

# Rubble Trouble

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Imagine that you live in a beautiful house, with a beautiful garden and a beautiful view. You may also wish to imagine a beautiful partner but that's not necessary for the scenario. Suppose that one day you look out from your window and see that someone has dumped a large pile of rubble at the end of your garden, partially obscuring the beautiful view. What would you do? Would you accept that some people dump rubble and there's nothing to be done about it, or would you investigate and try to remove most of the rubble?

That is the situation I encounter at the top of most hills that I climb. As far as I know there was no co-ordinated project to dump piles of rubble on top of every hill to celebrate fifty years of hill lists or the anniversary of someone dying. I suspect that most of the rubble has stealthily accumulated over the years. Most of the piles probably started off as innocent little cairns and have mutated into monstrosities over the years. Some of them may have had some practical value at one time but if so they are redundant in the GPS and database era.

I know that not everyone sees things the same way. That's fine. I am not proposing any co-ordinated centenary clean-up campaign. All I am suggesting is that people pay attention and think for themselves. If anyone else wishes to adjust the appearance of some summits, I recommend adding a pair of gardening gloves to the rucksack. Hills do not belong to any particular point of view, so anyone who likes large piles of rubble can make them bigger if they wish. Some photographs may help people judge for themselves.

Compared to the disastrous assault on the hills by turbines and other industrial intrusions, piles of rubble are minor eyesores. However, most of them are removable, so any hillwalker has the option of doing something about them should they wish to do so. A few practical points for those so inclined.

A small minority of summits have neat well-built cairns, such as those on An Cruachan and Beinn a' Chuallaich. I would prefer these to be smaller but I usually leave such cairns alone. A tiny minority have a designated ancient monument on top, such as the Tinto monster. Not much can be done with those except perhaps a little tidying. Some reasonably well-constructed large cairns have become grassed over and merged with the original summit, such as those on Sgurr nan Conbhairean and Stob Coire an Albannaich. Not much can be done with those either. Several summits have shelter cairns. Most of these are unruly and unsightly but they may provide some respite from weather. They are too big to tackle double-handed even if I was inclined to do something about them.

The summits where gloves are most useful are those that have acquired loose piles of rubble of no aesthetic, historical or practical value. There are thousands of these. The main problem is disposal of the loose rocks. This is relatively easy to do on quiet steep-sided summits. It's only rock and roll but I like it. One of my most satisfying efforts was on top of 901m Beinn Odhar near Tyndrum. One person can do a lot in 70 minutes. Anyone who prefers it the way it was is welcome to go up there and reinstate the rubble.



Beinn Odhar summit



Beinn Odhar 70 minutes later. The tripod has not moved.

Dispersal is more difficult on flat summits. I could do nothing with the big blob on top of Beinn a' Bhuird because there was nowhere better to put it and I didn't have time to spare as I had another 28km to go to get back to Tomintoul. On some summits I have redistributed the larger rocks into one or two neater cairns nearby and scattered the small stuff far and wide. Such remodelling is not ideal but better than spreading the rubble around to create an even bigger mess.

I accept that most walkers like some sort of summit marker and I am not averse to all cairns. In fact I have built as many as I have removed or remodelled. Mine are small and neat. A dozen or so rocks is usually enough in my opinion, twenty at most. I try to remove the remaining loose rocks to make it harder for the rubble builders to add to the new cairn. However, there are several summits where I have not had time to make much impression. These are some of my least favourite rubbish dumps from the past three years:

**Beinn a' Chlachair:** a massive triple-tiered carbuncle

**Mullach nan Coirean:** quite evenly shaped and not the ugliest, but ten times too big

**Corryhabbie Hill:** a sprawling building site mess with one main dump and several satellite piles

**Beinn Bhreac, Beinn Bharrain:** offensive obliteration of smooth boulders by loose rubble

**Meall Garbh,** near Glen Lyon: a wigwam of heavy metal so awful that it was rejected as an entrant for the Turner prize.

I have a particularly vigorous dislike of rubble that has been dumped on top of a natural outcrop or boulder or next to a trig pillar. Such obvious summits have no need for a cairn, never mind rubble. Worst of all are the piles studded with man-made objects, each one embedded or buried by someone's hands: iron poles, wooden posts, fence wire, old tin cans, broken bottles, shotgun pellets, crisp packets, the occasional paint pot etc. The Meall Garbh rubbish tip is so bad it makes the underlying rubble look almost nice.

Rubble cairns often conceal rubbish that has nowhere to hide if the covering rocks are removed. I sometimes carry a spare plastic bag to take away the smaller man-made debris. I even carried down a heavy iron post from Meall Garbh as a symbolic clean-up act, but that summit needs tools and a take-away vehicle to reinstate it toward respectability. Gloves and plastic bags won't do the job there, but most rubbed summits could be remodelled by any suitably motivated walker. The option to do so is in our gloved hands.

Sometimes there is a laminated photograph or memorial note within the rubble. I replace these under a rock if they are still legible. On Sgurr na h-Ulaidh (formerly Sgor na h-Ulaidh) I found a small glass bottle containing a note left by two people from Glasgow, both called John Tochel, to commemorate their 50th Munro and Scotland losing 2-0 to England the previous day ("same old story, still can't score"). Neatly typed and dated 14 November 1999, it must have been pre-planned unless they carried up a typewriter. I did not think this note was important enough to leave behind so it migrated to my lounge table for sixteen months until I found a use for it by mentioning it here. Perhaps the archivist might accept it as an example of something.

I have not always been able to finish the job I started. For example, I had to leave Beinn Challuim (formerly Ben Challum) with several large loose rocks that I did not have time to tidy away. However, I was able to get a second bite because I had left my camera in its case at the top. I went back early the next day in poor weather to retrieve the camera and do some more rubble removal. That camera case has survived six nights out on three different summits, protecting two different cameras. Perhaps I should pay more attention to possessions and less to summit surgery. I don't bother going back up for hats or gloves.

I admit that I started paying close attention to summit constructions and obliterations after I started surveying hills. This practical motivation persists, but I have now acquired a disturbingly powerful aesthetic motivation to try to improve the landscape that I love. These days I often tackle rubble even when it is not on the highest point, e.g. on Beinn Challuim South Top, which has a huge boulder overtopping the cairn. If I am going to wait around anyway for data collection I might as well make myself useful. It can be hard work, with dust blowing into eyes, sore back, sore toes and frequent glove replacement all part of the process. Sometimes I resent having to do the work even though no-one is making me do it. It would be lovely one day to arrive at a summit and find that someone had already done the job. On those rare occasions when the weather is favourable, I could sit down, relax, eat my lunch, look at the view and watch the pigs fly by.





**Meall Garbh**



**Meall Garbh after preliminary surgery**



**Sgurr na h-Ulaidh after removal of rubble**



**Beinn Bhreac, Arran**



**Beinn Challuim on 2 April 2017**



**Beinn Challuim after the first day's operation**



**Beinn Challuim South Top**



**Beinn Challuim South Top 40 minutes later**