

CLACHAN THOGALAICH GLEANN RUAIDH
(LIFTING STONES OF GLEN ROY)



[The Clachan Thogalaich Gleann Ruaidh](#)

At first glance, these inconspicuous stones may not seem to possess the granite symmetry of the Inver Stone nor indeed the druidical quality of the Glen Lyon stone, however the location and indeed the history of these stones are truly remarkable.

Glen Roy is one of Scotland's more famous remote Glens in respect that its geology proved the grounding for the proof of a Northern Hemisphere Ice age some 10,000 years ago due to its conspicuous "parallel roads". These roads are in fact the shore markings of a glacial lake which formed behind a glacier of immense size and the markings are visited almost continually by Geologists continuing the study.

To the Highlander of many years ago these road markings were simply the roads used by Fingal when hunting for deer on horseback.

The Glen Roy stones are unique in that their location in Lochaber on the west coast mainland make them the first significant historical stones found in this area. Their uniqueness is also underpinned by the fact that Glen Roy was until the 1970's, the last remaining mainland Glen where Gaelic was spoken by all its inhabitants. Sadly only a few remain and it is from this source that the stone was found. The knowledge of the stones is known only to the remnants of this community which has been passed down through generations by word of mouth. There is no written record which is perhaps the norm for those stones still to be found.

Whilst researching the possibility of a traditional lifting stone on the Island of Rhum, I was contacted by Ewan MacDonald of Fort William. Ewan is a MacDonald of Cranachan (not the sweet Highland delicacy but a location in the Glen) and he was able to tell me of the last remaining Gaelic speaking family in the Glen. The Campbell's had resided in Glen Roy for hundreds of years and were able to trace their ancestry to the times of Queen Margaret. The Campbells were the sixth cousins of Ewan MacDonald perhaps indicative of the breadth of Highland family culture and personal association. It also disproves the myth that the Campbells and MacDonalds were sworn enemies due to the savagery of the infamous massacre in Glen Coe, when indeed this was not the case with the Clan Campbell involvement in the tragedy being well and truly over stated.



The “Clach Thogalaich” of Glen Roy

On my first and second visit to trace the stone I was perhaps misfortunate that I had in my mind a particular area of the Glen to search which proved highly inaccurate. The second misfortune to befall the search was that every person that I spoke to who resided in the Glen, had no knowledge of the stone or its whereabouts. I do recall that on my first visit I passed by the Glen Roy stone, which in fact is obvious, now that is, and remarking that it looked like a lifting stone, however as my area of search was some two miles away the stone was discarded.

On the 15th August 2011 I made my third visit and decided to trace the Campbell family. I met Angus Campbell sitting outside his house enjoying what warmth the Scottish Summer could provide, and I asked if he could assist in helping me find the stone.

Angus invited me inside and with his wife and sister, all Gaelic speakers, they told me of the location of the stone. In so far that they could tell me of the stone's location, they stressed that they had never informed any non Gael within the Glen of its existence, not in a manner of being fearful of an anglicised culture but more as a result of respecting the ancient traditions knowing full well that in a number of years that it too may be completely lost.

Why Angus informed me was perhaps down to my own Gaelic background and knowledge of its culture, and over a period of about an hour and half, we shared stories of strength and legend. It was a remarkable experience and I was told of the times when the stone was lifted.

Angus was able to tell of the days when the crofting community in the Glen was Gaelic and strong and that after a hard day toiling on the land, many of the men would gather around the stone and simply engage in competition with each other. This was a time for telling

stories and drinking much whisky which prevailed with many at the end of the day. Some injuries were sustained in lifting the stone but not too the extent that it became a reason for the demise of stone lifting in the Glen. This is purely down to the removal of the community in the times of the Clearances and demise of the Gaelic population locally.

The stone had been lifted for hundreds of years and this continued until as recently as the 1950's. It is surprising to me that this testing stone has lain relatively unknown within the Glen even up to the times of this modern era. The stone was not named and was simply known as the lifting stone, clach thogaliach and its history neither infers or implies any concept or notion of manhood. The stone was simply a lifting stone for testing of strength and the phrase "clach cuid fir" was unknown to them.

Angus reminded me so much of the late PB Martin that I am sure that had he still been alive today, they would both be telling stories till the end of time. I had remarked to Angus who was extremely surprised that anyone would be so interested in the stone, that on occasions I sometimes felt as though I was a tourist in my own country. My own Gaelic speaking culture and history is long lost however when Angus with a gentle pat on the back said "your one of us" I felt truly humbled.

The existence of this stone perhaps demonstrates the purity of stone lifting. There are no frills, no firsts, its presence merely a celebration of the strength of a community which is sadly being lost.

