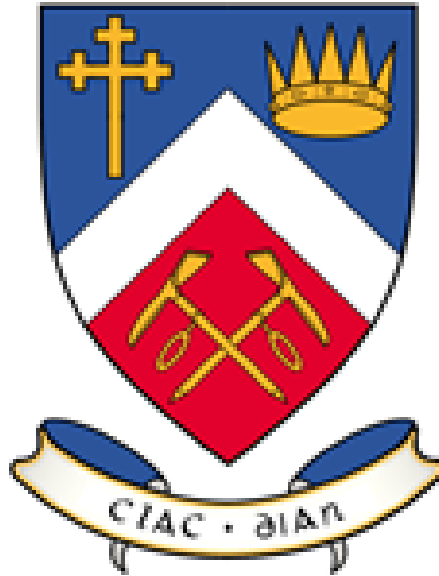


***The Cairngorm Club***



**Centennial Celebration of the  
Replacement of the Ben Macdui  
Mountain Indicator  
9 August 2025**



*Ben Macdui from Garbh Uisge Mor © Mike Duguid*

## **Programme Saturday 9 August 2025**

- 7:00 a.m. Coach leaves St. Margaret's School, Aberdeen\*
  - 9:30 a.m. Coach arrives Cairngorm Mountain car park
  - 9:45 a.m. Summit groups start ascent
  - 12:00 noon Installation group starts work
  - 12:30 p.m. Main group reaches summit
  - 1:00 p.m. Short commemorative ceremony
  - 1:15 p.m. Main group starts return
  - 2:00 p.m. Installation group finishes work
  - 5:00 p.m. Summit groups return to car park
  - 5:15 p.m. Coach departs CM car park
  - 6:00 p.m. Refreshment stop, Aviemore
  - 7:15 p.m. Coach resumes journey
  - 9:15 p.m. Coach arrives St. Margaret's School
- \* Pre-arranged pick-ups and drop-offs available.

The replacement indicator is being funded from various sources, some anonymous. One contribution has been made in honour of John Duff, a Life Member of the Club for 60 years, and a prime mover in the Braemar Mountain Rescue Team.

## The Ben Macdui Indicator: a Centennial Celebration

As related in the *Cairngorm Club Journal*, no. 64 (July 1926) (and readable online), the indicator on the summit of Ben Macdui (then spelled Macdhui) was unveiled on 1 August 1925. The idea had first been mooted in 1914, and a design approved in 1915, but was overtaken by the First World War and then the more popular claims of Lochnagar. It is dedicated to the memory of Alexander Copland, the first Club President (see below). Like the 1924 Lochnagar indicator, of which it is an exact replica in size and material, the Macdui one was designed and built “*under the skilled and enthusiastic leadership of James A. Parker*” (see also below).

On the day of unveiling, “[i]t was not too inviting a morning ... [m]ost of the high hills were cloud-capped, a sharp wind from the north-west was blowing, and there was a smell of moisture in the air which might eventually become much more than a smell”. But the day brightened up even though the wind did not lessen, and about 140 people gathered to hear the President, William Garden, describe the reasons for the event, and thank Mr Parker, after which Mrs Garden cut the ribbon, and made “a splendidly phrased little speech”.

An abbreviated “*Diary of the Building Operations*” is as follows:

*April 19, 1923.* J. A. Parker ascended from Derry Lodge, carrying a complete surveying outfit of plane-table, 5" compass, maps, binocular, etc., weighing in all about 14 lbs. Perfect weather conditions and a view in every direction of 50 to 60 miles. Continuous hard snow from 2,500 feet up and about 3 feet deep at the summit.

*June 21, 1925.* A party of 9 ascended by the Lui Beg route, to select the site, locate the nearest water supply, test stones as to their building suitability, and see if the Glen Derry path was good enough for pony transport. But a north wind, and driving sleet and rain, made careful work impossible.

*July 5, 1925.* H. Alexander and J. A. Parker visited from Inverdrue via Lurcher's Crag. The nearest water source was found in the headwaters of the Garbh Uisge Mor E.N.E. from the cairn. Weather perfect at the start, but ominous clouds banked up, and the 3-hour tramp back was done in drenching rain.

*July 18-19, 1925:* From a "backwoods camp" in Glen Derry, Parker and 4 others ascended via Coire Etchachan to check the pony route. It was found necessary to repair the ford across the Glas Allt Mor, to rebuild about fifty cairns, and to erect about a dozen or so new ones.

*July 20-22, 1925:* Two ponies took up materials, including the granite capstone in four sections, and weighing in total about six cwts (300 kg).

