researching collaboratively with communities can affect the course and outcomes of research in positive ways (Davies 2007; Trencher et al. 2014). What emerges is a much deeper and broader collective knowledge of the

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landscape, improving the potential for participation in land management in the present and the future. To this end, the project aims not only to understand the history of the Colony in the wider context of improvement, but also to attain a greater awareness around how our research collaboration has shaped the narratives that have emerged.

The project also fills a significant gap in research on settlements of this period and type. A good deal of work on later historic landscapes has sought to characterize the changes to rural settlement during a period that witnessed the reorganization of the landscape around the Enlightenment principles of improvement (Dalglish 2003). Most studies have focused on the history of the classic period of Highland Clearance: the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century—a period marked by the transition from a pre-modern, pre-improvement society to a modern and improved one (e.g. Atkinson 2010; Dalglish 2003; Whyte 1998). Far fewer, however, have focused on the lowlands, and on the latter parts of the nineteenth century, a period of “post-improvement” sometimes assumed to have acquired a degree of uniformity not generally worthy of archaeological investigation (but see Dixon and Fraser 2007). While settlement studies have played an important role in documenting change over wide areas as well as providing a chronology for dating sites, much less attention has been focused on how the guiding principles of improvement were integrated at local scales of analysis and within contexts that were outside the “norm” (but see Kuijt et al. 2015 for an example from Ireland).

Another common theme addressed within the rural landscape has been social and economic inequality, notably the asymmetries of power and the resulting class struggles that were their outcome. Within this frame, the story of the crofter-colonists’ struggle with neighboring landlords has been an enduring motif of how the Colony has been remembered (Carter 1983). However, there are also consequences to the class-based history model. Notably it

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tends to overemphasize power asymmetries at the cost of other kinds of relationships, resulting in thin descriptions of the rural poor; at worst they become fixed as an indistinct mass of “commoners” or “peasants” (Orser 2010), their lives defined more by the sharp end of exclusionary policies and their own passivity. Such an approach does not address the complexities of social and economic life at the scale of local community, particularly how the substance of social relationships are grounded in the reality of a landscape—specifically landscapes of improvement. An important aim for us, therefore, is to move closer to the lives and experiences of the crofters as these played out in different contexts and circumstances. What is more, the settlement’s status as a “squatter” colony provides a further dimension to the problem of class history. While geographers and others have made important strides in studying informal communities within contemporary contexts (Kellett and Napier 1995; Potts 2011; Roy 2005), few scholars have focused on their archaeology or social history (but see Given 2004; Tarlow 2008; Silvester 2007). So rather than assuming the Colonists’ otherness, part of our work has sought to understand to what extent the Colonists were actually different to other members of the rural wage-laboring majority.

Further investigation of the Bennachie Colony thus presents an important opportunity to move beyond more traditional and restrictive views of rural settlement and to engage more thoroughly with the lived realities of nineteenth-century rural communities. To this end we have attempted to undertake something of a microhistory, to help shed light on the multi-stranded and multi-relational history of community relations during this period of important social change. While we do not intend the present paper to develop the depth of celebrated microhistories book-length treatment (e.g., Davis 1983, Ginzburg 1980), we are nevertheless inspired by what detailed place-based studies can achieve.

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### **Approaches to the Hill**

The present study focuses on the scale of a small agricultural community that endured for approximately 50 years before it began to break up. Within this relatively defined spatial and temporal frame, we employ a variety of complementary research methods to bring greater resolution to the historical landscape than is possible from archaeological or historical methods alone. While we have drawn from a number of other notable later historic landscape projects (e.g., Dalglish 2003; Nassaney et al. 2000; Pluciennick et al. 2004), we are also aware of how community co-production of knowledge has intimately shaped the direction that our work has taken.

### **Archaeological Fieldwork**

Archaeological fieldwork undertaken on the project builds on work previously undertaken by Bogdan et al. (2000) and most recently by the independent archaeologist, Colin Shepherd, who has worked closely with the Bailies of Bennachie since 2009 to map the surviving extent of the Colony settlement. This work has not only brought to light a landscape that has remained largely hidden for more than a century, but has provided an important baseline for prompting questions and thinking through the development of the project. Since then detailed mapping within the current phase of the project has provided fine-grained planning of selected homesteads. This included the use of traditional, measured survey (Fig. 4) and more advanced dGPS survey, kite photography and digital mapping (Oliver et al. 2013). The use of low-tech methods provided a

{Fig. 4 near here}

degree of accessibility for the community researchers (RCAHMS 2011), but also played a significant role in aiding the selective process of “untangling” material relationships (Vergunst 2012). This allowed the development of increasingly detailed lines of questioning, many of

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which evolved over months (and sometimes years) of discussions between different members of the project. Talking through the process of archaeological survey not only helped us to appreciate materials and building techniques, but also gave us a much clearer picture of how homesteads were added to, redesigned and eventually torn down, an observation that has helped establish that the Colony buildings have interesting and complex biographies (Oliver et al. 2013).

A program of shovel test pitting was implemented early in the project to assess the enclosed fields and open areas adjacent to and beyond the crofts (Noble et al. 2011). The field methodology was devised in order to achieve two primary goals. The first was to characterize the use of field areas and to collect artifacts that would assist in dating the colony and its expansion. Secondly, we also wished to assess whether resulting distribution patterns might reflect varying social and economic practices such as manuring carried out by the different households within the settlement. To date, sampling of the landscape has focused on enclosed fields surrounding five crofter settlements: Shepherd's Lodge, A-Frame, Gowk Stone, Hillside (Oliver et al. 2013) and more recently, Burnside.

A more invasive investigation was then carried out during the summer of 2013 with an explicitly comparative framework in place (Oliver 2015). Here the excavation of elements of the McDonald house at Hillside and the main dwelling house at Shepherd's Lodge has provided the project with the most detailed evidence of life at the scale of the household. Excavation included considerable logistical challenges. The historical records suggest that abandoned structures in the Colony were typically toppled by the Balquhain estate to discourage latter episodes of squatting. This was confirmed at both sites. There was clear evidence that the gable ends and upper courses of wall masonry were pushed into the center of each dwelling, making the excavation particularly challenging (Fig. 5). The excavation was evaluative in nature with less than half of

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each structure excavated and keyhole trenches used to better understand the architectural evolution of the crofts.

{Fig. 5 near here}

## **Environmental Research**

Alongside our survey and excavation work the project has drawn additional strengths through the integration of environmental methods, namely soil science and pollen analysis, approaches less commonly applied to the study of this period (Dalglish and Dixon 2008; Newman 2005). While the standing archaeology is a testament to the Colonists' activities from the point of view of the built landscape, a further vital question has been to assess the settlers' wider environmental impact on Bennachie. Within the surrounds of the Colony, volunteers and students carried out a program of systematic soil mapping using soil test pits, coring on a grid system, soil sampling and subsequent laboratory analyses (organic content measured by loss-on-ignition, pH, phosphate analysis and soil micromorphology; see Milek and Roberts 2013 for explanations of these methods) across three of the Colony farms: Burnside, Hillside and Shepherd's Lodge. At each location we targeted areas likely to have been cultivated, such as enclosed kailyards and fields, as well as areas outside the field systems, which enabled us to assess the soil resource available to the Colonists when they first established their crofts, and whether agricultural practices fundamentally altered the fertility and productivity of the hillside.