The stone itself is made of granite. It has a curious shape in that, what I would consider as its base, is slightly curved perhaps to allow a better fit when lifted onto its small plinth. When stood upright it bares a curious resemblance to the Glen Lyon Bodach however there is ample opportunity for grip. It is not smooth but extremely rough. The chance of finding a well worn granite egg on the west coast is practically void as water courses in the Highlands running from east to west are extremely short in distance and lack consistent power to mould a stone. The Rivers Tay, Dee and Don etc all run a course from west to east over a considerable stretch and have the ability to create an Inver Stone.

Remember too that the plinth was also known to have been lifted on occasion. The plinth stone is far smoother and extremely prone to a build up of skin. It would appear to be lighter but would perhaps be harder to grip.

The plinth and alternative lifting stone

As for the test, Angus confirmed that a good lift was one in which the stone was simply lifted to the chest. The classic Ultach style.

The Glen Roy stone is the closest lifting stone to the home of the notable strongman of Lochaber, the great A A Cameron. Cameron resided practically in a neighbouring Glen and in Highland terms the distance would be half a day's walk. Was



Cameron aware of the stone or indeed did he lift it? I would answer that it would be an unlikely case for him to have visited and lifted the stone but his knowledge of its existence would be more than probable.

The lifting history of both these stones is scant at least however on 25th May 2012 the site was visited by Roger Davies. Estimating the weight of the main grey granite stone in the region of 300 lbs, the rough texture of the stone gives no serious grip problems although the shape of the stone causes it's centre of gravity to be offset. Feeling the stone for a while

prior to lifting will give the lifter an idea of how to approach and physically hoist it.



First lift of the Glen Roy stone in modern times by Roger Davies

Putting all his stone lifting experience to the test, Roger in his customary fashion took time to get to know the stone, a pull here and a push there feeling for areas of the stone with the best available grip and occasional tugging on the stone to “feel its weight”. After his assessment the stone was lifted into the lap and as befitting a researcher of traditional stones, Roger took advantage to become the first man to lift this traditional stone this millennium and certainly the first in many a long year to do so. The lift was also important as it was the first time that it had been lifted by a non- Scot however as

knowledge of this stone is learned others will no doubt follow. As an aside to this historical lift, with no nearby pub to toast this success Roger simply decided to celebrate by a cool refreshing swim in a nearby rock pool of the River Roy.

The plinth stone which was also known to have been lifted is again in the region of 300 lbs. This stone is of red granite and far smoother than the main stone and grip is to some degree more difficult to achieve. It is perhaps a quirk of nature and a pure coincidence that both stones, when standing upright show similarities to the testing stone in Glen Lyon. The second stone was also tested by Roger who managed to put a considerable amount of “air between the lifting stone and the ground”.



The second or plinth stone is beginning to gain some notoriety. On 27th July 2012, the Glen was visited by Alex Roberts of England who repeated the success of Roger in managing a good lift of the Clach Togalaich into his lap. The weather, exemplifying the traditional Scottish Summer was extremely bleak and with almost torrential rain. Alex stepped up to the stone and give it his best effort but only managed to put air between the stone and the turf.

The size and weight of these stones make them a considerable challenge for the lifter, the setting in a remote Highland Glen also adds a certain ambience to the occasion however the true beauty of these stones is that in ancient times they were lifted by men just for amusement and manly competition. These are no frills traditional heavy stones and as simple as that may sound, this tradition should always be retained.

Another stone which is extremely important to the Gaelic community within the Glen is the Communion or Mass Stone which can be clearly seen while driving into the Glen. The stone, which has a carved communion chalice inscribed on its west face stands as a memorial to the persecution of the community by the Duke of Cumberland after the 1745 rebellion. The mostly Roman Catholic community were driven from their homes and only met to conduct mass in the outdoors at this particular point. Communion was made from this rock by the local priest, who was often disguised.



The Communion or Mass Stone

When visiting the lifting stone within Glen Roy remember the Gaelic Community who once cherished these stones and enjoyed the test of their lifting. Respect the fact that the lifting history of the stone is unwritten, but be proud in the fact that you are by presence alone, retaining some element of a lost culture. More importantly, respect the fact that the Gaels of this Glen have trusted its knowledge to the

Brotherhood of Stone.

Directions – Despite my initial reservations that this stone may be extremely difficult to access it is indeed not the case. The Village of Roy Bridge is situated on the A86 Spean Bridge to Kingussie road which in essence is a cross country link between the A9 on the East and the A82 on the West, making this stone accessible from either direction and indeed it can be reached in just over an hour from Dalwhinnie.

On entering Roy Bridge the road into Glen Roy is clearly signed. The road into the Glen is a somewhat treacherous single track road (far worse than Glen Lyon) with many blind spots and sharp turns, so be warned. The road gains considerable height as you pass the communion stone on the right hand side and after passing a number of secluded houses the vastness of the Glen is soon appreciated as the scenic viewpoint marker and car park is reached. Continue on the road, taking extreme care for another 4 miles until a wooden bridge can be seen crossing the River Roy. Some 100 yards short of the bridge, the stones can be clearly seen on the right adjacent to the road.



View to the wooden bridge with the stones left of centre.