

My Highland Home

BRUACH

I was born the highland shieling of Bruach (meaning farm-on-the-hillside) in Glen Arklet. It's a sparsely populated hanging glen (a geomorphological term).



In summer and winter, the views from Bruach are spectacular, especially towards the Arrochar Alps and Loch Katrine.



View from Bruach. Top: Loch Arklet and the Arrochar Alps. Bottom: Loch Katrine from the early 18th century military road..

Bruach is located on the north side of Loch Arklet, near the junction of ancient cattle drove roads one leading to Loch Katrine eastward, Loch Lomond to the west and southward via Loch Chon and down Strathard to Flanders Moss and Stirling Castle.

Because of its strategic location, the many famous travelers have passed Bruach over the millennia and have made the glen famous by recording their experiences for posterity. The Bronze Age people left their carvings on the rocks. In the 5th Century, St. Berach visited the district to sort out a dispute the priestly king Aedan had with an Irish wizard. Among the most notable travelers were the Wise Women to whom a beautiful set of stained glass windows in St. Kentigerna's Church at Inversnaid were dedicated.

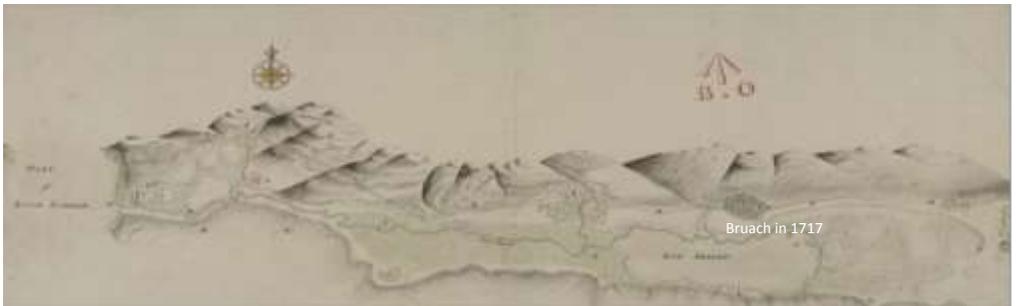


St. Kentigerna's Church, Inversnaid (c1900) and as The Bunkhouse Bothy— an important stop on the route of Great Highland Way. Note the windows dedicated to the Wise Women.

The Wise Women

Women of the Highlands have long been known for their wisdom, resourcefulness and leadership, not only in Scotland but also had some influence in the development of Icelandic culture.

Around Bruach many women have earned a prominent place in the history of the district, such as the strong-willed and well-respected wife of Rob Roy, Mary Helen Campbell.



St. Kentigerna's church windows honor the famous wise women of the *Kil-mi-Cailleach* (Cell of Nuns), founded in the 8th Century by St. Kentigerna. St. Kentigerna (*not be confused with St. Kentigern the founder of Glasgow Cathedral*) was the daughter of a Viking Irish king, and resided on Inchcailloch Island on Loch Lomond and was buried there in 733 A.D. In those days, the landscape was not as bereft of trees as it is now. So appropriately, St. Kentigerna's Church (is set in a native birch woods beside the Snaid Burn (river) above Inversnaid.

The west end of the church has a set of stained-glass windows which depicts God's care of women folk and women's services to God.



Kentigerna and her son St. Fillan would frequently be passed by Bruach while visiting the communities of the *Kil-mi-Cailleach*. Such was the fame of Kentigerna and her wise nuns that difficult court cases were occasionally referred to the *Kil-mi-Cailleach* for judgment. As one expects of wise women, nearly all cases referred to them were amicably resolved.