In addition, pollen analysis of blanket peat at Moss Grieve (~450m OD; NGR NJ 67121 22470), on the saddle between the summits of Oxen Craig and Mither Tap, was used to investigate vegetation changes at Bennachie around the time the Colony was occupied (see Moore et al. 1991 for a description of the standard palynological procedures applied to this aspect of the study). The goal was to provide a broader landscape context for the events recorded

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in the historical and archaeological records. The likely scale for the vegetation reconstruction is a radius of several kilometres around the sampling location (cf. Jacobson and Bradshaw 1981; Sugita et al. 1999; Tipping 2010). This includes the Colony, ~1.5-2.0 m southeast of Moss Grieve, but also the summit, the surrounding slopes of the hill, and to some extent, areas of the Donside lowlands beyond.

### **Archival Research**

Since 2012 the project has also involved a “History and Archives Group” of community researchers. From the beginning the importance of the documentary record was recognized as a means of complementing the archaeological investigations and for raising new questions for the project as a whole. The main repositories of material are the archives held by the Bailies of Bennachie, and by the Special Collections Centre (SCC) at the University of Aberdeen.

In 2013-14 the work of the archival volunteers was supported by a university researcher, Thomas Brochard. This initially focused on the identification and the creation of an inventory of relevant estate and family collections in the SCC. In a second phase, the community researchers consulted a number of manuscripts and printed records in which they had particular personal interest. Valuable resources such as Andrew Mathieson’s farming diary (AU MS 3778/15-17) were studied by Christine and Barry Foster, and the rental book of the Balquhain estates allowed Ken Ledingham to pursue a detailed investigation (Ledingham 2014), which has helped augment our understanding of tenancies on the hill. Genealogical work was also carried out by Alison Kennedy using censuses, newspapers, and magazines (Kennedy 2014). By cataloguing the early papers of the Balquhain estate (AU MS 3043), Colin H. Miller also brought to light the deeper historical context of this significant neighbouring estate before the establishment of the Colony, and produced an effective introduction to sources available for the eighteenth and nineteenth

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centuries as well as earlier periods (Miller 2015). These multiple and varied approaches to the Colony meant that knowledge of the site was rich and diverse, from daily life to the environment of the settlement. In a third phase, the community researchers were encouraged to make their work available to the wider public and produced written articles in various formats and outlets. Their output, as seen in the bibliography (Foster 2014; Kennedy 2014; Ledingham 2014; Miller 2015), is a testimony to their valuable achievements. It is worth noting that the archival research component of the project enabled the greatest degree of independence for our community members—an outcome that is possibly connected to the relative importance of using documents in the modern workplace—and played a disproportionately important role in shaping our overall interpretations.

In what follows, we provide an analysis of the Colony at a variety of scales of analysis, reflecting not only the approaches we have used but also the questions and themes pertinent to these contexts. In the following three sections we draw upon: (i) documentary records combined with pollen analysis to provide an overview of the vegetation history on and around the hillside; (ii) a survey of the built landscape, soil mapping and estate records to reveal patterns of occupation found across the Colony; and finally, (iii) architectural, archaeological and historical sources, to achieve a more nuanced picture not only of shared aspects of living and working, but also disparities within different parts of the community.

### **Land Use and Environmental History**

Historical references to Bennachie prior to the settlement of the Colony in the 1830s focus on its role as a commonity. While the moorland of Bennachie was at one time part of an ancient royal forest (Adams 1971, p. 12; McConnochie 1985[1890], p. 88), since the establishment of its surrounding estates in the medieval period, this upland area provided an important shared

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resource. Archival research offers a rare glimpse of land use practices prior to the Colony. These include the royal confirmation of title to the barony of Pitcaple, dated 1588, which mentions common pasture in the wood or forest of Bennachie (NRS: GD 108/22) and the later use of the hill as a resting place for drovers driving cattle south to markets at Falkirk and Perth. Given the shared nature of the common, it should perhaps not be surprising that it was the source of dispute even prior to the period of our own interest, with various disagreements noted, mostly between local proprietors over the rights of common grazing (e.g., NRS: GD 33/16).

If the later medieval and early modern periods were characterized by a certain degree of continuity of land use, the early nineteenth century hints at a more complicated pattern. In a historical context that mixed like measures of social upheaval and agricultural improvement, it is not surprising that the hill also became a focus for competing interests; as much a home for the disenfranchised as a new agricultural horizon for land owners. We have already mentioned the gravitational pull of the hill for those with little opportunity elsewhere. Apart from its attraction for the landless, for others, misconceptions surrounding the view of common as “common land” were enough to draw some farmers to the hill to try their luck. Such was the case for John Milne, a farmer in Parkbrae, Oyne parish, who between 1840 and 1843 selected a portion of the hill that “went under the name of part of the Queen’s Forest” (*Herald and Weekly Free Press* 1888). It was not only those at the lower end of the social ladder that gravitated towards Bennachie. Some adjacent landowners, such as the Gordons’ of Premnay, also actively sought to improve land on the hill. Drawing on the services of his own farm servants and laborers, this land owner brought open moor into cultivation, but ran into financial difficulty as a result (*Herald and Weekly Free Press* 1888).

Historical sources help to shed light on the nature of land use on Bennachie, yet this view

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is naturally only a partial one. Fortunately, the physical environment, and in particular the pollen record preserved within the blanket peats on the summit of Bennachie, provides an additional environmental archive from which to study land use changes and the vegetation history of the hill. A pollen diagram for the top ~30cm of blanket peat on Bennachie is presented in Fig. 6. This allows the reconstruction of plant communities on and around the hill over the last ~200-300 years. As one would expect, the pollen assemblages from Moss Grieve are dominated by plants of heaths and moors – notably heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), sedges (*Cyperaceae*; a group which includes the cotton grasses, *Eriophorum* spp.) and bog mosses (*Sphagnum*). Yet pollen types representative of woodland and agricultural landscapes are also recorded, and these must be derived from vegetation growing on the lower slopes of the hill and in surrounding lowland areas.

