

Chapter Eight

The Stones of the Southern Highlands

Moving on from the stones of the Lowlands and the Southern Uplands, the last stone encountered, the Wallace Putting Stone could easily have been included in this section and certainly when standing on Sheriffmuir, the expanse of the Southern Highlands to the north are so close and almost tangible.

There are no distinguishing boundaries for the stones in this section and as a base either the towns of Callander or Aberfeldy should be considered. All but one of the stones are located in the ancient county of Perthshire although some through boundary changes are now in Stirlingshire but regardless, in the days when the Gaelic was spoken and stones were lifted this was entirely Perthshire.

The majority of these stones are hemmed in by one of the major trunk roads to the Highlands and the A9 gives access to many of the stones mentioned. If making a tour of the stones, and including the Wallace Putting Stone, an almost oval loop allows testing them all within a day without too much travelling by car. From the Wallace Putting Stone it is 40 mins to the Saddlin Mare and then less than 30 mins to the Menzies Stone. From here it is 30 mins to the famed Bodach in Glen Lyon and 60 mins later the Ardvorlich Stone followed by a short 15 min drive to Balquhiddy for the Puterach.

This circuit, which has now been carried out on a more than a few occasions has been referred to as the “**Perthshire Loop**” and any stone lifting visit to Scotland would probably commence on the same lines.

The Stones of the Southern Highlands offer a myriad of different strength challenges and a diversity of location and scenery. The **Saddlin Mare** is a curious strength test with its sloping plinth and as such should really come with a health warning for the dangers of the stone slipping back on the lifter. The **Menzies Stone** is a popular challenge where obvious comparisons in weight will be made with the Inver Stone.

For most stone lifting traditionalists, the **Bodach Craigh Fianna** better known as the Testing Stone of the Fianna is that quintessential lifting stone that merges history, tradition and strength into a location that is as peaceful as it is stunning. The **Ardvorlich Stone** is quite simply a stone that will in future gain fame as one of the supreme challenges in stone lifting and a short distance away is located the **Puterach**, with its never to be surpassed plinth stone of antiquity. Although not extant the sister stone to the Puterach, the **Monachyle Stone** is included to affirm the local history and background to the Braes of Balquhiddy.

Finally and the only stone in this section out-with Perthshire, the **Clachaboisgean** is quite simply a puzzle of Gaelic culture which can only partly be explained.

As we enter the true Highlands in this section the lifting stones only offer a flavour of what is to come. By adding the Wallace Putting Stone an excellent tour of a variety of stones can be achieved however any visiting lifter should be warned that consideration should be given to the following day as “volume stone lifting” has been tried by only a few and on occasion, lifts towards the end of the day can be fatigued and certainly not as vibrant as when starting the stone lifting adventure earlier.

Sufficient detail is given to find each particular stone however over many years, the infamous Testing Stone of the Fianna has proved problematical and I have first-hand knowledge of lifters trying to find it and when failing to do so, assuming that the stone has been removed by the local farmer. The stone was removed only once and has remained on its pedestal with visitors simply driving by it. In as much as I have tried to detail the exact position of the stone, I would suggest attempting to find the stone on Google Street View where it can be clearly seen prior to visiting. This should give you some indication of location and not miss the opportunity to lift such a special stone.

Bodach Craigh Fianna or Bodach Craigh Diannaidh

(The old man of the rock of the Fianna or The old man of the rock of defence)

Aka The Fianna Stone or Testing Stone of the Fianna

*Bha da chaisteal deug aig Fionn,
Ann an Crom-ghleann dubh nan Clach.*

*(Twelve castles had Fionn
In the dark bent Glen of the Stones.)*



The Bodach

For many stone lifters, this stone is a firm favourite behind the Dinnie Stones and the Inver Stone in Royal Deeside. Probably the undisputed third favourite as for many the stone holds a special blend that incorporates strength, history and location. Here is a quiet and remote setting that allows lifting to be contemplative and at one with nature.

Glen Lyon is indeed a special place. Not only is the Glen known to be the longest in Scotland but it's location in the heart of the Highlands makes it more remote than most and the difficulty of navigating the single track road which extends the length of the Glen, ensures that tourist traffic is drastically reduced in comparison with other places. Everywhere

you turn in Glen Lyon there is history, whether it be Roman on the east side of the Glen or indeed Pictish on the west, the history between is somewhat akin to the history of Scotland itself and that means a full explanation of the reason why this testing stone exists.

Quite simply, the Bodach may well be perhaps the oldest remaining known test of strength known to man or it may have an antiquity that is not so old but still old enough to compare with other known stones.