*July 25, 1925:* Masons and helpers left Braemar at 5 a.m. for the summit, and a second party, aided by Bob the Derry Lodge pony, carried up the "Doulton

slab." By 1pm the masons had placed the four granite sections, and "*adjourned for a substantial mid-day meal*" while Parker performed an "*abstruse orientation ceremony with a five-inch magnetic compass*", there being no distant view. He also placed inside a central cavity a small bottle containing a record of the building and the names of those present, not forgetting Bob. The masons then finished the pointing, the indicator was covered and securely roped up, and a short masonic ceremony was held. The final party left the summit after a delay caused by Bob disliking his loading, and returned to Derry Lodge and Braemar. Most but not all missed the worst thunderstorm in the district for many years, and the Derry Lodge campers were washed out of their tents.



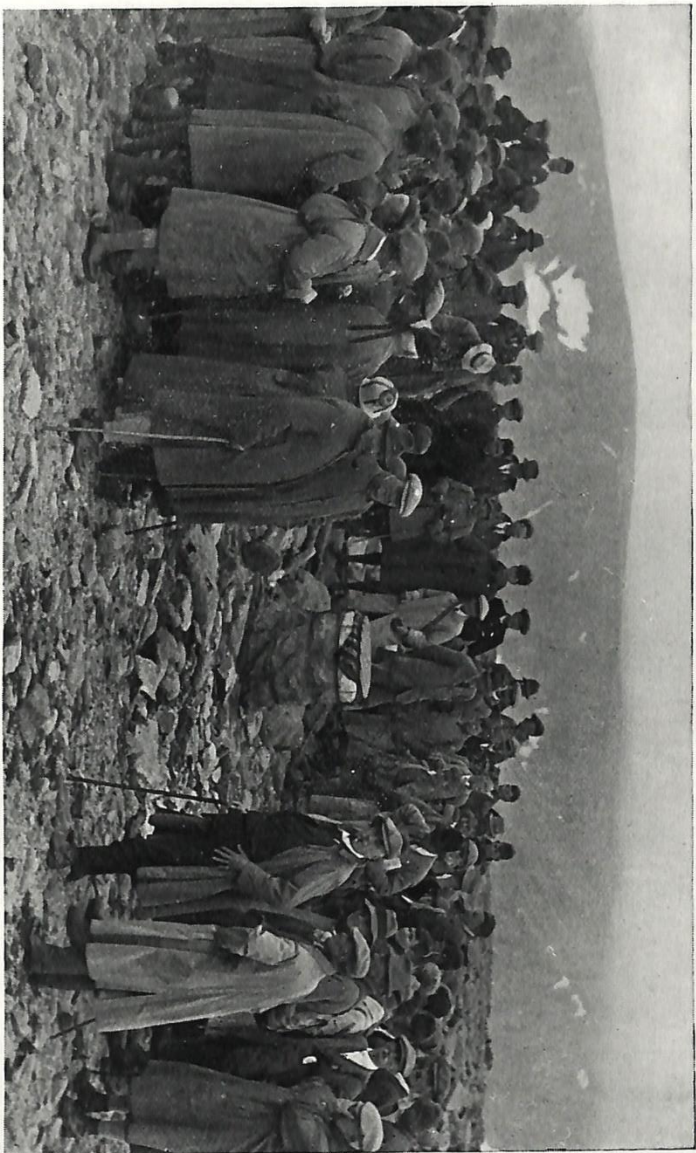
*H. Alexander.*

INSPECTING THE SITE OF THE INDICATOR, JULY 5, 1925.



*M. J. Robb.*

THE MASONS AT WORK ON THE SUMMIT, JULY 25, 1925.



UNVEILING THE BEN MACDHUI INDICATOR, AUGUST 1, 1925.

