

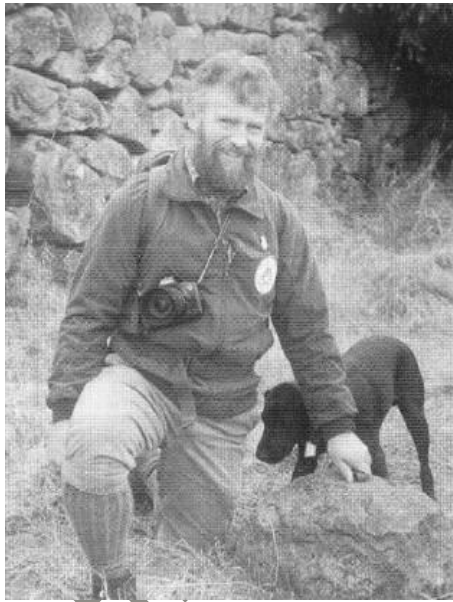
# Scotland

## Aberdeenshire

### Bennachie – Esson Stone

Weight unknown

*Editor – Peter did not have an article for this stone. What follows is pieced together from a series of emails and contact I had with local bailies.*



Fred Gordon with the only known picture of the Esson Stone.  
Notice the metal ring in Fred's left hand.

Bennachie is a range of hills in Aberdeenshire and was the home to a community of squatters. They lived a crofting life and performed skilled work such as dyking. A number of them were stone masons.

The family that continued to live on the former colony was as mentioned above, the Esson's. Some of them were noted for their physical strength. They possessed a large boulder with a ring on it, a lifting stone, which they used to practice for the heavy events in the local games. According to Smith it was as formidable as the Dinnie Stones.

Bennachie Colony House Excavation 1999 An Extended Report NQ Bogdan, Dr PZ Dransart, T Upson-Smith and J Trigg with contribution by J MacKay, p.15, 1999.

The photograph below is of George Esson, the last of the Bennachie squatters. He died in 1939. His family had their own lifting stone (from at least 1801) which was located outside the door of their croft at *Boghead of Tullos* on the SE slopes of the hill

