

Planning chaos and HIE's custodianship of Cairngorm

Description

Ptarmigan site set to be redeveloped

New-look mountain peak plan

By GAVIN MUSGROVE

THERE are exciting plans afoot for Cairngorm Mountain with a revised proposal for Britain's highest building and the possible return of a familiar old lady in the pipeline.

Cairngorm Mountain Ltd is set to reveal a detailed blueprint next week for the redevelopment of the Ptarmigan building near the top of the mountain.

The operators have said that this will form a significant part of the long-term strategy for the resort.

It comes as more details have emerged about £1.4 million plans by the Scottish Ski Club to install a new White Lady lift to serve Cairngorm's most famous ski slope.

The club hopes that the addition will improve access to their nearby base - the Scottish Ski Club Hut - as well as helping to "re-energise" ski training on the hill and benefitting the resort and wider strath economy.



IMPROVEMENTS AFOOT: To the Ptarmigan building.

A drop-in session on the Ptarmigan proposals is being held next Thursday (January 18) from 12 noon to 5pm at the Cairngorm Hotel in Aviemore and there will be a team on-site to answer any questions.

The public consultation takes place ahead of the submission of a detailed planning application to revise the building which is the top station for the Cairngorm funicular.

Proposed is the addition of a rooftop walkway that will maximise the amazing vistas

all year round and this will be complemented by a boardwalk extension to the existing viewing terrace.

Cairngorm Mountain has said the design proposals will "work with the existing form of the building whilst sensitively modernising the appearance".

The proposals are not limited to the exterior of the Ptarmigan as the company plans to "completely overhaul the interior space to dramatically enhance the overall visitor experience".

Adam Gough, Cairngorm



'SENSE OF ARRIVAL': Adam Gough on an earlier visit to Cairngorm Mountain.

Mountain Ltd spokesman, said: "We are really looking forward to sharing our plans for the Ptarmigan building at Cairngorm Mountain.

"The building is unique both in its setting and in its functions as a funicular station, ski summit building, restaurant, exhibition centre and shop.

"The Ptarmigan is the hub of the resort all year round, welcoming skiers and snowboarders in the winter and visitors from all over the world the rest of the year to enjoy a trip on Scotland's only funicular railway and the spectacular scenery of Cairngorm National Park.

"The proposals are to sensitively extend the building which will address congestion and capacity issues whilst also improving the underwhelming sense of arrival and confusing way-

finding." He added: "The overall flow of the building will be reconfigured to create a bigger sense of impact and welcome for visitors as well as making it easier to navigate.

"The exhibition will be revamped to create a more modern and adaptive experience which is what visitors expect from one of Scotland's top ten visitor attractions."

The Strathly revealed in May last year that a masterplan drawn-up for Cairngorm Mountain could create 62 full time jobs and increase the number of summer visitors by more than 100,000 people.

It included a wrap-around viewing platform with a connecting proposed 30 to 40 metre funicular tunnel boardwalk added to the Ptarmigan building

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Last week, nine months after Highlands and Island Enterprise launched its so called masterplan for Cairngorm ([see here](#)), the Strathy announced the date of the pre-planning consultation event on the proposals to revamp the Ptarmigan near the summit of the hill. At the same time it also broke the news that the Scottish Ski Club, which has a hut at Cairngorm, was proposing to spend £1.4m on a new lift at the White Lady. This post will consider how both proposals fit with the need for a wider plan for Cairngorm and what is really going on there behind the scenes.

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LOCAL NEWS

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New plans ready for Cairngorm

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as well as an artificial ski slope.

The latter was dropped in favour of a Snowfactory unit which is now in operation at the resort on a two-month trial.

Janette Jansson, Cairngorm Mountain general manager, said: "The Snowfactory has been a very worthwhile trial so far, just a few weeks into the trial we've had positive feedback from snow sports fans and other mountain operators who have visited to see the factory in operation.