*M. J. Robb.*

**James A. Parker B.Sc., M.Inst.C.E. (1864-1846)**



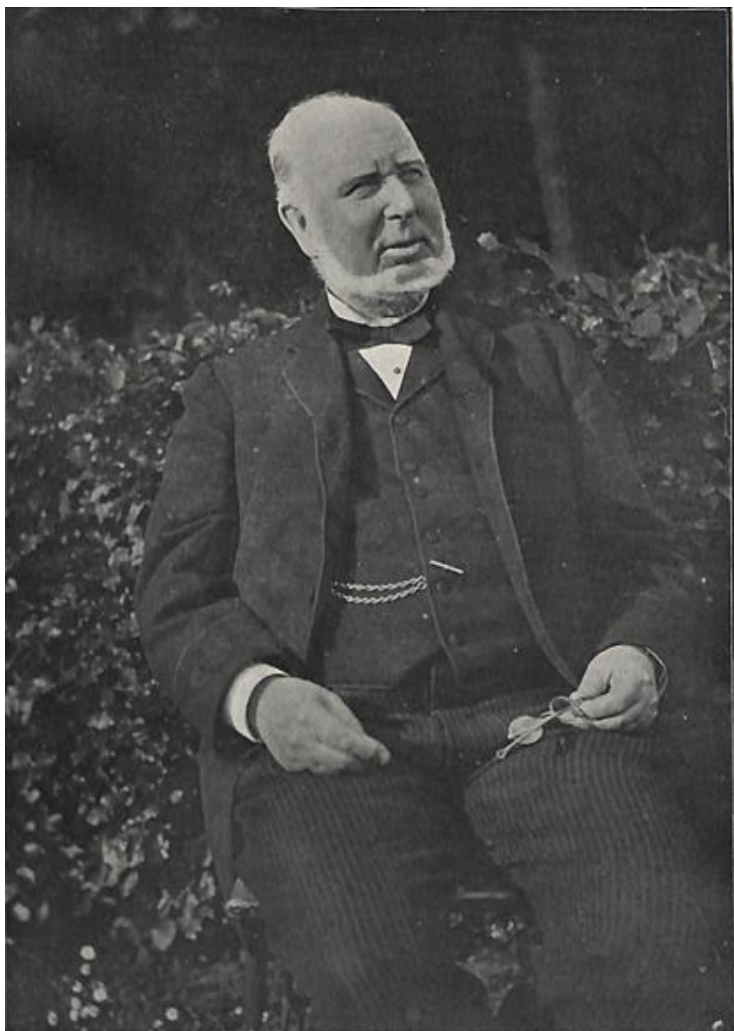
JAMES ALEXANDER PARKER  
1864-1946

James Parker was a civil engineer “*of quite exceptional accuracy*”, who designed and oversaw the 1912-16 reconstruction of Aberdeen Joint Station. He joined the Cairngorm Club in 1907, and was “*one of its most energetic and enthusiastic members*”, although “*he took some knowing*”. He served on its Committee, acted as Librarian, and

became its President in 1928-30 and its Honorary President in 1945. He was responsible for the Club footbridge over the Allt na Beinne More in Rothiemurchus (built in 1912 – and still there), and for the indicators on Lochnagar, Ben Macdhui and the Blue Hill near Aberdeen, the last replacing an earlier tower, and itself now replaced.

Parker was also a member of the Alpine Club and of the Scottish Mountaineering Club (1893-1946; elected President in 1924). He persuaded the Ordnance Survey to produce a coloured and contoured map of the Cairngorms in 1922, and wrote the first SMC *Guide to the Western Highlands* (1931). He had climbed all the Munros in Scotland, and Macgillycuddy's Reeks etc. in Ireland. He also made some fine ascents in the Alps and in the Pyrenees (with a highly informative article on the latter region, then under-explored, in the *Alpine Journal* of 1924), and visited the Japanese Alps and the Canadian Rockies on a world tour.

*Alexander Copland*



MR. ALEXANDER COPLAND,  
OUR FIRST CHAIRMAN.

Alexander Copland was one of six men who ascended Ben Macdui in 1887 to celebrate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee with fireworks. In the early morning of 23 June, they descended to the shores of Loch Avon, and there resolved to form a "Cairngorm Club". Copland became the Club's first Chairman (nowadays President) in 1889. Sometimes under the label "Dryas Octopetala" or "D.O.", he contributed a dozen or so articles to the Club Journal, as well as a four-section panorama as seen from the summit of Macdui, a task requiring many ascents of the mountain, not all of them rewarding.

In about 1850, before OS maps and the Deeside railway, Copland took his first pedestrian Highland tour: "*Strapped upon my shoulders my leather portmanteau—measuring outside 18 inches long, 8 inches wide and 6 inches deep—contained a night-shirt, an extra pair of stockings, a needle and thread and other necessary nick-nacks which sufficiently served my limited requirements.*" In 1879, he was responsible for the erection of an observation cairn on the Blue Hill outside Aberdeen. He is said to have named Sgòr an Lochain Uaine as "Angel's Peak", in contrast to the nearby Devil's Point.

He worked for 42 years, mostly as manager, at the Aberdeen Commercial Company (formed in 1837, and still in existence). He took an interest in many public affairs affecting Aberdeen and Deeside, e.g. salmon fishing, and fought for the Dee against the Avon as the main water source for the city.