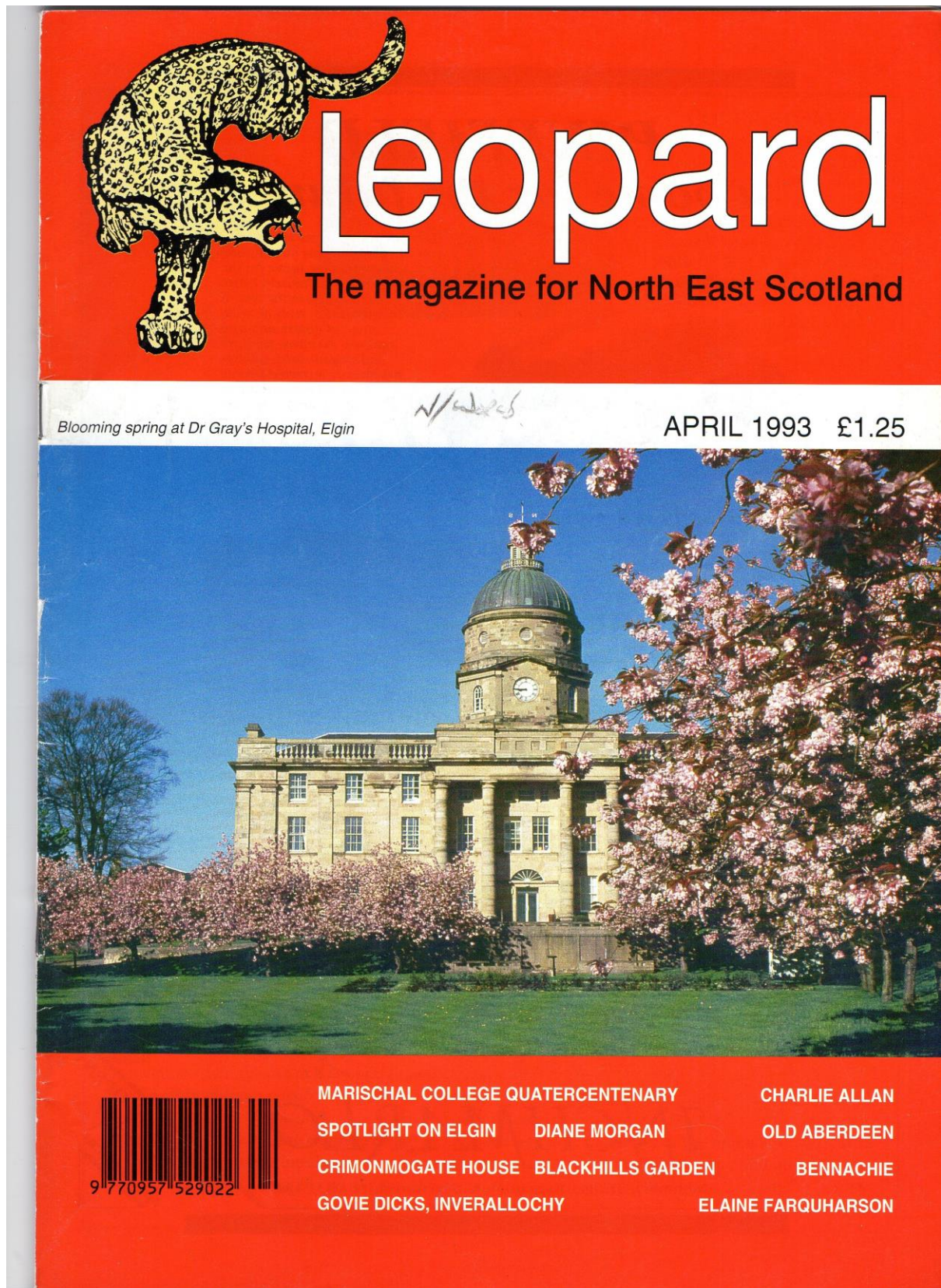


Left:. Esson Croft      Right: George Esson

The stone was known to be located at The Esson Croft until circa 1993. It is one of very few known traditional ringed-stones in Scotland.



This stone was also referenced in a now defunct local publication. Those from a highland games background may recognise the famous Charlie Allan on the cover.





A publication established in 1974 which takes its name from the leopards on Aberdeen's coat of arms.

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### COVER STORY

Front cover shows Dr Gray's Hospital in Elgin, with the spring blossom in full glory. The photograph is reproduced courtesy of Moray Tourist Board/Anne Burgess. This month Sydney Wood writes on Elgin's history, in part two of our series on the County Towns of north east Scotland. See p12.

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# The lost village on Bennachie

by Bob Smith

A "LOST" settlement is being rediscovered on Bennachie. Hill-walkers tramping along the maze of paths around the Mither Tap are getting their first glimpse of a crofting township that has been buried in the woods for more than half a century.

The man leading this probe into the past is Fred Gordon, senior ranger with the Gordon District Council. The hope is that opening up the crofts to the public will encourage visitors to use Esson's Car Park when they visit Bennachie, relieving pressure on the Rowantree Car Park on the north side of the hill.

This crofting area has always been known as "The Colony". In 1859 there were more than twelve homesteads there, with nearly sixty

people living on the crofts, but by 1939 only one croft remained. Today no one lives in the Colony, although cattle are still grazed on Esson's Croft, the holding that gives its name to Esson's Car Park. As Flora Garry wrote -  
*Eence the crafts o' the Esson Men  
Noo a broken wa';  
Eence spaed an' scythe an' reekin'  
lum  
Noo the green girss haps a'*

The story of the Colony carries echoes of the Highland Clearances, for the crofters were harried by both lairds and the law. Some were evicted from their homes, others forced to emigrate to America.

Up to 1859 Bennachie was a Free Forest or Commonty, often used by cattle drovers on their way south. In 1801, the first squatter

made his home on the banks of the Clachie Burn. His daughter married a mason called John Esson, who built a house with walls of stone and clay, "weel thackit wi' divots and hedder", as a local poet wrote, and as other squatters followed him 'The Colony' grew.

The Colonists lived their own lives, building a road east and west from the main road near Tullos. They were decent, hard-working people. Living on the borders of Chapel of Garioch and Oyne, they were ignored by the authorities in both parishes, so they became a law unto themselves - and they made their own whisky!

This happy state of affairs came to an end when nine neighbouring lairds on Bennachie decided to divide the hill between them, partly

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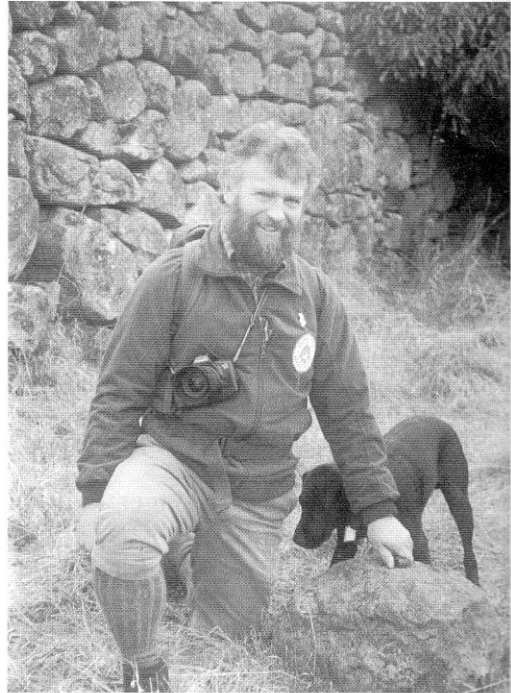
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Fred Gordon with the 'lifting stone' lying on Esson's croft.