One such case was that of a man accused of stealing a horse while its owner was attending church. The accused pleaded innocent, saying: ***"Ah wis jist sat oan the harse tae get a feel o't, when ta' beastie ran aff wi' me barely hangin' oan tae it."*** The Sheriff, unable to make a judgement, referred the case to the *Kil-mi-Cailleach*. In their usual brilliant diplomatic aplomb, they rendered a double-edged verdict. They judged that the defendant was truthful and decreed *"he be set free; the horse, on the other hand, was found guilty of abducting the accused and was sentenced to be hanged for kidnapping."*

A few *Kil-mi-Cailleach* ruins can still be seen within an hour or so walk from Bruach. The *Kil-mi-Cailleach* at the foot of Ben Ducteach (Ben Dochty - meaning Holy Hill) was already an ancient holy site before it became occupied by a St. Fillan's cell. Robert the Bruce, after

slaying Sir John Comyn in Greyfriars Kirk in Dumfries in 1306, and defeated a few months later at the Battle of St. Johnstoun (the old name for Perth), took to hiding in the birch and oak forests of Loch Katrine. He was given sanctuary by the monks of the cult of St. Fillan where he learned of the strange arm relic of the Saint. Apparently, in order for St. Fillan to write edicts in a darkened monastery during the night, he was blessed with a glowing right arm. Eight years later, on the eve of the Battle of Bannockburn (1314), King Robert the Bruce summoned the sacred relic. But the monk in charge of it, calculating the overwhelming odds in favour of King Edward's army, feared it might be lost forever; so he stowed the arm in a safe hiding place and presented the King of the Scots army with an empty box. Low and behold! When Bruce opened the box, in it was the glowing arm of St. Fillan. And so it was that Robert the Bruce attributed his victory over Edward II at Bannockburn, beneath Stirling Castle, to the intercession of St. Kentigerna's boy. In gratitude, King Robert dedicated a nunnery and ecclesiastical college on the site. These ancient ruins can still be seen on the shores of Loch Katrine.

The mystical relationship between Robert the Bruce and St. Fillan's is symbolized in the Clan Robertson coat-of-arms in which the Scottish by crown is held aloft by a glowing hand.

From the 14th Century, the Stewart Earl's, including the clever King James dubbed "the wisest fool in all Christendom," who generally resided in Stirling Castle, decreed the region as his hunting estate - then dominated by birch, oak and pine forests. In those the term **'forest'** in Scotland generally meant all wild lands, with or without trees, and included managed heath, grouse moors and highland pastures.

The birch woods are in the heartland of the Gregarach (Clan MacGregor) who owned most of the lands including Bruach in the district until the 17th Century -. The most famous of the Gregarach, who would have lodged many a night at Bruach, was Robert MacGregor - the legendary Rob Roy. He acquired the birch and oak woods of Craigrayston (also called Craigröstan) on the

Bonnie banks of Loch Lomond and some other woodlands and farmlands by a charter of 1706 Indicative of a gentleman of property - a “lad o’ pairts” as we say in Scots - Robert signed his letters Robt. of Royston - hence his nickname **Rob Roy**. As son of a chieftain, Rob Roy was well educated and fluent in Gaelic, Scots (and its many dialects), plus English, Latin and French.

The birch and oak woodlands of Craigroystan in the district was at the **root** of his trouble (pardon the pun). As explained earlier, by defaulting on a loan from the Duke of Montrose, it cost him the valuable woods of Craigroyston and probably Bruach and, on many occasions, nearly his life.

Nowadays, planting a forest, even if it is meant as a good deed, is not quite so simple as in the 19th century. Recently, a proposal to establish a small plantation required planning permission from 89 regulatory agencies and quasi-official interest groups - (quangos).

I recall one incident during a debate at a public hearing on a proposed plantation up the far north of Scotland, where an academic declared that a species of snipe required **50 square miles to breed** and that re-draining the moor after a 100 year lapse would endanger the birds’ mating and breeding chances. During a heated moment in the proceedings, an exasperated forester muttered, **“Only bird who needs fifty square miles tae get his nooky deserves to be endangered.”**

In the mid-19th Century, Queen Victoria was a regular visitor, and as late as the 1980s, American country legend Johnny Cash found much to sing about here. Many great poets, chroniclers and legions of photographers have drawn inspiration from the glens and becoming became famous in the process. The Scottish Comedian Billy Connolly gave praises of sorts – but then it was heavily raining at the time.