{Fig. 6 near here}

Read alongside the historical evidence, changes in the pollen assemblages appear to correlate broadly with the documented history of land use. The earliest pollen assemblages (in BEN-1a) demonstrate heath and moorland as dominant, and may equate to the period of early modern forms of land use traditionally associated with common land. Subsequently there is a significant (20-40%) reduction in heather (at the BEN 1a/b zone boundary) and a doubling of the percentages of pollen of grasses (*Poaceae*), alongside smaller increases in herbs characteristic of grassland, such as ribwort plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*) and common sorrel (*Rumex acetosa*). These changes suggest the replacement of some areas of heath and moor with meadows and pastures, a pattern that is reinforced by a rise in spores from *Sporormiella*-type, a group of coprophilous fungi that grow on animal dung (van Geel et al. 2003). As these spores do not disperse far from source (Raper and Bush 2009) it is likely that their proportional rise in the

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assemblage reflects an increase in the intensity of grazing across the moorland itself. Increases in pollen from plants associated with grazing animals are further mirrored by increases in the pollen from cultivated species, such as cereals (barley, oats and rye) and Brassicaceae (a family of plants that includes kale and turnips), together with arable “weeds” such as cornflower (*Centaurea cyanus*) and spurreys (*Spergula*-type).

The palynological changes displayed from the base of BEN-1b seem likely to reflect the agricultural improvements that gained momentum around Bennachie in the first half of the nineteenth century; most notably, the expansion of arable and the colonization of “waste ground,” which was brought into cultivation following trenching, ditching and draining of moorland (Dixon and Gannon 2007). Given the close proximity of the Colony’s own arable fields and kailyards, it seems highly likely that a significant proportion of the vegetation changes noted above was due to the labors of the Colonists themselves, particularly during the establishment and rapid growth of the Colony between the 1830s and 1859.

If the character and tempo of environmental changes described above seem to correlate with what might be termed the heyday of the settlement, evidence of the Colony’s decline and abandonment is also evident within the pollen record. Toward the top of the profile there is a recovery in heather (rising to 75% in BEN-1c) while pollen representative of grasslands and arable shows a small decline, suggesting a slight relaxation in agricultural activity and a re-expansion of moorland. What is more, these changes occur before the consistent appearance of pollen of spruce (*Picea*; a non-native tree) and the substantial rise in Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*), both of which must undoubtedly signal the substantial planting of forestry on the lower slopes of the hill from the later nineteenth century onwards by the Balquhain estate and after 1943 by the Forestry Commission (Cumberbirch 2013, p. 56).

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### **The Colony Landscape: Community Connections**

Narrowing our frames of reference from the wider context of the hill, we now zoom in and examine the Colony itself. Within its short lifespan, the Colonists transformed the land from a windswept, heather-clad hillside into a complex patchwork of arable fields, pasture, gardens, and homes. The Colony's first three decades saw the growth of a community little encumbered by landed interests. Its later years, dominated by the appropriation of Bennachie in 1859, are marked in places by further expansion, but also decline and eventual abandonment. At this scale of analysis, the more salient features of the built landscape helps us to address questions about the uniqueness of the community, particularly the more popular charge of its marginal and uncivilized nature in a context where respectability was partly linked to the ethos of improvement. At the same time it provides us with some important evidence about how the material conditions of life shaped community relations on the hill.

The settlements of "squatters" often bring certain assumptions to mind; key among them are informality and ephemerality. The design and construction of informal settlements are typically associated with unskilled labor using materials and methods "at hand." They are assumed to be ephemeral in terms of their perceived instability, based on conflicts with property law, and even the impermanence of their material conditions; at a moment's notice they could be swept away. Yet the material remains of the Colony tell a more complex story about poverty and marginal living that challenges more popular views. The creation of this cultural landscape not only afforded a degree of common experience, but would have helped to forge a sense of community in certain contexts through the mutual task of improving the hillside, a point we shall return to later.

A bird's-eye view provides certain clues in regards to its development (see Fig 3). The

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Colony is composed of a dispersed arrangement of cottages and outbuildings, most with attached kailyards, which in turn sit at the center, or to the side of, enclosed or partly enclosed fields. As we might expect, the organization of the community exhibits little evidence of forward planning; rather the placement of cottages, the arrangement of surrounding fields, and the physical relationship to neighbors, seem to be a response to local conditions and concerns. This is further reflected in the system of trackways built across the hillside, which connect farms to each other and the Colony to the lowlands and the moorlands above. The overall pattern accords reasonably well with the model of chain migration where favored spots were colonized first, with later migrants moving outward from a core area around Shepherd's Lodge, which was occupied by the Colony's putative first inhabitants, the Littlejohns. The settlement pattern provides a general picture of the growth of the Colony, but it tells us much less about conditions on the ground.

Fenton and Walker (1981, pp. 73-74) suggest that among the lower rungs of rural society, turf continued to be an important building block of dwelling houses well into the 1800s. Among informal communities in some Highland areas turf was used exclusively, while dwellings constructed by tenant crofters were commonly of alternating courses of turf and stone. In contrast, the cottages on Bennachie, owing to nearby quarries, were largely stone-built, of undressed granite on levelled stances, though turf may have been used for the uppermost wall courses. In some respects, the colony houses are more similar to what Kay (1962, p. 105) reports as common for "squatter" settlements in the Northeast: single-storey cottages of undressed stone, often with an unglazed window and an earthen floor; except that at Bennachie our excavations have unequivocally revealed window glass at three of the dwellings, suggesting that glazed windows were not uncommon (see also Bogdan et al. 2000, p. 27). As Allen (1983[1927], p. 62) confirms in his memoirs as an agricultural laborer in the 1860s, in construction methods, the

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dwellings with their “walls of stone and clay, and divot roof thatched with broom or heather” were similar to other crofting households in the region.

It is at the scale of broader agricultural practices that this common commitment to place comes most sharply into focus. Fields were cleared of stone, as attested through the construction of so-called consumption dykes, effectively giant linear cairns, examples of which can be found at Cairn Cootie, Hillside and Shepherd’s Lodge. Fields and trackways were enclosed with drystone dykes, animal pens were built and elaborate stone wells were constructed around water sources (Fig. 7 and Fig. 8 (a)). In places the craftsmanship of these features are as well-preserved as they are unexpected: walls built with enviable symmetry, often exhibiting expertly mounted

{Fig. 7 near here}

{Fig. 8 near here}

capstones; a fitting reminder of the Colonists’ renown as champion dykers. Although each family lived in a single one or two-room cottage and possessed a single plot of land, it is almost unthinkable that labor on this scale was not a cooperative affair (cf. Tarlow 2008, p. 185). Indeed, given our knowledge of social ties between the Colonists, such as bonds of marriage (Fagen 2011), we can suggest that much of this work, including the erecting of dwellings, was carried out through the help of neighbors in a reciprocal fashion not uncommon for settler communities the world over (Oliver and Edwald 2014), a point to which we will return.

