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Tenant Deer Shoot at Rhachatan

Robin Callander

In February 2015, when I was chatting with David Duncan in the Turning Mill, he mentioned that there used to be an annual tenant deer shoot involving Finzean and Ballogie Estates in the 1950s and 1960s.[1]

These seem to have happened in February or March and to have covered approximately the same ground each year.[2] The Finzean line of guns and helpers walked up from the Bucket Mill through the Glen Ferrick Pinewood towards the watershed at Rhachatan and the Moss of Garbet. The Ballogie line came up from Murley farm through the woodlands beside the Garbet Burn.

The Finzean line was directed by Donald McLeod, the Finzean Estate Head Keeper, and usually around half a dozen or a dozen deer were killed each year. However, David, also known as Dyte,[3] became very animated as he described a year when they shot 36 deer. Dyte was c.85 years old when he told me the story, but his memory was very clear and I wished I could have recorded his vivid description.

Dyte said that the only other person still alive who had been on that shoot was Bill Christie, Balnahard Farm. I asked about Jim Christie, a retired Finzean Estate keeper, but Dyte said he had been too young to be there.

On the 7th March 2015, I asked Bill Christie (then 79) about that particular shoot. He immediately recalled the occasion and some of his own memories of it. Unsolicited, he said, like Dyte, that 36 deer had been culled. Neither Dyte or Bill could remember the year of this shoot, but both dated it to the late 1950s or early 1960s.

Dyte remembered that he had to borrow a shotgun for the shoot from a cousin in Strachan. It was an old hammer shotgun, and some of the tenants also had fairly old shotguns.

During the shoot, as it was nearing the watershed, Donald McLeod sent Dyte up one side of the deer to prevent them breaking out. He shot a calf and when that did not turn them, he shot the lead hind. The deer then turned and ran into the Finzean line, several falling as they were shot. The confused deer then fled from the line and the Ballogie guns killed some as well.

By then, at the climax of the shoot, the scene had become a melee with wounded deer and other frightened deer running this way and that, with shotguns going off around them and people shouting as they rushed to try to finish off wounded deer or bring down some of the others.

There must have been many wounded deer, given the use of shotguns against moving red deer. Bill recalled a wounded deer that came towards him. He shot it, but it seemed to shrug off the shot and keep coming. Bill managed to grab its antlers as it tried to get passed. He was able to pull the deer to the ground, but could barely hold on until someone came to help

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[1] The annual deer shoots seem to have ended in the 1960s. An annual tenant pheasant shoot survived in Finzean into the 21st century, the last taking place on 20th January 2020.

[2] Finzean Estate game books which survive from the First World War onwards, might have details of the timing of these shoots and the numbers of deer killed each year.

[3] Dyte is a Scots word for someone of small stature.

him finish off the deer. From Dyte and Bill's descriptions, it seems almost surprising that there were no people hurt either in the crossfire or by a wounded deer!

Dyte recalled that his tally for the shoot was six red deer and two roe. These and the rest of the 36 deer killed were hung up by their back legs from branches of the pine trees there and butchered by the well practised tenant farmers. The participants at the shoot then went home with the larger bounty than usual of half a carcase each. Dyte's father David and his uncle George took the skins to burn in the Turning Mill kiln room fire.

Nearly all the deer had been killed on the relatively flat land with a scattered distribution of pine trees, that lies immediately south of the Garbet Moss and east of the Finzean march dyke. Dyte referred to this area as the Garbet.[4] However, when the detailed 1801 map of Finzean Estate was rediscovered in the 1970s or 80s, it showed that the older name for the level area was Rhachatan and this name is now shown there on the 1:10,500 scale Ordnance Survey map.

Bill referred to the area where the deer were killed as Mackie's Howe. While the level ground might fit the definition of a howe, the 1801 map shows Mackie's Howe lower down the slope to the south. Bill also commented that there were few plantations at the time of the shoot and also fewer deer then, though he remembered problems at Ennochie and Little Ennochie from red deer coming round from Glen Aven.

In early April 2015 after my discussions with Dyte and Bill, I asked Peter Littlejohn if he had heard of the tenant deer shoots they had mentioned. Peter was probably in his early fifties in 2015, a very able deer stalker working on Ballogie Estate and the son of Eric Littlejohn, who had been the Head Keeper on Finzean Estate after Donald McLeod.

Peter had not heard of those shoots, but he did recall another time when Dyte had proved very effective with a shot gun against deer. In the 1980s, Ballogie Estate had organised a 'shoot out' of a plantation in the Inchbare / Mains of Potarch area, inviting some other local guns, including Dyte. About 18 deer were killed (12 red and 6 roe), with Dyte accounting for half a dozen of them.

Peter also mentioned that there had been deer drives on Ballogie Estate in the 1990s, when George Nicol was Head Keeper there. These also used other local guns such as Cameron Hay to boost numbers. A line of beaters with a few interspersed guns would drive an area towards a line of standing guns. The guns in the line were supposed to only shoot if a deer was breaking back, as there was more chance of a humane kill by the standing guns.

These drives usually resulted in 20-30 roe deer killed. It was on one of them, when Peter was a standing gun in a field on Murley Farm, that he shot the only fallow deer recorded in Birse parish to date.

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[4] Some still know the gate in the march dyke there as the Garbet gate.