## Hidden Bennachie

to control access to peat reserves and partly to let the land to shooting tenants. The dispute came to a head in March 1859, when the Court of Session decided in favour of the landowners. There was no opposition from the squatters at the time, with the result that they found themselves paying rent to the lairds.

When they did protest later, it was too late. Some of the crofters left. Among those who stayed were two brothers, Hugh and James Littlejohn, who refused to pay the rent. In 1878 they were evicted by a sheriff's officer, two policemen and several estate workers, who not only removed their furniture but carried out an old man as he lay in his bed and deposited him by the roadside. The houses were then demolished.

One by one the other crofters left, until only the Essons remained. John Esson agreed to pay £2.10/- a year to the laird - and was allowed to live in the house he had built with his own hands and to till the fields he himself had wrested from the hill. When two of the crofts became vacant he paid another £2 for their grazing.

The second John Esson died in 1891 and his youngest son, George, who had returned from America, took over the croft. A mason like his father and grandfather, he was also a dyker, and his skill in this lost craft can still be seen in the ruined walls of Esson's Croft. George Esson lived there for nearly fifty years, and when he died in May 1939, the Colony of Bennachie came to an end.

It was in 1939 that the Forestry Commission began major planting on the hill, so that the crofters' houses slowly disappeared from sight, apart from Esson's Croft, which is still privately owned. Now the Commission, working with the district council, are cutting down the trees where the crofters' homes were built.

I went exploring the Colony with Red Gordon. While some crofts have been cleared, others are still buried in the woods. We pushed our way through the trees to a line of small ruined cottages strung together and almost swallowed up by the undergrowth. Fred thought that these were where the Littlejohns had lived. They were thatchers to trade and kept adding



*Fred Gordon and a group of visitors at one of the crofts unveiled by the clearing away of trees.*

to their small dwellings until they had houses for two or three families of Littlejohns.

It was like fitting pieces of a jigsaw together. The Mitchells, who did woodcutting and dyking, were in one corner of the Colony, the Gardens, who were farthest west, were in another. Also among the squatters was Sandy Lindsay, the cadger, who drove fish from Peterhead and Aberdeen and no doubt handed out a 'fry' of dried dogfish to his neighbours when he came home. Then there was Susie Findlater, the spinster of Mrs Esson, who did what she called 'Factory Work' - knitting stockings.

Below the commonity on the Fetternear estate, near the Tullos road, Sandy Porter built a house with two wooden 'hingin' lums. Macdonald, a retired contractor, had the biggest patch in the Colony and kept two cows and two or three yearlings. Every squatter had pigs and a few ewes and lambs. Other families were the Christies, Findlaters and Beverleys.

The most striking croft of all is Esson's croft, Boghead of Tullos, which was not afforested. The Mither Tap looks down on the walls and dykes which the Essons "biggit" on their 6-acre croft. Lying among the ruins was a big boulder with a ring on it - a 'lifting stone' which the Essons used when practising for heavy events in the local games. It looked - and felt - as formidable as the Dinnie stones.

In a letter dated January 1938, George Esson wrote, "The old stone in the dyke below my place is still

there; the Cup and Saucer it was called. The Gouk Stone is still standing in its old place." More than half a century later, nothing has changed, except that a sign now points the way to the Gouk Stone. A gouk is either a cuckoo or a fool, but which sat on the Bennachie stone is anybody's guess.

There was a museum in one of the houses. The exhibits inside were known as Esson's Collection. This must have been George Esson's brother John, for George, who mentioned in his letter that his brother was dead, added, "His Collection of Antiquities was sold in Aberdeen about twenty years ago." It would be interesting to know what happened to them. Maybe 'Esson's Collection' could be gathered together again and housed in the planned Visitor's Centre.

In the summer of 1940, people passing Esson's croft would have seen another collection laid out on the grass in front of the house. Geordie Esson's roup was under way. There were pots and pans, a dresser, a gurnal, some dishes and gramophone records, a badger trap, a flackster spade, a hay rake, harness for a pony and cart, some books and an old spinning wheel. The spinning wheel was sold, but when it was moved and set down on the ground it fell to pieces and ended up as 'a heap of dust'.

In a way it was symbolic, for the roup marked the moment when nearly two centuries of Bennachie history also turned to dust. The last chapter had been written in the story of 'The Colony'.