One of the more powerful testaments to the Colonists’ commitment to place is seen in the labor they put into improving the soils of Bennachie in order to grow crops such as oats, barley and rye, and garden produce, such as kale, turnips and potatoes (Fagen 2011, p. 10). In Britain, techniques for improving stony and/or shallow agricultural soils by removing field stones and piling them into cairns, and by adding turf, manure and domestic waste to artificially thicken and

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fertilize them, have been used since at least the Bronze Age (Davidson and Carter 1997;

Guttmann et al. 2006; Simpson et al. 1998). In Scotland, a particular method of adapting to soils with shallow rooting depths and poor drainage developed in the medieval period, later known as “run rig,” in which strips of top soil were scraped up (creating furrows) and deposited over adjacent strips of soil (creating ridges, or rigs) (Allen 1983[1927], p. 57). More complex and labor intensive methods of managing poor drainage, such as the digging of drainage ditches and under-field drains, developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Pretty 1991).

Soil mapping and sampling was undertaken at three farmsteads. Shepherd’s Lodge, Hillside and Burnside revealed a story of anthropogenic inputs to the Colony environment that contradicts popular accounts of the backwardness of the Colonists, and their pitiable attempts to scratch a living out of a nutrient-impooverished hillside. Test pits dug in kailyards, fields, and unimproved land beyond the farmsteads, demonstrated marked differences in soil types. Test pits located just outside the enclosed fields revealed that the soils first encountered by the Colonists were often very shallow, with only 16-18cm total soil depth to the underlying glacial till, which in many places showed evidence for periodic waterlogging (gleying) (see Fig. 8 (b) and Fig. 9 (b)). This total depth of soil included the upper peaty O/H horizon, which was of variable depth,

{Fig. 9 near here }

such that the mineral A or Ag horizon was as shallow as 3-4cm. In many locations the impermeability of the glacial till or the shallow depths to bedrock had led to the development of peat on top of grey, clayey, surface gleys, soils that were waterlogged for much of the year and would have been unsuitable for crop growth without intervention in the form of drainage and/or artificial soil deepening. In areas where the underlying topography of the glacial till had enabled thicker soils to form, they had developed into podsoles with infertile, leached upper (eluviated)

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horizons. In all cases, the natural stoniness of the soils was clearly evident (see Fig 9 (b)), and would have posed a constant challenge to the aspiring farmers.

In contrast, soil test pits excavated inside enclosed fields demonstrated clear evidence of anthropogenic improvement. All of the agricultural fields at Burnside, Hillside, and Shepherd's Lodge contained Ap horizons (ploughed topsoils) that had been deepened by the plough to depths of 30-66cm (see Fig. 9 (c)). These ploughed soils contained an abundance of medium and fine sand that had been dragged up by the plough from the glacial till, were relatively stone free, and contained charcoal inclusions, indicating that hearth waste had been added to them. In addition, the discovery of pottery fragments common for the period in a number of fields, close to the houses, suggests the further input of the contents of household middens (see Fig. 9 (c)). At Burnside, a 150cm wide, 50cm deep drainage ditch had been dug across the northern (upslope) edge of the field, which led downslope-flowing water away from the fields and into an adjacent mire. Perhaps most impressive were the under-field drains found at Burnside and Hillside, which had been dug 40cm into the compact glacial till, filled with elongated cobbles and sometimes capstones, and covered over again with soil (see Fig. 8 (a)). In the kailyards, the soils had also been artificially thickened by the addition of mineral-based turves, often still visible in the form of dark brown blocks in soil sections, until these kitchen gardens soils reached depths of up to 64cm (see Fig. 8 (c)) The soil evidence casts doubt on the caricatures of rustic living that were sometime applied to those living on Bennachie. This is not to deny that the community faced significant challenges, or that some older, more "antiquated" methods of farming were employed, such as the use of narrow rigs, which were advantageous for drainage (Allen 1983[1927], p. 57), but it does begin to provide a much broader appreciation of the significant labors undertaken by the Colonists, whose improvements created a legacy that is still benefiting

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the tree plantations of the Forestry Commission

### **After the Division of the Commonty**

In 1859, the land occupied by the Colony was legally appropriated by the Balquhain Estate.

Separating out the conditions of life on the hillside before and after the division of the commonty is a tricky business. From an archaeological viewpoint, little of the evidence discussed above can be firmly dated to a pre-division or post-division phase. Fortunately, records of the Balquhain estate of the Leslie family identified by our community researchers, combined with other documents, can be used to shed light on some of the changed conditions under which the Colonists lived. Prior to the division, the residents had unlimited use of the resources of the hill, and little interference from local landlords. After the legal division, they were bound to sign prescriptive leases and pay rent for both their rough grounds and cottages (Ledingham 2014). According to estate records, there were nine listed leaseholders on Bennachie in 1859 (AU: MS 2769/I/76/2) (Table I). Leases were for a duration of one year and could be renewed each year for up to nineteen years, but the landlord held the right to remove at any Whitsunday term “without reason assigned.”

{ Table I near here }

The general conditions issued by the Balquhain estate to all their tenants, in 1828, ca. 1853, and 1883, offer an instructive view of tenancies on their lands, in particular the practicalities surrounding landlord-tenant agreements and land management practices at the height of the “improvement” era (Ledingham 2014; Miller 2015). Although they specifically apply to the tenants in the parishes of the Chapel of Garioch, Inverurie, and Inch, they would have been observed across the estate as a whole. Overall, they are telling of the way in which

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communal rights, such as grazing, fell under increasingly restrictive, and even draconian, conditions. For example, regulations barred the common practice of assignation and subtenancy. Only the eldest heir could succeed to a lease, to the exclusion of heirs portioners, thus ruling out any form of sub-division. Furthermore they imposed the personal residence of the tenants and their families on the leased lands. The gradual encroachment upon ancient tenurial rights was all too visible in depriving the tenants of any right to use the former common lands beyond their own holdings “notwithstanding any former practice to the contrary” (AU: MS 2769/I/76/4). Moreover, in addition to paying rent for crofts and houses they had established themselves, tenants were liable to pay additional levies towards the cost of building roads in the area and payment of a cattle disease assessment (possibly introduced following the rinderpest outbreak in 1865; Ledingham 2014).

While only a few documents relate to the Colonists in particular, the Whitsunday 1859 “Conditions of letting of Crofts along the Clochie Burn and Kewlie How on Bennachie” (presumably drawn from the ca. 1853 general conditions), detail certain obligations in regards to the improvement of the Colony lands. They provide us with a glimpse of how such conditions could influence the latter years of the Colony. This included the cutting of a ditch along the tenant’s boundaries “two and a half feet deep, Six feet wide at the top and One Foot in the bottom” (Ledingham 2014), and the improvement of the leased lands by annual trenching and draining until the tenant’s whole plot of land was improved under the penalty of eviction. Evidence for such activities is not widely seen in the Colony, except for at Burnside where a possible ditch bordering the northern and eastern boundaries of the croft and a stone-lined field drain (described above), may be features directly linked to the terms of the tenancy (see Fig. 8 (a)). However, other evidence contradicts this. A survey of Bennachie produced in 1845, prior to

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imposition of tenancies, shows the croft boundary along this same curvilinear route as identified in the field, suggesting it may have marked the edge of the croft prior to any improvement regulation (Fig 10).