"The trial will continue and so far we are impressed with the potential for snowmaking.

"The addition of the Snowfactory has enabled us to continue with a beginners lessons area remaining in great condition outside the Day Lodge."

Other parts of the masterplan included introducing a year-round snow school operation and the phased development of 15.3 kilometres of bike trails within the ski field although the status of this part of the plan is unknown.

Proposals for a big money Day Lodge - which many likened to the lair of a James Bond villain - funded in part using a £4 million loan from Cairngorm Estate owners Highlands and Islands Enterprise were axed in June 2016.

Great tracks being made on return of old favourite

By GAVIN MUSGROVE

SCOTLAND'S most famous ski run could soon be served by its own dedicated uplift again after an absence of more than a decade.

It is understood that the Scottish Ski Club is making good progress with plans to install a lift to serve the White Lady.

The old T-bar was last open to snowsports enthusiasts in April 2006.

It suffered a catastrophic failure during February 2007 when being prepared for use - when the top bullwheel landed by the children's sledge park outside the Ptarmigan building.

But now there are hopes that a new lift - most likely to be a T-bar - can be installed with hopes that funding will come from members of the ski club, potential sponsors and grants.

It is estimated that a state of the art lift could cost in the region of £1.4 million.

A spokesman for the Scottish Ski Club told the Strathy yesterday: "The club - in collaboration with Natural Retreats and Highlands and Islands Enterprise is assisting the feasibility of re-establishing a tow on the White Lady. This would be beneficial by improving access to the Scottish Ski Club Hut, adding to the overall uplift at Cairngorm Mountain and by re-energising the mountain particularly for dedicated racers and trainees.

"We hope that this will also in turn bring more people to the resort and to the wider Spey Valley.

"Everyone shares the same objectives to improve the experience at Cairngorm Mountain and we are being proactive as we can in making this happen."

The Scottish Ski Club's base is at the bottom of the White Lady and this has been the lifeblood of the club. They hope that installing a new lift will help to reinvigorate the Scottish ski racing scene.

An opening date for the 2019 season has been proposed but this would be subject to planning and funding running smoothly.

A button style lift was also considered but this form of uplift was deemed by consultants to be less reliable and requiring more maintenance in this case.

Janette Jansson from Cairngorm Mountain Ltd said: "We understand that the Scottish Ski Club is keen to reinstate the White Lady lift access at Cairngorm Mountain and that discussions about how to realise this ambition are ongoing."

A spokesman for the Aviemore and Glenmore Community Trust - which hopes to take community control of the estate and its resort - also welcomed: "Replacement of the White Lady Tow would provide much needed capacity on Cairngorm Mountain, so the trust is very happy to support the Scottish Ski Club with its plans.



GRAND OLD DAME: The White Lady run is on the left side of the photograph.

"We do, however, feel that more fundamental change is essential to revive the business, and as such are continuing to push ahead with our vision for a sustainable future, increasing visitors, creating more quality employment and reducing dependency on the taxpayer."

Cairngorm Mountain has enjoyed a better start to the New Year than in most recent years with the arrival of snow although the sport on offer is still restricted.

A resort spokeswoman said: Over

the last week 2946 skiers and 3000 snow machine guests have visited Cairngorm Mountain.

"Current snow conditions are good with the next few days showing minus degrees light winds and showers."

■ For anyone who would like to see plans for the revised Ptarmigan building but is unable to attend the public consultation next Thursday, they can email enquiries@naturalretreats.com for more information.