Among those who passed by our shieling were the likes of Sir Walter Scott, William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy, Samuel Coleridge, James Hogg, Tobias Smollet (born nearby beside Loch Lomond in 1721), Nathaniel Hawthorne, Jules Verne, Hans Christian Anderson, George Eliot, Thomas Carlyle, John Keats, Gerard Manley Hopkins. Contemporaries include Nigel Tranter author of

MacGregors Gathering, Country singing legends Johnny Cash and Susan Boyle.

Touring the Trossachs in the early 19th century was still a bit of challenge; especially getting from Loch Lomond to Loch Katrine via Glen Arklet and vice-versa as this example from Adam and Charles Black’s tour of Scotland shows.



“From the west end of the Lake, a wild valley, traversed by a path way about five miles long, affords a communication with Loch Lomond, upon which it opens at Inversnaid Mill, where the steam-boat, which every day plies along Loch Lomond, takes in the Loch Katrine tourists. The small lake, Arclat (Arklet) lies in the hollow near this pathway. In one of the smoky huts in the valley between Loch Katrine and Loch Lomond may be seen a long Spanish musket, once the property of Rob Roy, whose original residence was in this lone vale. Beside the way are the ruins of Inversnaid Fort, erected in 1713 to check the MacGregors. While the tourist is in the midst of the country of the MacGregors, a flock of shaggy highland ponies is in attendance, to convey Travelers across this moorland region, and a pony cart to carry their baggage the extortion and incivility, to which tourists are subjected, at this stage of their progress, are a reproach to Scotland. A recent sufferer thus addresses the editor of a Glasgow paper on the subject “On being landed at the hill at Inversnaid, we as usual took our departure for Loch Katrine, mounted on the highland ponies which awaited us. I shall say nothing of the charge, (four shillings each,) which certainly appeared rather high for a ride on the back of such cattle; but I feel bound to mention the conduct of the boatmen, and others, who formed an escort to our party. They came provided with a small pony cart, which carries the luggage across, and here their extortion began. On reaching the margine of Loch Katrine, one gentleman, who had not the precaution to make a bargain with them, charged eight shillings for the carriage of a few articles;*



another party 5 shillings; and so' on in proportion. The sun was fast sinking, and, under the pretense of refreshing themselves, the whole party sat smoking and drinking for above an hour, deaf to all entreaties which were made to them, and at length, with rudeness and extreme reluctance, at half-past five o'clock set out; so that, by the time we reached the Trossachs, it was quite dark, and we reached the crowded inn, only to be obliged to take horses and hurry away ten miles to Callander. The consequence of this was, that we not only lost the view of the lovely scenery through which we passed, but the comfort, and even the health of our party, which endangered, by night travelling and its accompaniments. Were this a solitary instance, we should not have quoted it here; but having personally experienced the annoyance, and many of our friends having suffered in the same way, we have no hesitation in cautioning travellers to make an express bargain, before they avail themselves of either ponies or cart, For a pony, we regard 2s 6d. a moderate, and 3s 6d. a liberal hire."

A decade later, in 1850, the concept of day-tripping to escape the grime and bustle of cities was started by **Thomas Cook & Son** when on his inaugural trip he brought 100 clients from the opposite direction on a day trip from Stirling to Loch Katrine, Glen Arklet, and down Loch Lomond. No mean feat in days when coordination between modes of transportation by rail, steamer and coach was as much a game of chance as by design.

For example, eight of the group missed the steamer at the Trossachs end of Loch Katrine and had to be transported the 15 kilometres to Stronachlachar at the other end of the loch in an open, eight-oar galley called *Witch-Water*. From Stronachlachar, they walked 8km in heavy rain, over bogs and rocks to Inversnaid where they found that the Loch Lomond steamer had an accident. So they hired two men to row them another 27 kilometers to Balloch in cold, wet, squally weather; then walked overland to Dumbarton. Luckily, they managed to catch the steamer docked on the River Clyde in time to continue the first **Thomas Cook package Tour** through the stormy waters through the Hebridean Islands.

Eventually, the standard of the Trossachs tour improved especially with the construction of fine hotels and a fine 4-in-hand coach service with coachmen properly attired in smart uniforms. So much so that it became a world famous Glen Arklet landscape has hardly changed since the Iron Age. As shown by the military drawing dated 1717 showing treeless lands except the small ancient pasture woodlands of Bruach. Until 1915 Loch Arklet was half the size – having been enlarge as an reservoir in addition to Loch Katrine for Glasgow's water supply.