## ***Ben Macdui: Some points of interest***

1. Ben Macdui is the second highest mountain in Scotland at 1309m or 4295 feet, and was once thought to be the highest. Its Gaelic name, *beinn mac dhuibh*, variously spelled as Macdhuì, Macduibh, Muich Dhui, etc., probably means “hill of the son of the black one”, i.e. a Duff, the family that ruled the area for many centuries, latterly as the Duke of Fife. Early mapmakers were vague about both location and name, but Roy’s military map of about 1750 has “Ben Machdhuì”, though with little detail, and drawn less impressively than “Carn Goaram”.
2. The mountain can claim Lochan Uaine, Loch Etchachan, Loch Avon and Lochan Buidhe. It also houses the Shelter Stone. The UKClimbing website records 118 routes (summer and winter) in Coire Sputan Dearg, 78 on Carn Etchachan, 91 on Creagan a' Choire Etchachan, and 85 on the Shelter Stone Crag.
3. Grid reference NJ 000000, in a fine location above Loch Etchachan, is the highest of the 22 Ordnance Survey “zero points” in Great Britain. The lowest is OB 000000 on a hard-to-reach beach in Yorkshire, while NB 000000 is on Taransay off Harris.
4. In 1925, the well-known climber (and Honorary Club President 1922-42) Prof. Norman Collie FRS related at a Club Dinner his frightening 1891 experience of the Big Grey Man, or *Am Fear Liath*

Mòr, who followed him unseen in the mist but was heard crunching the snow behind him.

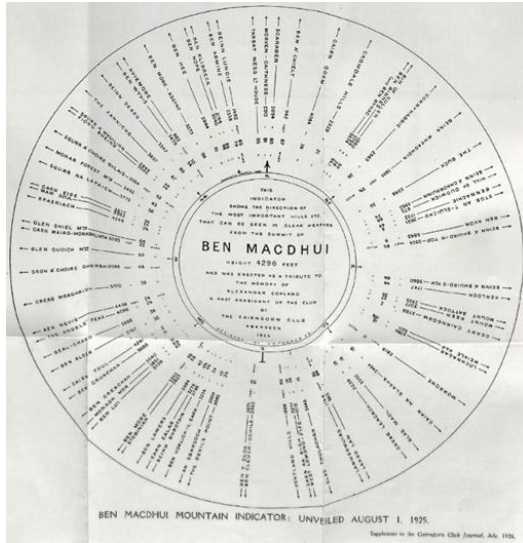
5. In August 1942, an Avro Anson training aircraft from RAF Kinloss crashed about 500m NW of the summit, at the head of the Allt a'Choire Mhòir, killing all five of the crew. A stone memorial now marks the spot. In March 2001, two USAF F-15 fighters from RAF Lakenheath crashed in the upper reaches of the Garbh Uisge Mor; both pilots were killed. An extensive search and clear-up operation followed, often in horrendous conditions, and little remains on the ground.
6. The mountain plateau has been well studied for its geomorphology and biology. A climatological station in Garbh Uisge Mor was run for 18 months in 1956-57 by Pat Baird (Club President 1958-59): see CCJ no. 91 (1957). Many bird species have been noted, some rare and others common, e.g. eagle, snowy owl, dunlin, ring ouzel, snow bunting, meadow pipit, wheatear, curlew, ptarmigan and dotterel.
7. In 1847, the Ordnance Survey built the "Sappers' Bothy" a little to the east of the summit, as a base for their trigonometrical work from the summit, where they erected a trig pillar; its walls still provide welcome shelter. Queen Victoria, aged forty, ascended Ben Macdui (on a pony) on 7 October 1859: she wrote: *"It had a sublime and solemn effect, so wild, so solitary – no one but ourselves and our little party there ... I had a little whisky and water, as the people declared pure*

*water would be too chill*". During the Second World War, commandos built several small stone shelters on the plateau.



*The Sapper's Hut, Ben Macdui, 2025 ©Mike Duguid*

8. The Feith Buidhe disaster occurred in November 1971. Six 15-year-old students and their two leaders were on a two-day expedition when the weather on the high plateau deteriorated. They headed for the Curran shelter near Lochan Buidhe (which a second group had reached), but became stranded in the open for two nights in a blizzard. Five youths and the leader's assistant died of exposure. Subsequently, after much argument, the Curran shelter was removed, along with others in the Cairngorms.



*The Original Design (Supp. to CCJ no. 64, 1926)*



*The Indicator, September 2023 (© Ken Thomson)*