The Ptarmigan proposals

There were two main elements to the Cairngorm masterplan that wasn't: a dry ski slope by the carpark, which now appears to have been ditched (a planning application was submitted before being quickly withdrawn last year), and the Ptarmigan. From the Strathy article it appears that the proposals have not changed greatly in the last nine months since the concept was revealed, with the extension to the building and revamped exhibition both included in the original plans, although the plan for a walkway out over the funicular appears to have been altered slightly. It now apparently goes around or over the roof:



East Elevation

Extract from 365 Degree Architecture's previous plans released under Freedom of Information – if th

The basic idea however remains the same, try and get more people to use the funicular by creating a visitor attraction at the top of it. The idea is totally flawed. In landscape terms National Parks should not be permitting new developments near the summits of mountains and in visitor experience terms, to use that awful phrase, the plan is complete stupidity. The Ptarmigan is shrouded in cloud for much of the time and subject to high winds, so the claim that the rooftop walkway will “*maximise the amazing vistas all year round*” is complete tosh. HIE appears to be preparing to lend another £4m of public monies to create yet another white elephant at Cairngorm.

What's worse, HIE appears to be pressing ahead with this proposal before it – or rather Natural Retreats – has produced an overall plan for Cairngorm, as it committed to do under the Cairngorm and Glenmore Strategy which was approved in 2016 and before it has completed its review of ski infrastructure at Cairngorm. This is important because in terms of use of public money, HIE should have fully assessed the cost-benefits of expanding the Ptarmigan compared to other options BEFORE

endorsing any planning application.

The White Lady ski lift proposal



The former White Lady lift before the removal of the old lift base with the Scottish Ski Club Hut above 2017.

HIE's inability to produce any sort of coherent plan for Cairngorm is nicely shown up by the proposal from the Scottish Ski Club to reinstate the White Lady lift, probably in the form of a state of the art t-bar which apparently would cost £1.4m and which they hope to fund. This is most interesting, not least because it suggests that new lifts could be installed in Coire na Ciste for less than the £4m HIE are proposing to lend to Cairngorm Mountain in order to develop the Ptarmigan. So, would it not be better to use public monies to support the proposals from the Ciste Group and Aviemore and Glenmore Community Trust to redevelop the Ciste rather than waste it on the Ptarmigan? Add those proposals

to the White Lady lift and the use of snow making machines and one might, once again, have skiing worthy of the name at Cairngorm.

While the White Lady Lift proposal appears welcome, the evidence suggests that behind the scenes HIE has yet again not been honest about what they are up to while the Scottish Ski Club has allowed themselves to get caught up in HIE and Cairngorm Mountain shenanigans. The Strathy story quotes the Scottish Ski Club as saying they have been in collaboration with HIE and Natural Retreats to look at the feasibility of the proposal. This must have taken time and it seems reasonable to conclude therefore that HIE must have known about this when they tendered for their review of ski infrastructure at the end of November ([see here](#)). That tender included in its [scope](#) the development potential of Coire na Ciste but NOTHING about the development potential of Coire Cas where the White Lady is situated. So has HIE helped commission another study, which they have kept secret, about the ski potential in Coire Cas or have they just missed an opportunity to get independent evidence on the Scottish Ski Club proposals which could be used to justify some public financial investment? Either way the lack of join up by HIE between the various initiatives at Cairngorm is quite staggering and yet more evidence of the need of a proper overall plan.

While I can understand that the Scottish Ski Club needed to get HIE, as the owners, and NR as the operators, on board, it appears they may have allowed themselves to get too close. Its much easier to understand now why the SSC did not make an issue when Cairngorm Mountain staff entered the Ski Club Hut and removed the Winter Highland webcam without permission ([see here](#)). If they had done so, Natural Retreats might have refused to co-operate with their proposal. Easier too to understand why Cairngorm Mountain thought they could get away with this highhanded action. It would be in interests of all who care about Cairngorm if SSC were to talk now to the Ciste Group and Aviemore and Glenmore Community Trust and ensure all their plans fit as one cannot see either HIE or Natural Retreats doing this.

So is Natural Retreats still Natural Retreats and if not who is running Cairngorm Mountain?