{Fig. 10 near here}

Additional evidence for expansion and improvement after the Colony's absorption by the estate is seen at Hillside croft. Through comparing the 1845 survey mentioned above with the 1869 first edition OS map (Fig. 11), it is easy to see how older curvilinear field patterns were extended and transformed into rectilinear shapes—patterns fossilized today through the survival of a number of drystone dykes. However, Hillside is also a somewhat unusual case in the context of the Colony as it was also the only known croft to receive new tenants after 1859 in the form of

{Fig. 11 near here}

the MacDonald family. Records indicate their arrival in 1860 and suggest they set about integrating a number of important changes to their property, which we will return to in greater detail below. In general, the period after division is characterized by population decline as well as a reduction in the number of leases. By the mid-1870s, the Colony had reduced to seven leaseholders, three of whom had fallen into rent arrears. Between 1878 and 1884, only three leaseholders remained (Ledingham 2014), a situation that was likely exacerbated by the downturn in agricultural production during the 1880s (Allen 1983[1927], p. 54).

When comparing the conditions of lease between the Colonists and the other tenant farmers on the Balquhain estate, the Colonists had fewer obligations to fulfil, primarily due to the poorer soils found on Bennachie. Other tenants were cultivating larger holdings with more productive soils, which had probably been benefiting from amendment and fertilization for several thousand years. The Colonists were thus not expected to contribute substantially to the

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overall production of the estate. Instead they found casual employment in ditch-digging and dyke-building on neighboring farms (Ledingham 2014, p. 22), but in this regard they are very similar to the small army of wage laborers who worked in the region more broadly (Harper 2012).

### **Households: From Ties that Bind to Lines that Divide**

At certain scales of resolution, it is easy to paint a relatively homogeneous picture of the Colony, and much of the evidence we have presented thus far fits such a pattern. Indeed, it is the shared experiences of the Colonists that more popular histories of the hill tend to selectively remember and even embellish, notably aspects of their struggle with landowners. However, what appears as a neatly framed image, at one level of detail, begins to lose some of its sharpness at another. As ever, the devil is in the detail. Closer attention to the history of individual crofts reveals the biographies of standing structures (Cassella and Croucher 2010; Mytum 2010), which points to an important degree of dissonance within the Colony that does not sit comfortably alongside the inclination to generalize.

To begin with, each croft seems to respond differently to its immediate topography (cf. Tarlow 2008, p. 185). At least four of the Colony's dwelling houses are built with windows and thresholds facing roughly eastwards (Wainwright n.d.), looking over the sweeping views to be had over the lands of the Garioch. As if remarking on the decision behind its placement, a one-time visitor of Hillside commented that the croft "commanded a grand view of the country to the East," taking in the "charming" and "extensive woods of Pittodrie and Monymusk" (Mitchell 1988, p. 7). The remainder of the dwellings roughly face south, overlooking the peat-stained waters of Clachie Burn. With their closed gable ends towards the view, they are placed as if in anticipation of the prevailing wind, a decision which may have helped to keep out the worst of

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weather—a pattern more commonly known from Aberdeenshire’s coastal fishing communities.

More compelling evidence is drawn from reading the standing archaeology alongside documentary sources. In undertaking detailed studies of individual crofts, it has become clear that most have complicated biographies, which hinder attempts to confine their structures to a single type. The Colony was inhabited during the post-improvement period. For rural communities, the ethos of improvement is most readily seen in the integration of “modern” agricultural practices and building techniques. A good deal of historical archaeology in Scotland has focused on tracing this transformation through rural farming methods and architecture. While most crofts in the Colony incorporate what are broadly viewed as “classic” characteristics of improvement, like enclosed rectilinear fields, agricultural revetment walls and consumption dykes (Pretty 1991), others suggest a more organic development. Compare the relatively rectilinear character of Esson’s Croft, Shepherd’s Lodge or Hillside with the seemingly makeshift layout of A-frame with its series of haphazardly placed and wandering curvilinear enclosures more reminiscent of small garden plots and animal pens than arable fields (Fig. 12).

{Fig. 12 near here}

It is instructive to compare and contrast in more detail two crofts that have been at the center of our analysis: Shepherd’s Lodge and Hillside. The excavation and survey of these homesteads has established clear differences in their form and evolution. Both settlements outwardly show expected improvement features, such as level stances built into the hillslope and gable-end fireplaces, but attention to detail also reveals some interesting differences. As latecomers to the Colony, the McDonalds at Hillside remodeled pre-existing structures to take advantage of certain “modern” conveniences. Notable is the clear separation created between the “business end” of the farm, defined by steadings focused on a courtyard, and the living spaces of

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the dwelling house. The working end of the farmstead contains animal pens, storage rooms and a cart shed, while the three-bay house had its back to the courtyard and faced the more salubrious kailyard, which seems to have provided a suitable foreground to the view beyond. A notable feature here is the stonework of the courtyard itself: a finely cobbled pavement surrounding a large sunken midden area. The use of cobbling is not uncommon in small rural farmsteads from different periods—for example it can be traced from smaller eighteenth-century farms (Shepherd 2012, plates III and IV) to the large model farms of the mid nineteenth century—however, its craftsmanship is of exceptionally high quality and unlike anything comparable from the region more broadly (Dixon pers. comm.). While this feature undoubtedly functioned to keep the crofter's feet out of the muck, it also speaks to a broader set of issues, such as an awareness of hygiene and the aesthetics of "improved" farming; both with clear links to notions of social decorum. Similar principals would have led to the enclosing of the trackway at Hillside, which funnels traffic well away from the dwelling threshold. In contrast, the Littlejohns of Shepherd's Lodge seem to have been more contented to share the threshold of their house with a variety of both human and animal traffic. Not only does the forecourt area of the house form the main trackway across the hill in this part of the settlement, but it was also the site of a principal midden for household waste.

Further details suggest the two crofts are entwined with different architectural and family biographies. At Shepherd's Lodge, the building seems to closely echo the fecundity of the Littlejohn family as it increased in numbers and spread its influence over Bennachie—notably through intermarriage. The fact that multiple rooms sequentially abut an original single-celled structure suggests that the cottage expanded into a much larger four-celled range structure—including at least two separate apartments, a possible storage room, and a cart shed—to

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accommodate the ever-growing Littlejohn family (Allen 1983[1927], p. 62). Even the more “planned” layout at Hillside with its classic U-shaped steading betrays an important degree of improvisation and remodeling. In the years following the division of the community, an older single-celled dwelling house, formerly occupied by the Mitchell family (until they succumbed to tuberculosis), was transformed by the incoming McDonalds into a segmented outbuilding—possibly used as a barn and byre—while the addition of new storage rooms and a cart shed lengthened the structure.