The Rob Roy coach at Inversnaid Hotel, and coaches passing Bruach on their way from Stronachlachar Pier on Loch Katrine to Inversnaid Hotel by Loch Lomond. This was the last public coach service in Britain which ceased in 1937.

As to the fate of the garrison, most of it has been recycled into the Garrison Farm and what was left of ruined barracks has ever since been used as a sheep pen. Nearby, behind the one-room Inversnaid Primary School, is the military graveyard with a dozen or so headstones bearing the inscription of some of the brave soldiers (mostly Highlanders) who died at the garrison 250 years ago.

The Garrison Farm estate was sold to the Royal Society for Protection of Birds and is now

a Nature Reserve (where they plant trees for special bird habitats).

There has been a shieling at Bruach at least since the 17th century and had the only patch of ancient woods in the Glen. At one point a Duke of Montrose used Bruach primarily as toll and watch station. And while there were several small clachans in the glen, Bruach seems to have stood alone throughout recorded history.

About 1915 or so the Glen was bought by the Glasgow Water Corporation and the loch was double in size. Until recently, the corporation allowed sheep and cattle grazing and actually had their own shepherds. One of them was John Barrington – best-selling author of **Red Sky ant Night** which chronicles his life as a shepherd in the area.

Glen arklet today is a virtually treeless, and the landscape is more representative of ancient traditional hill farming lands where the McGregor's of Glengyle owned the 7 'ferm touns' in the glen as late as the 18th century under the feudal lordship of the Duke of Montrose. The adjacent photo shows farm is ancient farmstead shown on an early 18th century map as being leased a tenant of the Duke of Montrose. The mound in the foreground is an Iron Age bloomer

The glen's broad steep slopes are a mosaic of grassland sedge interspersed with patches of heather, bracken and the scattered patches of birch trees; in other words, mostly sheep grazing, Red Deer and Grouse lands and more recently, hiking.

At the bottom of the slopes was a patchwork of farms with their lush green fields which once had 7 small clachans owned by the McGregors.

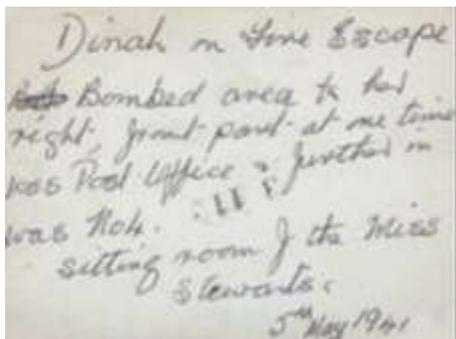
Apart from some natural regeneration of birch, today, the braes around in Glen arklet virtually treeless, with the only wood above Bruach and small coniferous plantations around the Loch arklet dam. In essence the landscape has hardly changed sine the iron age. woods along the shores of lochs and rivers.



Apart from a few trees planted around the Loch Arklet Dam, the landscape that 19th travellers passed through is virtually unchanged; i.e., it is mostly treeless, especially around the Garrison Farm (built from the stone of the demolished fort); otherwise it is mostly sheep country and more recently a bird sanctuary.

was In 1941, when I was a year old the family was still living the ancient, a somewhat isolated shieling of Bruach in Glen arklet. Some cattle nearby had been infected with foot-and-mouth disease. So, on the 14th May, 1941, near the west end of Glen Arklet, the infected cattle were killed and burned in a spot surrounded by an area covered by a thick blanket of dead, dry bracken

Late in the night of the 14-15th May the fire spread into the bracken which the locals think may have attracted the attention of the pilot of a German bomber who mistook it for fires on Clydeside docks about 35 km southward that had been set ablaze by other bombers ahead of him



The bomber flew past Bruach and dropped twenty-eight bombs westward roughly in a line from the Garrison Farm to the Inversnaid Hotel and into Loch Lomond. There was no loss of life. But the Post Office, which was part of the Hotel, was damaged.