The first point to emphasise with the Bodach is its name. The stone is not the “**Testing Stone of the Fianna**” as mentioned in “**Of Stones and Strength**” however this has more to do with using an erroneous book reference rather than any specific error of interpretation. ¹

This said, The Testing Stone of the Fianna or Fianna Stone as it is more commonly referred to by modern day stone lifters, is not so far off to be regarded as a corruption of the true nomenclature and although most residents of the Glen are aware of the direct translation, common usage by those who actually lift the stone make “**The Fianna Stone**” an apt name for this test of strength.

To put an age on this stone is extremely difficult and equally, to explain how and why the stone was lifted is similarly so. There is evidence to show two specific cultural reasons for lifting the stone as well as evidence that the method and style of lifting was also different but initially it is perhaps easiest to begin with the unique nomenclature of the stone.

The Fianna Stone is not a **Clach** whereas just about every other stone known in Scotland (except the Puterach) has a reference to “**stone**”. The direct translation of Bodach is “**old man**” however even this is not so simple to understand as why would a test of strength be known as an old man?

There are quite a few explanations, all of them quite probably correct.

The most probable is that in Gaelic culture, as a term of endearment, a young man was referred to as a “Bodach” by a wiser and more knowledgeable man. This is well accepted in Gaelic culture however fails to answer the question why other stones throughout the Highlands and Islands are not similarly known.

¹ Why the Bodach became to be known as the “Testing stone of the Fianna” is perhaps due to some erroneous texts within “The Country Life Magazine, 5th April 1979” and “Highland Perthshire” by Duncan Fraser (1969). Both refer to the Bodach as “one of Fionn’s testing stones”. Folklore, but untrue and these were the original references used in “Of Stones and Strength”.

The word bodach is perhaps the clue and despite its relevance as a term of endearment, the Gaelic language is full of words that when used in a particular context can express a completely different meaning. –

“Although Bodach literally means Old Man, it conveys to the Highlander a great deal more. It is quite an untranslatable word. A lowland vulgar clown comes nearest to the Highlanders’ meaning of the word. Bodach is a term expressive of great contempt”. ²

What Stewart may be referring to in this context is the closeness of the word **“Bod”** which was the Gaelic slang for **“penis”**. In the history of Celtic and Norse stone lifting there is evidence that heavy penis shaped stones were lifted for various fertility and manhood rituals and the shape of the Fianna Stone takes little imagination to realise that there may be some historical relevance to its shape. Perhaps nothing to do with Gaelic etymology is the fact that in the Scot’s language, the penis is sometimes referred to as **“the old man”**.



“Bod” or “Bodach”

The stone is **300 lbs of dolerite**, a rock type which due to a high iron content, gives it a higher density than granite meaning that the actual volume of the stone is probably less than that of, with in comparison the Inver Stone but it is indeed heavier. Now whereas the iconic granite egg of the Inver Stone was so obviously fashioned in shape by

the fast flowing waters of the River Dee, to achieve the shape of the Fianna Stone is far more difficult to ascertain. The bulging protrusion on the bottom end of the stone, in most instances used as a grip by the stone lifter, shows obvious signs of being cut by the hands of man. The stone itself appears to have been hand shaped rather than shaped by the action of water on rock and this itself would require the appropriate level of expertise to investigate any further in this respect, but the shape does allude to some substantial difference in the traditional shape of testing stones.

If indeed the Fianna stone has been deliberately shaped by man into a penis shape, this would make the stone extremely ancient in origin pointing towards it being used as a test of strength well before the clan system was established in Scotland.

² *Sketches of the Character and Manners and Present State of the Highlanders of Scotland, Volume 2, Colonel David Stewart (1822)*

The other aspect of the nomenclature of the stone also adds a degree of authenticity to the stone being truly ancient. The translation to ***the old man of the rock of the fianna or defence*** provides some evidence to the origin of the stone but equally, it can also detract from it.

The testing stone, as the name implies is so called as it is named after the rock of the Fianna or defence. The Bodach is not that rock and indeed the stone is actually named after a prominent hillock situated some 400 yards east of the stone's present location.



The rock of the Fianna or rock of defence

Many modern stone lifters have passed by this hillock whilst searching for the Fianna Stone, completely unaware of its relevance to the stone they are about to attempt. Also located about 100 yards west of the lifting stone, the old Church Manse was built upon the remnants of one of the twelve forts of the Fionn warriors and each of these forts were known to have a meeting place where various judgements were made. These places had usually a high degree of prominence and were elevated areas known to the archaeologist as a ***“mote hill”*** taken from the old Danish word moot for meeting. These mote hills exist the entire length and breadth of Britain however in Glen Lyon each of the twelve Fionn forts had their own individual mote hill.