Excavation of the dwelling interiors on both sites revealed additional contrasts in regard to the individual building methods and design of the crofts (Oliver 2015). Underneath the collapsed gables of each structure, we exposed the former living surfaces and interior walls. The McDonald house was relatively spacious (with exterior dimensions of 11.3 x 5.3m), which when considered alongside census information, helps to confirm this structure as two-room cottage. It had three windows, two facing the kailyard, and one facing the courtyard, the latter helping to light a probable hallway (with space for a closet) separating the rooms. In the north room (Fig. 13), an ample fireplace was uncovered, set into a shallow rectangular niche in the gable end. This was composed of a v-shaped stone firebox flanked by cheek stones, all of which sat on a substantial stone-flagged hearth. The floor was made of hard-packed soil resting on a built

{Fig. 13 near here}

cobbled surface. The proportionality of the layout combined with key features, such as the positioning of windows, suggests that the McDonald dwelling may well have been a “modern” pattern-book house, with its use of space divided between what was probably a kitchen and a private room (Walker 1979, p. 32). As standing ruins across the lowlands of Aberdeenshire attest today, this form of design became increasingly popular during the later nineteenth century as

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capitalist forms of consuming architecture became common (Dixon and Fraser 2007, p. 212). At the very least, Hillside is a dwelling inspired by such innovations.

The excavation at Shepherd's Lodge revealed a smaller, irregular structure (9 x 5.4m). Although recorded as a two-room cottage in censuses for 1861 and 1871, excavation revealed no evidence for a third window, and if it possessed an internal hall it was dark and cramped. Unlike the more elaborate McDonald house fireplace, excavations in the gable end of Shepherd's Lodge uncovered a small triangular, niche-shaped fireplace, with only a single hearthstone (Fig. 14). While much of the floor of the dwelling was no longer in situ, a corner of the structure provided compelling evidence of a simple hard-packed earthen living surface. Excavations along the downslope side, surprisingly, showed no evidence of foundation trenches. Instead the wall sat directly on the original topsoil layer, which is found across the Colony. In comparison, at Hillside, the identification of a possible stone spread footing running outwards from the south gable end combined with its built floor set within construction fill, suggests different levels of planning and execution. Finally, to add to this pattern of variability, excavations carried out by Bogdan et al. (2000, p. 21) at Cairn Cootie, a one-room cottage abandoned by 1860, points to further inconsistency. Here clear evidence of cut foundation trenches confirms the idiosyncrasies of construction found among a series of cottages all built within a few decades of one another.

{Fig. 14 near here}

The micro-histories of each croft speak to a range of issues about their former inhabitants. The dwellings as revealed in their changing layouts were more than simple shelters for the poor. Rather, their fluid forms are implicated in the histories of their former occupants as they responded to what was possible within a world that imposed certain limits. While falling within an expected range of dwellings typical of the lower rungs of rural society (Fenton and

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Walker 1981), differences in form and function were likely associated with the ways in which the crofters viewed each other. As their complex family histories suggest, reputations and social distinctions were apt to shift depending on a host of variables. If we accept the Littlejohns' role as founding members of the Colony, then we might speculate on how their status as "pioneers" was received within the community—a social identity with a certain gravitas within the context of British colonial projects, for example (Oliver 2013). More certain is the way in which their reputation hinged on maintaining appearances, such as keeping the family properly sheltered, clothed and fed. Records indicate that Littlejohn senior was by turns a laborer, a dyker, a stone mason, a shepherd, and at the end of his life, a pauper—an eclectic life that reflected family fortunes as they rose and fell. By the 1870s the household provided a roof over the heads of a least ten documented individuals, including tenants and a number of illegitimate grandchildren (Fagen 2011, p. 40). A cottage heaving with bodies is not an outlandish image for nineteenth-century Britain (Lee 2005, pp. 7-8). However, the contrasts with the carefully "planned" presentation and pedigree of Hillside with its meritocratic improvements and only three mouths to feed may have been fuel for the Colony gossip mill, a practice that puts them in keeping with so-called "common folk" the world over who endlessly "talk story" and "tell the news," not only about trivial matters, but also about what was deemed significant within local canons of value (Sahlins 1987, p. 51). While the McDonalds were relative newcomers, they farmed the biggest patch, at seven acres, owned livestock, and could point to the head of the family's former career in business (John McDonald, was a "retired contractor") (Fagen 2011, pp. 43-44). The overall pattern is one of subtle discontinuities, of family histories with different pathways and changing circumstances.

While the complex material histories of Hillside and Shepherd's Lodge participated in

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how their households were viewed at particular times and places, in a strange twist of fate their nineteenth-century biographies come to an end on a collectively bleak note. Narratives about the demise of the Colony suggest that tenant Alexander Littlejohn was eventually evicted in 1878 when he was unable pay the rent. In true romantic style, one surviving story has the patriarch of his clan being carried from the house clinging to his bed by bailiffs. Although we possess no folk memory of such an eviction at Hillside, we know that McDonald senior died in 1870, from “exhaustion” and “gastric derangement” at the age of 77 (Fagen 2011, p. 44), leaving his daughter and a young farm servant to fend for themselves. The final days of excavation in the McDonald house helped to reveal the final chapter: compelling evidence for a second eviction event (Oliver 2014). The whole of the interior of the McDonald house was found littered with entire shattered ceramic and glass vessels and fragments of furniture, suggesting that the McDonalds were forced to leave in a hurry. Indeed, archival research by our community researchers has helped to confirm their “removal” (Ledingham 2014; see also Foster 2014), and that the surviving daughter relocated to Aberdeen, where she is known to have died in 1878 (Kennedy 2014, p. 44). Both structures were subsequently quickly destroyed by estate workers, who pushed their gable ends and upper wall courses inward, collapsing the houses and fossilizing their stories until their discovery by community researchers. Eviction, it seems, was the great leveler.

## **Discussion**

In this final section, we reflect upon and develop the key themes of our work at the Colony.

### **Histories of Improvement**

Historical sources about the Colony paint a picture of a society living on the edge. At best the Colonists were seen as simple “squatters,” of limited means, or at worst a morally corrupted

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assembly of thieves. Contemporary accounts tend to drive a wedge between the activities of the Colonists and neighboring communities. However, much of the archaeological and archival evidence shows important degrees of similarity with rural settlements beyond Bennachie (e.g., Fenton and Walker 1981). While tenancies suggest that the cultivated spaces on the hillside were smaller than others within the expanse of the Balquhain Estate, the fact that the crofters were valued as dykers and stone masons, seems to put them in good company with the multitude of farm workers who had by this time swelled the ranks of the rural population throughout the Northeast. Indeed, if reminiscences about the quality of accommodation offered to the wage laboring classes are representative, at times little more than a “pig-house” (Allen 1983[1927], p. 59), then many of the Colony dwellings were almost commodious by comparison.

