

Benrinnes Distillery

Aberlour, Banffshire

Benrinnes Distillery was built at a height of almost 700 feet (213 metres) above sea level, on the northern shoulder of Ben Rinnes. The mountain rises to a summit of 2,755 feet (840 metres), commands a view of nine counties, and is a landmark to the fishing fleet of the Moray Firth.

The large intrusion of "Ben Rinnes granite", injected in a molten state among and through existing rocks in geological times, is a fact of great importance to the Speyside distilling industry. Eleven distilleries obtain the finest of pure hill water from somewhere within the boundaries of this intrusion. Benrinnes Distillery is ideally located to exploit this natural advantage. Its water, as Alfred Barnard wrote in *The Whisky Distilleries of the United Kingdom*, 1887, "rises from springs on the summit of the mountain and can be seen on a clear

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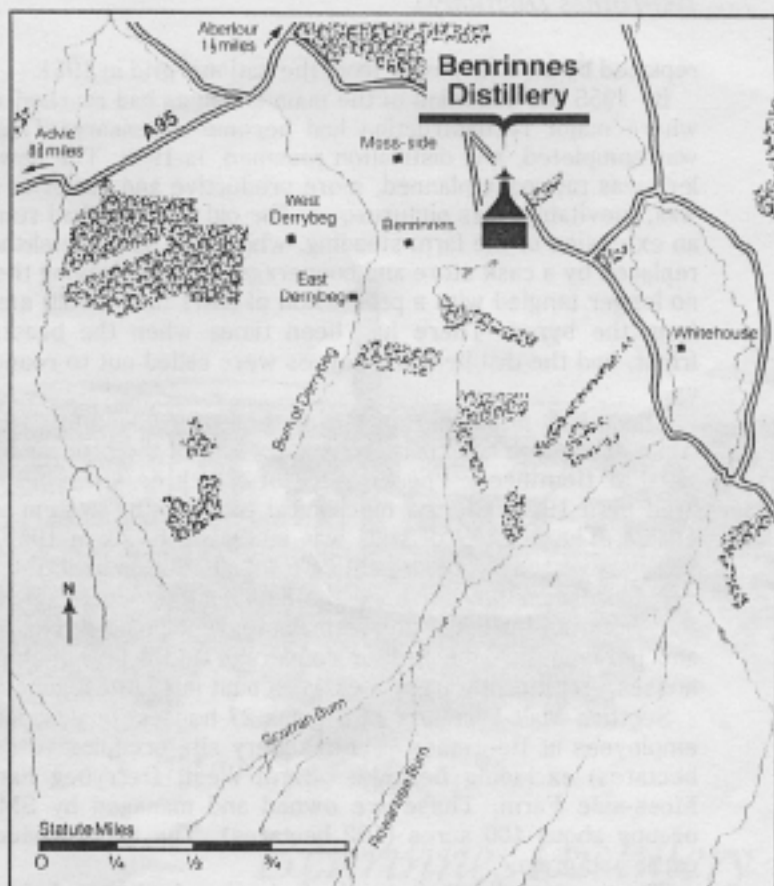
day some miles distant, sparking over the prominent rocks on its downward course, passing over mossy banks and gravel, which perfectly filters it". Both process and cooling water are drawn from the Scurran and Rowantree burns.

The earliest known reference to Benrinnes dates from 1826, when Peter McKenzie was recorded as the licensed distiller. According to local tradition, the distillery was located near Whitehouse Farm until it was swept away in the great flood of 1829. Barnard was told that "the works" had been built on the present site in 1835, "and from that day to the present have been continually altered and enlarged". As illustrated on the letterhead of John Innes, the distiller in 1842, they consisted of a farm steading with some of its outbuildings adapted for distilling purposes. The next known occupier, William Smith, testified before a bankruptcy court in 1864 that he had been tenant or sub-tenant for nineteen years of the farm of Lower Lyne of Ruthrie, where the distillery was located, and that he owned the distilling vessels, but not the buildings. Later that year, when Smith changed his place of residence to Banff Gaol, David Edward, farmer, of Gauldwell, took over the lease.

Alexander Edward succeeded his father as owner of Benrinnes, built Craigellachie and Aultmore Distilleries, and promoted various companies, including the Benrinnes-Glenlivet Distillery Co. Ltd. in 1897. This company acquired the lands, buildings, water rights, plant, vessels and the goodwill of the business for £78,930. Edward himself was chairman and managing director. His co-directors comprised two distillers, Innes Cameron of Linkwood, Elgin, and Duncan MacCallum of Glen Nevis, Campbeltown, with the local bank agent and F.W. Brickmann of Leith, a whisky broker.

The *Northern Scot* published a brief description of Benrinnes in 1899. The stillhouse and other main buildings had been rebuilt and remodelled after "a rather destructive fire" about three years earlier. An improved method of mashing, and the installation of three large stills, had increased capacity. There was a new plant for treating effluent; electric light had replaced paraffin lamps; and eight modern warehouses had been built, with a ninth in course of erection. The drawback of the distillery's upland situation was the distance from a railhead: all supplies came by horse and cart up the hill from Aberlour Station, three miles away. There were countervailing factors in its supplies of pure water, peat, barley and air, all of which "contributed to the high character which Benrinnes has attained in the market, and the high price it can always command".

The "heavy failure", later in 1899, of F.W. & O. Brickmann,



sole agents for the make, inflicted serious damage on the new company. A recession in the whisky industry followed. Ten years later, the directors had to write down the capital from £80,096 to £39,800.

John Dewar & Sons Ltd. of Perth obtained control of the company in 1922. Ownership of Benrinnes was transferred in 1930 to Scottish Malt Distillers Ltd., five years after Dewar's (and other major whisky blenders) had merged their business with that of The Distillers Company Limited.

Benrinnes closed in the winter of 1932-33, and again in 1943, owing to wartime restrictions on the supply of barley to distillers. It changed out of recognition within a few years of restarting production in 1945. At that time lighting was provided by a generator worked by a petrol engine or, when there was enough water, by a water-wheel. A Rushton-Hornsby steam engine drove the elevators that loaded malt into the kiln and worked the mashing machine. Another engine operated the barley elevators. All were

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replaced by electric power from the national grid in 1951.

By 1955 the condition of the main buildings had reached a stage where major reconstruction had become necessary. This work was completed, and distillation resumed, in 1956. The new distillery was rationally planned, more productive and easier to run. It was, inevitably, less picturesque. The old distillery had started as an extension of the farm steading, which was now demolished and replaced by a cask store and cooperage. Visitors leaving the office no longer tangled with a procession of cows (and a bull) emerging from the byres. There had been times when the beasts took fright, and the distillery employees were called out to round them up.

There was no change in the method of production. A form of triple distillation is a characteristic feature of the process as practised at Benrinnes. The furnaces of the three stills were hand-fired until 1963, when a mechanical coal-stoking system was installed. The number of stills was increased to six in 1966. They were converted to steam-heating from an oil-fired boiler in 1970.

A Saladin malting replaced the floor maltings in 1965. None of the Victorian buildings now remains except possibly No. 2 store and perhaps also the former cooperage and a few of the warehouses. Additional warehouses were built in 1978-81.

Scottish Malt Distillers Ltd. owns 27 houses for occupation by employees at Benrinnes. The distillery site occupies 10 acres (4 hectares) excluding Benrinnes Farm West, Derrybeg Farm and Moss-side Farm. These are owned and managed by SMD and occupy about 400 acres (162 hectares). The main products are cattle and grain.

The licensed distillers are A. & A. Crawford Ltd., Leith, blenders of Crawford's Three Star and Five Star Scotch whiskies.

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