

Part of Historic Environment Scotland



# CANMORE

NATIONAL RECORD OF THE HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT



## Archaeology InSites

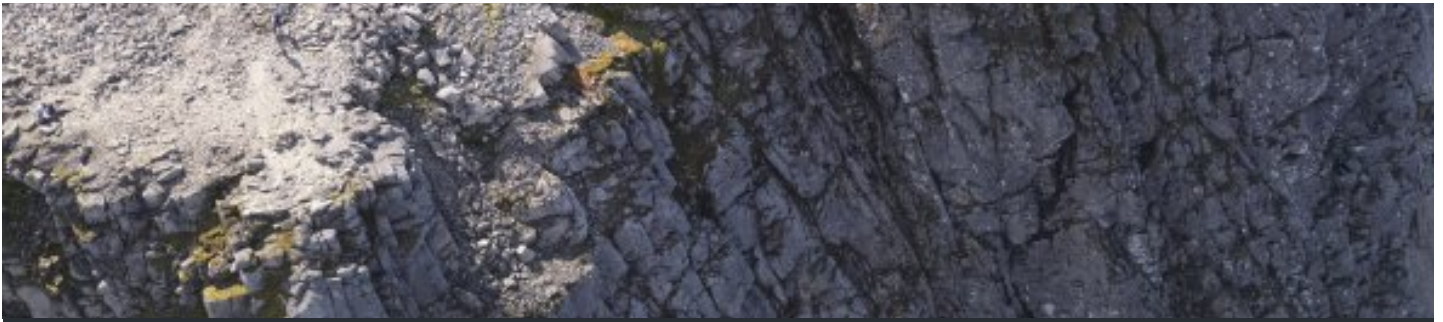


◀ [Return to Archaeology InSites](#)



### Ben Nevis Meteorological Observatory - Fort William, Highland





### **'rolling mists...and raging tempests'**

*The summit of Scotland's highest mountain may seem an unlikely location for a building project but the Ben Nevis Meteorological Observatory was completed in 1883. Observatory meteorologist William T Kilgour recorded that 'the rolling mists, and the raging tempests have their own peculiar interest'. This inhospitable weather and the mountain's lofty height made Ben Nevis the ideal location for a weather station.*

*For the next 20 years the weathermen of Ben Nevis took hourly measurements, their dedication producing one of the most comprehensive sets of weather data ever collected in the UK. A number of individuals, later famous for other accomplishments, served their time on the mountain. Amongst them were polar explorer William Speirs Bruce and the meteorologist Charles Thomson Rees Wilson whose observation of a Brocken spectre on the summit inspired his Nobel Prize winning invention of the cloud chamber.*





## Temperature and Temperance

*The construction of the observatory was funded largely by public subscription, as the original proposal by the Scottish Meteorological Society had failed to secure government funding. In the years before, without a permanent building, meteorologists had to ascend the summit to take weather readings, and newspaper coverage of Clement 'Inclement' Wragge's daily commute helped raise £4000. Plans were originally drawn up by the lighthouse engineer Thomas Stevenson, a man well versed in extreme building projects, but in the end, the design fell to the little-known architect NN Black with later additions by the firm of Sydney, Mitchell and Wilson. The building was constructed of granite and was Z-shaped on plan with walls thick enough to withstand the gales and snow.*

*Robert Traill Omond served as the first superintendent of the observatory and was joined by two assistants. The life of the meteorologists was challenging, and when extreme weather conditions confined them indoors, they made observations of their life on the summit. A log book entry from November 1883 records a 'house-fly today seen' while an entry three days later notes 'a weasel to-day came and looked in the window'. During their first winter, snow drifts were a frequent problem, forcing the men to tunnel through the snow to take their readings. To overcome this, a stone tower was built the following summer to enable access from above the level of the snow.*

*In 1885 an enterprising Fort William hotelier, Robert Whyte, built an annex onto the observatory and opened the Ben Nevis Observatory Hotel providing bed, breakfast and refreshments to weary climbers. When lack of funding brought meteorological observations to an end in 1904, the hotel expanded into the observatory, but eventually closed its doors for business in 1916. Abandoned, the buildings began their gradual decline and were further damaged by fire in 1932. Today only the tower and some stretches of walls remain, fading reminders of the work of the weathermen of Ben Nevis and the canny business acumen of a Fort William hotelier.*

*Now, some 134 years after Victorian-era crowd sourcing helped establish the weather station, the public are being asked to help transcribe 2 million weather observations from Ben Nevis in Operation Weather Rescue. To get involved, visit the project website at <https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/edh/weather-rescue>.*

*Further Reading:*

*William T Kilgour (1985) Twenty Years on Ben Nevis: being an account of the life, work and experiences of the observers on the highest meteorological station in the British Isles; Cambridge University Press*

*Marjory Roy (2004) The Weathermen of Ben Nevis; Royal Meteorological Society*

<http://ben-nevis.com/information/history/observatory/observatory.php>

Leanne McCafferty - Data Project Manager





<https://canmore.org.uk/site/105476/ben-nevis-observatory>  
<https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/edh/weather-rescue/>  
<http://her.hIGHLAND.gov.uk/SingleResult.aspx?uid=MHG21606>





# #ArchInSites

Please be aware that this site may be on private land. For more information regarding access please consult the [Scottish Outdoor Access Code](#)



[Accessibility Policy](#)  
[Buying Images](#)  
[Cookie Policy](#)  
[Legals](#)  
[Glossary](#)  
[Contact](#)  
[MyCanmore](#)  
[Sitemap](#)  
[User Guide](#)



SUPPORTING  
year of young people  
bliadhna na h-òigridh  
2018



HISTORIC  
ENVIRONMENT  
SCOTLAND

ÀRAINNEACHD  
EACHDRAIDHEIL  
ALBA

© Historic Environment Scotland. Scottish Charity No. SC045925