Craigh Fianna or Diannaidh was the mote hill attached to the ancient fort where the old Church Manse at Camusvrachan is now located. The bodach is related to this mote hill

however two other lifting stones, the Puterach at Balquhiddy and the Lifting Stone at Closeburn near Dumfries are also situated adjacent to a known mote hill. This attachment of lifting stone with a mote hill has raised some academic interest with Cardiff University particularly interested in this hitherto unknown arrangement of lifting stones and archaeology.

The final aspect in relation to nomenclature is related to the area where the Bodach is situated. Glen Lyon is centrally located within the ancient county of Perthshire which was known to possess, as similar to other areas, a unique dialect of the Gaelic language. The people who knew of this stone and the men who lifted it in times when such a test of strength was part of local culture would have called the stone a "Pullaid", a term known to have been applied specifically to this area and perhaps others but certainly was not generic throughout the Highlands and Islands.

"Near the rock is Bodach Chraig-dianaidh a large round stone, which is to be placed on another flat one some feet high. While the seniors were in council grave, the young men, it is probable, were putting their strength to the test in lifting the Bodach. There are at least two other similar stones in the glen one at Cashlie, eight miles farther up ; and one at Lochs. Fingal, the grey-haired King of Morven, would, it is said, allow no youth to bear the warlike spear, or join the ranks of war until he lifted one of the Bodachs."³

Of what has actually been written regarding the stone, the above text taken from ***"The Lairds of Glen Lyon"*** is perhaps the most informative. Written in that peculiar Victorian romantic fashion, the rock where the seniors were in council is a reference to the mote hill. Whereas any decision relating to the local people in the time of the Clans would be made by the Clan Chief or Chieftain, these decisions would be made without any need or indeed the use of a mote hill. The inference from the text is that the stone, whilst being lifted as a test of strength, while seniors were in council at the mote hill infers that the stone existed well before the formation and regulation of a Clan structure. This indeed would mean that the stone as a test of strength would have been used certainly within the first millennium.

Another aspect of the text is the attachment of Fingalian legend to the lifting of the stone. This is where the history of the stone falls in respect to its ancient origin.

The late 18th Century was known as a period of enlightenment in Scotland especially within its literary works. James MacPherson produced his ***"Poems of Ossian"*** to much acclaim with his stories of the Fingalian heroes allegedly translated from the Gaelic tales of the Sennachies or story tellers. The romantic attachment to the folklore was immense with even the great conqueror Napoleon Bonaparte known to have carried a copy with him as he attempted to conquer Europe. These were tales of inspiration, of warriors and of honour with which, raising the mighty spear of Morven fits so comfortably.

Throughout Scotland, as a result of this written work, many decided to adapt and change local culture and folklore to adapt. Perhaps the most famous adaptation was the renaming of a cave on the island of Staffa from its traditional Gaelic with absolutely no Fingalian reference to now become "Ossian's Cave". The spectacular rock architecture of the cave and now with a contrived association with Ossian, caused a swarm of visitors to attend and

³ P6/7 *The Lairds of Glen Lyon. Privately printed in 1886.*

soak up the unique atmosphere. This purely created romantic history with Ossianic attachment drew those of artistic inclination to visit and be inspired by it. Mendlleson on his individual romantic tour of Scotland wrote the celebrated "Hebridean Overture" as a direct result of his visit which was inspired by the romantic attachment of Fingalian folklore. What this means is that where there is any reference to the Fionn, tread carefully as it may well have been fabricated on the basis of the success of MacPherson's Poems of Ossian.

An academic analysis of MacPherson points to the activities of the Picts being the actual basis of these stories with the likes of the celebrated poem Col na Donna, a love story set within the narrative of a battle between Ossian and the British tribes of lowland Scotland being an assimilation of Pictish lore into the more romantic Ossianic.

In relation to the testing stone in Glen Lyon there is every possibility that the folklore attached to it has similarly been ascribed. What was Pictish is now seen as that of the Fionn and if this is the case then the stone may not be as old as originally thought.

However, the stone did have an alternative name of the old man of the rock of defence.

In 664 AD Glen Lyon was struck by the Black Plague. At the time the Glen was being visited on a regular basis by St Adamnan. Adamnan (also known as Eonan) was a culdee, an Irish monk based on the sacred Island of Iona, who like many others was attempting to bring Christianity to the heathen Picts. The folklore ascribes a miracle carried out by Adamnan where standing on the mote hill, he cast out the plague from the Glen by either placing a crucifix into a large rock with a hole in it, or indeed casting the plague into the hole. Like all good folklore, the plague stone still exists and it is situated a short distance east of the testing stone. Factually it is known that St Adamnan separated the infected from those who were clear of the plague and in thus doing so he managed to halt its spread within the Glen.

Adjacent to the mote hill sits an angular standing stone known as St Adamnans Cross which has been inscribed with a rude cross shape to apparently commemorate the event.