Throughout the 'raid' the staff huddled under a staircase; except the manageress who ran out of the building and did not stop running until she arrived at the boathouse about a kilometer away. Meanwhile, one of the hotel



guests had the presence of mind to write a note of incident. Which was reproduced in the Hotel's **Lochs and Glens Newsletter**.

The sound of this single bomber passing over our Bruach shieling sent my older (pre-teen) siblings into a well-drilled action which they had learned at the wee Inversnaid School – which included putting on gas masks.

My eldest sister vividly recalls the gas mask drill insofar as she and my other siblings were bawling their eyes out. Not because of fright from the bomber, but the youngest, I was the only one who was assigned a Mickey Mouse mask, while others made do with adult gas masks.

But fear soon changed to laughter at the sight of this ridiculous and funny looking child's mask and then trying to fit it onto the face of a baby that struggled to keep away from it. When they succeeded, the laughter became uncontrollable, as they took turns blowing air into the mask so that a blue-faced, gasping baby wouldn't die from lack of air. With a little practice they discovered the endless fun of making loud farting noises long after the bomber had gone.



Sandy & WWII Mickey Mouse gas mask for babies.

Living on the Duke's Pass

After spending the war in Glasgow, at Elmbank Crescent - opposite the Mitchel Library - we returned to the Trossachs to one of the rare wooden houses in district in the slate quarry village (called the Cottaries) a top of the Dukes pass above Aberfoyle. There were virtually no trees on the west side of the Dukes Pass. and only young plantations on the east side. However, when we arrived the quarry the village was demolished and replaced with fast-growing forests so that, by the 1990's, only our wooden house and "Hill Cottage" the manager's house survived as shown in the series of photo

taken from about 1940 to 2006 – all but the top photo were taken by me.

We lived in the rare wee wooden house the last one to be torn down. Our house was the only one apart from the managers house to have a doubtful sort of tap water, i.e., from a pipe drawing water from a stream was shared by big herds of sheep. To my recollection, 'running water' for the other houses was the fast running stream (called a burn in Scotland) running past their door.



Top: Our wood house and the 'cottaries' c 1945. Middle, demolition of the last workers of the cottaries c 1960, and Aberfoyle School. Bottom: The manager's house and magnificent Forest Commission planted in the 1960's and photographed 1995.



Transformation of the Duke's pass. 1950 (top), 1990 (middle) and, on the site of the

They were very hard times for workers, regardless of their occupation. But, for as a wee boy eager to explore from dawn to dusk the wild mountainous land of lochs and glens, of great beauty and full of livestock and wildlife, it was a happy time. The Cottary was a bustling village of about 20 families – mostly quarry workers families, but also a salesman, a forestry worker and others. The school building was still standing but not used. Instead, we walked the down the Duke's Pass to a beautiful school, beside the river Forth often through the ancient oak woods and the enchanting surroundings along the Loch Ard Road where the much wealthier folk lived in fine Victorian

mansions. In winter months a bus took us to school. And when there fewer children we were taken to school in a fine Armstrong Siddley car with a convertible roof. But almost all the time I much preferred the 3 km walk up and down the beautiful Dukes Pass road which ran alongside the burn with beautiful water falls, and through oak woods; sometimes taking the short-cut through bracken-covered slopes. And, try to out-run a rabbit or frisky lambs; unsuccessfully at that.

In his booklet *Aberfoyle Slate Quarries: Fragments of an Earlier World.* (2007) Louis Stott provides an excellent history of the slate quarry since it was first opened in 1581 to provide slate for the likes of the King's palaces at Stirling Castle and Doune Castle and many other royal and stately mansions and of course and of course countless buildings.

This was no ordinary slate and was considered a cut above all others because it came in several colours and called "Tartans" by slaters. For example, in last photo the slates were so valuable, that they were stripped from roofs of the "Cottaries" during their demolition and re-used in expensive architectural projects – notable churches.



Cutting Roofing Slates

By the mid-1950's the quarry village was demolished and replaced with fast-growing forests so that, by the 1990's, only our wooden house and "Hill Cottage" the manager's house survived. Today the Hill Cottage is the only survivor. The wee wooden house was quite a change from our Elmbank Crescent apartment in Glasgow which had large 3 bedrooms, kitchen, bathroom, living room and a long,

spacious hallway and water & electricity and spacious, stone-walled vegetable garden.