Perhaps the most unexpected evidence is the degree to which the Colonists labored to improve their land; a point that gains particular weight when we consider how historical attitudes have tended to maintain that “poverty inhibits meaningful impacts on the built environment” (Kellet and Napier 1995, p. 10). While we should be careful not to overly romanticize their relationship to the soil, the sheer scale of improvement activities in the form of clearing land, improving shallow, stony, poorly drained soils by spreading turf and kitchen waste and manually removing stones, draining fields by constructing ditches and under-field drains, and enclosing fields with well-built dykes, is a symbolic materialization of their commitment to a risky location, where their presence was open to question. It is often assumed that improvement was a top-down process (as suggested by tenancy agreements), however, we should acknowledge that tenants were also capable of making their own decisions, based on what was viewed as socially and economically appropriate (Dalglish 2003). From this point of view, improvement need not be something imposed from above, but rather a system of knowledge negotiated through a more

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messy process that probably involved as much acceptance as it did rejection, and which seemingly involved neighbors and local experimentation with environmental conditions as much as it did book learning. The fact that we have identified very little evidence of improvement, as spelled out in tenancies from after 1859, but a great deal of variation in terms of how the Colonists built their homes and laid out their fields, suggests that they shaped their futures in ways that are not always acknowledged. Life on the hill was not unwaveringly on the receiving end of unequal power relations, nor was it strictly determined by environmental variables or social classes. Following Pluciennick and others (2004, p. 29), we suggest that much of the evidence might be seen in terms of an archaeology of aspiration and innovation. Ledingham's (2014) research into the estate records helps to support this point. The small amount of rent the Colonists were charged combined with the expectation that they could be counted on for their labor, may have meant that they were often left to their own devices. So rather than a picture of the Colonists living on borrowed time, and "under the thumb," the Colony tells a complex story about place-making that was bound-up with commitment and future ambitions (Fig. 15).

{Fig. 15 near here}

### **Community Relations**

Our work has begun to address some of the social relationships connected with the Colony. Although it is tempting to identify the geographically-bounded nature of the settlement as a sign of a community united, it is clearly simplistic to view this configuration as a given. A good deal of research has helped to show that geographical proximity and similar cultural patterns are not enough to create notions of group membership (Canuto and Yaeger 2000). A better way of understanding how social groups are created is through what Wenger (1998) terms communities of practice. Drawn from practice theory more broadly, a community of practice is based on the

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premise of mutual engagement, a shared project and the development of a repertoire of skills.

The Colonists all lived in stone-built cottages quarried from the same hillside, and they carved up their smallholdings with dykes from the same sources. They also used common strategies to improve their lands, including the labor-intensive practice of cutting drains into the compact glacial till and cutting turves from surrounding, unoccupied lands. If one considers how such practical activities were embedded in the rhythms of seasonal routines, it is not difficult to suggest how shared experiences were created.

In addition to the practices of improving and cultivating the hillside, which are less commonly written about (but see Lee 2007), community relations were also constructed through a number of well-documented activities. We know, for example, that many families intermarried or had informal relationships, which not only produced children but social and economic obligations. In considering how neighborly relations are vital to contexts of colonization, it is not difficult to understand the importance of good relations with kith and kin. Perhaps one of the most important contexts for this was in the building of cottages. The occupation of the “commonty” required putting down claims to land quickly. Across upland areas of Britain, the erection of a “one-night house” over the course of a single evening provided informal communities with a degree of tacit legitimacy (Sayce 1941). McConnochie (1985[1890], p. 92) remarked on the very practice at Bennachie: “the neighbours joined together and in one day erected a house for a “squatter,” celebrating the event by a supper in the same evening, in the newly erected building.” Shared practices such as these created histories of community endeavor cemented in material form, actions responsible for the expansion and consolidation of this new community.

Of course, shared histories look different when they appear to stand apart from the things

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that helped to define broader community relations. Within such contexts the practices that brought the Colonists together could also be used to single them out: neighboring tenant farmers resentful of freeloaders with no obligations to the Laird, or parish administrators resigned to sharing limited resources with “squatters.” We might speculate that if one of the sources of marginalization had been their rent-free conditions, then the signing of leases after the division of Bennachie might have served to diminish this distinction. Among middle-class worthies, the authors of nineteenth-century guidebooks for example (e.g., McConnochie 1985[1890]), one suspects that the prejudicial tones used against “simple” country folk were tinged with the desire to fulfil preconceived notions of an exotic “other,” helping to confirm urban town dwellers of their own status and urbanity (Oliver et al. 2013). While the othering of the Colony’s inhabitants is an important theme of its history, at the same time we can point to numerous occasions where work brought the Colonists and those living elsewhere together. For example, after the division of the commonty, certain degrees of reciprocity existed between those living in the Colony and communities in the locality, for example when ploughing of the hillside was done by local farmers in return for help in busy seasons (Allen 1983[1927], p. 62), reminding us that relationships between the Colonists and others were a complex affair.

### **The Politics of Identity**

At the same time, while we cannot ignore how community relations were forged, the label “Colonists” hardly addresses the internal tensions and dynamics of what was once a busy, heterogeneous world. A major focus of the project has been to examine more closely the politics of identity operating within and cross-cutting the Colony. While identity politics can work at a variety of scales and in connection with a variety of issues (Bender 1993; Jenkins 2005), work at the level of the household has suggested a number of ways in which different forms of social

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status, such as occupation, economic distinction, and awareness of improvement, was both grounded and mediated. It is quite tempting to suggest that the archaeology expressed, at times and in varying ways, differential access to resources, conditions and choices. These not only shaped the way people lived, but also how they viewed and interacted with each other. To come briefly back to Hillside and Shepherd's Lodge, we can begin moving beyond the spare textual descriptions about their one-time residents and start thinking about the changes that occurred here and how they were viewed. The singular craftsmanship of Hillside's courtyard with its clear nod to notions of hygiene contrasts with the simpler layout of Shepherd's Lodge. In this context, one's status was, in particular historical moments, shaped by one's knowledge and one's ability to implement the socially efficacious fashions of the day. The variability seen at the level of intra-household relations is further bolstered when we consider that the Colony inhabitants came from a variety of places and backgrounds. Rather than seeing improvement as a progressive and inevitable transformation, as others have noted (e.g., Dalglish 2003; Pluciennick et al. 2004), a more convincing argument is that the Colonists brought different distillations of the principles of improvement with them and planted its rhetoric in the hillside of Bennachie. We need not blow these distinctions out of proportion. Grander narratives will not necessarily emphasize these local scale peculiarities, but within the context of the Colony, even seemingly "little" things mattered.