While the Scottish Ski Club reported they had been talking to Natural Retreats, I suspect this is because the staff they spoke to never told them what was going on – or perhaps even they didn't know. I think it is significant in this respect that the Ptarmigan proposal is being push in the name of Cairngorm Mountain with not a mention of Natural Retreats. The original proposals for the

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MOUNTAIN

 **Threesix**
Architect

The branding strapline from an earlier version of the proposals for the Ptarmigan Ptarmigan were branded on every page as coming from Natural Retreats. I suspect that at the

consultation event there will be not a mention of Natural Retreats, which we know is no longer a so-called international operation, and the UK part of which appears to have transferred to the UK Great Travel Company on 1st November ([see here](#)) and ([here](#)). I have since found out – as a result of a comment on the blog that the Great Travel Company Ltd had registered a person with Significant Control – that there are in fact two Great Travel Companies, both operated by former directors of Natural Retreats:

THE UK GREAT TRAVEL COMPANY LIMITED

Company number **07232597**

Overview Filing history **People**

Officers **Persons with significant control**

0 active persons with significant control / 1 active statement

Statement **ACTIVE**

The company knows or has reasonable cause to believe that there is a registrable person in relation to the company but it has not identified the registrable person

Notified on
22 April 2017

THE GREAT TRAVEL COMPANY LIMITED

Company number **11026063**

Follow this company File for this company

Overview Filing history **People**

Officers **Persons with significant control**

1 active person with significant control / 0 active statements

Mr Matthew Dawson Spence **ACTIVE**

Correspondence address
1st Floor Whitecroft House, 51 Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, United Kingdom, SK9 5BQ

Notified on
23 October 2017

Date of birth
September 1969

Nationality
British

Nature of control
Ownership of shares – 75% or more

Country of residence
United Kingdom

The UK Great Travel Company is the new name for the Natural Retreats UK and has three Directors, Ewan Kearney, Anthony Wild and Matthew Spence and, while it has still failed to register who has significant control, we know from past accounts that it used, at any rate, to be controlled by David Michael Gorton, the same man who controls Natural Assets Investment Ltd, the owner of Cairngorm Mountain.

The Great Travel Company was incorporated – i.e created as a new company – at the end of October 2017 with Matthew Spence as sole Director and owning over 75% of the shares.

So what is happening? The former company Natural Retreats UK, before it became the UK Great Travel Company, appeared to service all the companies owned by Natural Assets Investment Ltd . As remarked in my last post, there is still a Natural Retreats UK website but all mention of Cairngorm Mountain has been removed from it and a new marketing manager is/has been appointed based at Cairngorm. It appears therefore the companies are being separated. The creation of the Great Travel Company suggests that Cairngorm Mountain is not the only part of the Natural Retreats business which is being separated off. But why then create a company with such a similar sounding name and why is Matthew Spence a director of both? A recipe for confusion unless something else is going on.

Before the latest changes, I has written to HIE expressing concern about what is going on behind the scenes and who actually now manages and controls Cairngorm Mountain Ltd. I had a very polite and clear response from their Chief Executive, Charlotte Wright, just before Xmas:

1 *Information on Companies House website*

Companies House data should be kept up to date, and I understand you raising this as a concern. However, as I said before, HIE believes that this is a matter for the company. I would assure you that we do not rely solely on Companies House information for our monitoring activities, which are regular and robust.

What this told me was that even if HIE do know who owns the UK Great Travel Company, they don't see it as being in the public interest that this information is made public. Given that Scottish Limited Partnerships, money laundering and tax evasion are in the news on a daily basis at present, one would have hoped that all public agencies in Scotland were ensuring the organisations they contract with meet these basic legal obligations. All it would take is one call from them saying "publish the correct information or there will be contractual consequences" and the UK Great Travel Company would oblige. That they have not done so suggests other things are going on.

Within this context it appears foolhardy in the extreme to be pushing ahead with an ill conceived scheme which will hand yet more public money to the shadowy companies that own and manage Cairngorm and whom we know were, until recently at least, controlled by a hedge fund manager.

Category

- 1. Cairngorms

Tags

- 1. CNPA
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Author

nickkempe