Primitive though wee house was, at least we had the luxury of our own out-house (*i.e.*, *bogg* as on the architectural drawings for the *Inversnaid Fort – dated 1718*); or, if you prefer the more sanitized definition, the “Privy”) But we had a short run about 30 feet across a sodden wet peat bog to get to use our bogg – that was an especially miserable run on a gie drieb (soaking wet) day.

To the uninitiated, working and living in this land o’ mountain and moorland may seem a bleak and lonely place. But to those of us who live and work with nature, it is nothing short of gift. As a youngster growing up in early 1950’s and working many parts of the Highlands I was absolutely fascinated by it all. The heather-covered bogs, so characteristic of the landscape, teemed with wildlife. As a hobby, we’d compete to see who could the most nests of grouse, lapwings, tiny heather linties and “Wullie wagtails”. Having found their nests, it was very interesting to follow the progress of the chicks from hatching to first flight.

Other times we’d search for bumble bee nests in mossy hummocks of the heather moor. These big bumble bees are very friendly and harmless, and not the least offended when we pulled a wee bit of their honeycomb and sucked out warm, delicious honey. Of course, this sticky business meant a trip to the stream to wash to unstick our finger; which, inevitably, led to “guddling in the burn” (feeling for and catching trout hiding under stones).

There was never a short of work, especially when we moved down a neat house in Aberfoyle and back to electricity and proper. Water and, best of all a fine view of over the village, Duchray, Ben Lomond and Craigmore - then, mostly treeless landscape which I was to help plant up with fast growing forests we see today

As for entertainment, other than squabbling with the siblings, was mostly trying to make sense of the weak squeals fading in and out from a crystal radio – an odd and frustrating sort of pastime that wasted many hours getting the battery top-up with acid down at the village.

But the best of true highland living was not so much the humble house, but the fantastically beautiful landscape so full of wildlife, sheep and just enough mountaineering dangers to keep us on an even keel mentally & physically.

There was much hiking to do for a 10 year-old wearing short, woolen trousers and tackety leather boots as was the custom (*our elders thought it disgraceful and downright rude for youngsters under 15 years old to wear long trouser regardless of frosty weather and deep snow*).

Climbing Ben Aan was not a great challenge for us quarry youngsters. Often, we go fishing Loch Drunkie which was a pleasure providing we didn’t hook an ugly pike instead of a trout. Naturally, we were skilled with our slingshots for hunting rabbits.

In those days there was a large colony of thousands of Black Headed Gulls, nesting on Flanders Moss a few kilometers south of the Dukes Pass. Their eggs were once a necessary part of the diet of poor folks living on the moss. However, gulls eggs were a treat for the rich too. For example, on 28th May 2009, a headline in upper class Guardian Newspaper read **“Top Class Restaurants Face Shortage of Seagull Eggs”** and with the opening sentence **“Black-headed gulls' eggs, which can sell for up to £5 each, were once the exclusive preserve of aristocrats”** So, in the spring we’d make 20 km round trip down the Dukes Pass to Flanders Moss to collect a large box-full of black-headed gull’s eggs. We would only take one of the three to four eggs in each nest - despite the protests of dive-bombing, screaming gulls.



But thank goodness, unlike those huge Icelandic gulls, they don't spit that awful goo at in our face.



After the egg foray, there was the big chore of digging and drying of peat for heating and cooking. At the age of 12 this was my first experience with harvesting peat. By coincidence, several decades later I founded and edited a magazine **Peat News** for the Newfoundland & Labrador Peat Association.

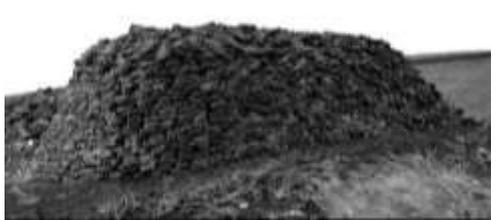
Those who romanticize country living ought to have a go at digging, stooking and stacking peat. It is a wet, messy, back-breaking job that would be rather tedious without spells of comic relief from the usual shenanigans of misbehaving youngsters.