### **Conclusion**

Recent work by academic and community researchers at the Bennachie Colony has provided a unique opportunity to "dig deeper" into the story of an informal community known better through caricatures of the poor and stereotypes of rural living. While the Colonists were certainly victims of popular representations of poverty and marginality—what social anthropologist Maia Green (2006, p. 1112) calls "an identity of form rather than content"—attempts to classify its

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residents as “mountain people,” “wage laborers,” or even “rural poor,” begin to look like thin descriptions once we begin to assemble the range of evidence at our disposal. A collaborative approach with multiple lines of questioning provides for an interpretation that is multiscalar and richly textured: the Colony was a result of wider improvement processes, but it was also an example of how improvement ideas were adopted locally, resisted and adapted; material relations that played directly into the way community relations were themselves negotiated. From the common concerns the Colonists had about their fields, to the more idiosyncratic conditions surrounding the building and expansion of dwellings, “community” relations—things that brought people together and those that set them apart—were formed and reformed around a host of different issues.

Our research sheds light on a very small part of rural Scotland. However, the lessons learned have implications for the archaeology of improvement and the study of informal communities on a global scale. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the ethos of improvement, increasingly interwoven with capitalist relations of production, not only helped to create a society based on land ownership, it also produced the conditions for the emergence of informal communities established within the interstices of the new land system. Our research bears out the more general assertion that improvement was not a homogenous phenomenon, but one that was interpreted and distilled in different ways. Likewise, if we are to understand the specific nature of informal communities within the reformed rural landscape, future research must strike a balance between understanding local entanglements and broader comparative analysis.

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Landscape Project, a collaborative endeavour between the Bailies of Bennachie and the University of Aberdeen. To date, funding for the project has been generously provided by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in the form of a Connected Communities Grant (G. Noble PI) and more recently through a larger Development Grant (J. Oliver PI). The research that this paper is based on could not have been undertaken without the generous assistance of a large number of volunteers, university students and staff members. While it would be impossible to name everyone who has contributed, we would like to acknowledge the regular members of the “landscape group” whose infective enthusiasm for the project has provided a stimulating environment for learning and co-production. Particular thanks go to Jackie Cumberbirch, Barry Foster, Chris Foster, Angela Groat, David Irving, Alison Kennedy, Harry Leal, Ken Ledingham, Colin Miller, Iain Ralston, Colin Shepherd, Sue Taylor and Andrew Wainwright. Further assistance with fieldwork was provided by Ágústa Edwald, Patrycia Kupiec, Barbora Wouters, Óskar Sveinbjarnarson, members of Northlight Heritage and several cohorts worth of University of Aberdeen undergraduate and graduate students. We are indebted to the RCAHMS for assistance with plane table survey and to Óskar Sveinbjarnarson for help with mapping. Others have supported additional aspects of the Bennachie Landscape project or have provided specialist advice. Thanks go to Neil Curtis, Liz Curtis, Rowan Ellis, Marjory Harper, Siobhan Convery and the University of Aberdeen Special Collections staff. Access to undertake fieldwork was graciously provided by the Forestry Commission Scotland. Helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper were provided by Barry and Chris Foster, Ken Ledingham, Collin Miller, Collin Shepherd, Sue Taylor, Andrew Wainwright and two anonymous reviewers.

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## Figure Captions

Fig. 1. The location of the Colony within the wider context of Scotland and the hill of Bennachie.

Fig. 2. Boghead of Tullos, the Esson Croft, 1939. George Esson continued to live at Boghead of Tullos as the sole resident of the Colony after it was abandoned in the previous century. By permission of the Bailies of Bennachie.

Fig. 3. Plan of the Colony based principally on the Ordnance Survey published in 1869. Place names are derived from census information. Those in quotations have been formed through modern conventions. Adapted from a base map by Colin Shepherd. By kind permission.

Fig. 4. Community members plan the ruins of Hillside croft. The inset plan shows the Mitchell house on the left and the McDonald house on the right.

Fig. 5. Due to its weight and bulk, the collapsed masonry from the dwelling interiors posed a

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significant challenge to remove. At Hillside the solution was engineered by community researchers in the form of a nineteenth-century style “bier” to carry granite blocks.

Fig. 6. Percentage diagram for Moss Grieve displaying selected pollen and spores. The likely period covered is the last ~250-300 years. This is based upon interpolation between a radiocarbon date on the peat at 42-43cm (Beta-368364;  $340 \pm 30$  BP; cal 1470-1640 CE [95%]) and the modern ground surface (2013 CE). A substantial rise in pollen from forestry (pine, spruce), and the presence of spheroidal carbonaceous particles (SCPs) produced through the incomplete high-temperature combustion of fossil fuels (Yang et al. 2001) at the top of the profile, demonstrates that the surface has not been truncated by peat cutting. (+ indicates  $\leq 1\%$ ; LPAZ = Local Pollen Assemblage Zone.)

Fig 7. Elaborately-built stone well, Shepherd’s Lodge.

Fig. 8. Soils and improvement methods at Burnside croft, showing (a) a map of the farm, with the locations of the drainage ditches and the under-field drain; (b) the natural, stony soil outside of the field system, being sampled for micromorphological analysis, where a thin peaty O horizon had developed on top of a grey, stoney, gleyed (frequently waterlogged) glacial till; and (c) the deep anthropogenic soil developed in the kailyard.

Fig. 9. Soils at Shepherd’s Lodge croft, showing (a) pottery distributions and soil depths; (b) the natural, stony soil outside of the field system, where a thin peaty soil had developed on top of a grey, gleyed (frequently waterlogged) glacial till; and (c) the thick plough soil developed in one of the fields.

Fig. 10. Detail of a map from 1857 based on the earlier Reduced Plan of the Common [sic] of Bein-na-chie Lying in the Parishes of Chapel of Garioch, Oyne & Premnay and County of Aberdeen – Surveyed by Alexander Smith. 1845. Note the curvilinear field pattern around

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Hillside croft.

Fig. 11. Detail of 1869 Ordnance Survey. Note the rectilinear field pattern around Hillside croft.

Fig. 12. Plan contrasting Shepherd’s Lodge with A-Frame. Map drawn by Colin Shepherd, used with permission.

Fig. 13. The McDonald house at Hillside Croft showing its hard packed floor, fireplace with standing “cheek” stone and stone-flagged hearth. The inset sketch shows a typical pattern book cottage. Interpretation by Collin Miller, with permission, based on a design in Walker (1978, p. 32).

Fig. 14. Shepherd’s Lodge showing its v-shaped fireplace built into the west gable end.

Fig. 15. Aesthetic qualities of features such as Hillside’s midden suggest an important degree of ambition.

**Table I**

**Annual rents in £ sterling 1859**

Tenant	Annual rent in £	Comments
Alexander Porter	£1	
Ellen Esson	£1	
James Esson	£2 10s	to rise to £3 15s after ten years
John Esson	£2 10s	to rise to £3 15s after ten years
James Mitchell	£1 5s	to rise to £1 17s 6d after ten years
Alexander Littlejohn	£2	
John Garden	£1 5s	to rise to £3 after ten years
John McDonald	£3 10s	to rise to £5 7s 6d after ten years
Susan Findlater	£1	

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(Source: Ledingham 2014)