However, apart from saving money, in the right kind of bog, its qualities as a fuel provided incentive enough to harvest it. Besides, there is no fuel quite like the sweet aroma and lasting heat of a good heather peat.

Peat has cleansing and anti-septic properties and is very useful for cleaning and healing cuts and bruises. For cooking we normally burned coal in a grand old cast iron range. On the few occasions for heating the house, we burned blocks of peat that we cut-dried ourselves.

As for the merits of peat, K. Macleod's delightful song "*By the Light of the Peat Fires Flame*" did not always ring true for us; since, for example, the light from a batch of peat that I dug from a bad section of the bog, resulted in a barely smoldering peat fire dimmer than the light of a half moon and not much brighter the glow of the distant lights Glasgow faintly shining through our windows. Luckily, school homework was done by the *light o' the*

smelly kerosene lamp (now there's a title for a ballad). The adjacent photos show the process of digging, stooking and stacking peat.

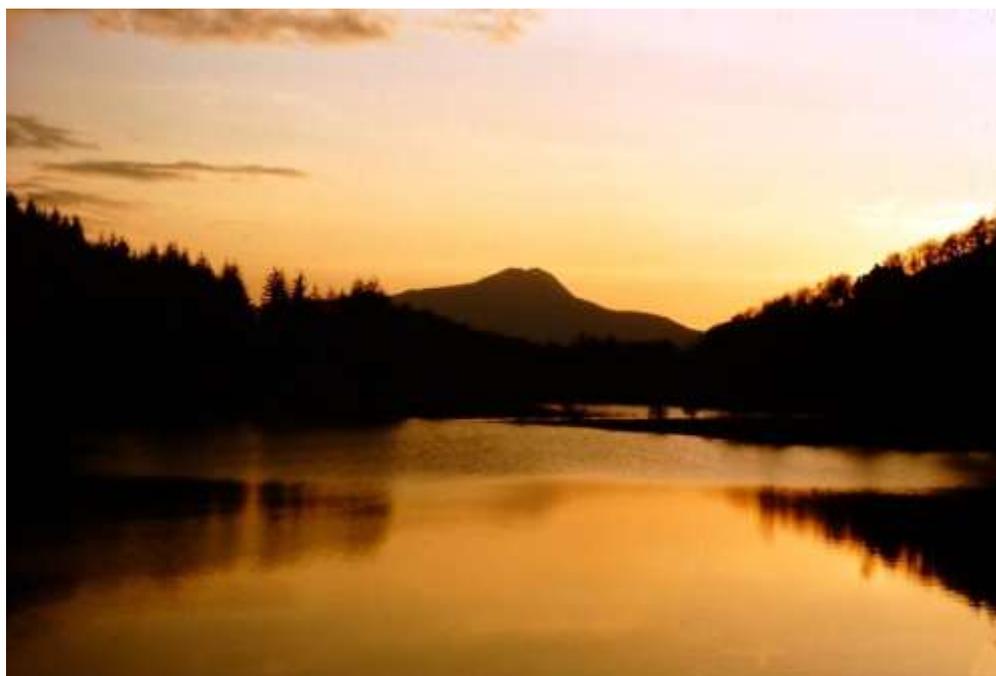


The stooked peat dries much faster than the bottom; so we'd turn the stooks upside down periodically during the summer. When the blocks hardened they became virtually impervious to water and would be packed in stacks in such a way as to ensure further drying.

Even when there was a long period of rainy weather the peat blocks in the uncovered stacks never absorbed so much moisture as to limit their heating qualities. The colour photo at the bottom-right is a modern method for harvesting peat commercially on Flanders Moss.



Aberfoyle: top: the view from the author's childhood house on Queen's Crescent. Middle: Aberfoyle from Manse Road and a camper under flood water from the River Forth.



A Victorian house below Craigmore, Aberfoyle and Ben Lomond in the sunset by Loch Ard is a pleasant way to end this chapter on the photogenic Trossachs.