St Adamnan's Cross and the Plague Stone

So as the Old Man of the rock of defence or the rock of the Fianna, the testing stone has an associated history that is indeed ancient in origin. Within this short stretch of the Glen there

is an ancient Fort of Pictish origin, a mote hill and standing stone of the same time period as well as many cup and ring marked stones associated with Bronze age man.

How old is the testing stone? No-one will ever be able to ascertain for sure but the evidence that exists does point to having a truly ancient origin.

Having perhaps failed to attach an actual age to the testing stone itself, how the stone was lifted is similarly difficult. In the modern context, it appears that ever since the release of "**Of Stones and Strength**" there is an apparent assumption that an acceptable lift is simply to lift the Bodach and place it onto the plinth some six inches high.

As a test of strength this certainly would not be too difficult and nor does it compare as a test in relation to other stones.

"Throughout this Glen there are strongholds of Fingallian Heroes and near the Free Church Manse, eight miles up the Glen, is a stone called the Bodach, of roundish form, which is said to have been used as a test of strength for young men before they assumed the arms of men. This feat consisted in lifting the Bodach and placing it on a flat slab close by, of about 10 inches in height and which still requires the arms of a well grown man to perform."⁴

The above text is taken from a well known Victorian tourist guide book and although it is known that Black chose to travel the length of Loch Tay instead of visiting Camusvarchan, alluding to his knowledge being obtained by hearsay, the book does state that the lift was simply elevating the stone onto its flat plinth of 10 inches in height. The obviousness of this text is that it infers that the stone was lifted as part of a manhood ritual.

In contrast to this we have the following from some 60 years later -

"In the Highlands of Perthshire, there is a famous boulder or roundstone, locally known by the name of the Bodad (Bodach) or old man. It was used as a bit of strength in ancient times. When a young man wished to be numbered among the athletes of the district, he was called upon to lift this stone and place it upon a pedestal of rock beside it, about three feet above the ground".⁵

The inference in this text is that the stone was required to be lifted onto a plinth of three feet in height, a substantial bit higher than that stated by Black. Furthermore there is slight reference to the stone being lifted to prove manhood, but in reality it makes no mention of this simply stating that the lifting of the stone put you into a group of known athletes who lifted the stone. It makes no mention of manhood. Following on from this we have yet again another historical reference -

"There are a number of stones in the dale herewith which no ventures to interfere, as each has its tradition, sometimes sacred. One of them was the lifting stone that every man had to raise in his hands before he was permitted to join the bodyguard of his chieftain."⁶

⁴ Black's Picturesque Tourist of Scotland. (1830)

⁵ The Scots Magazine 1st April (1893)

⁶ What I have seen while fishing and how I caught my fish. Phillip Geen (1905)

Mr Geen obtained the story of the Bodach from his Gaelic speaking ghillie named Peter whilst fishing in a nearby pool of the River Lyon. The text is a direct reference to a known test of strength for the Bunnachean of a clan. Selected for their physical strength a known test of prowess was the lifting of a heavy stone along with other feats of strength.

What the three previous texts actually infer are two specific cultural reasons for lifting this stone. Firstly, a lift of a mere six inches, the equivalent of putting air beneath the stone, a physical test for a youth to prove that he was now physical strong enough for training in weaponry. Secondly, the higher lift is a test to become the warrior elite of the Clan.

In July 2012 a cursory examination of the pedestal was made by removing from the southern side some of the surrounding top soil. Without interfering in any way with the pedestal, it was discovered that on the east side (facing the fence line), the depth of the rock extends some 2 feet whereas on the west side the depth is a mere 10 inches. The pedestal itself, or rather the solid rock part of it would seem to form an inverted "L" shape with its flat top of the plinth forming the longest part of the inversion. If as is likely, the pedestal stone was placed upon an earth mound of approximately one foot in height then the desired three feet is achievable. Why this is not the case today is more likely to be down to the building of the adjacent road rather than a track through the glen. It is known that the road, or at least the course of it, follows the same line today as it did when Black travelled on it in the 1830's.

As the current plinth height no longer reaches the extent as required by the lifters of yesteryear, an acceptable lift of the Bodach can be any of the two specific lifts mentioned.

Perhaps the best overall reference to the stone is the following. Taken from an unpublished text which was translated from the Gaelic, the story was recited by an old Highlander who was convalescing in England and while doing so tried to give an account of life in Glen Lyon before the advent of Victorian culture.

"In regard to strength, the pre-eminence of the biggest man in the Glen was admitted, and boasted of by all the Glen people. But there were many young men from other parts present at the sale who wished to test him in athletic sports, and as the sale continued for two days, and the evenings were long, a competition between the Glen young men and the stranger young men was resolved upon. Now Ewan beat all at the caber and putting the stone, but a stranger was first at throwing the hammer, the elder's John coming second. A stranger was also first in the racing, Diarmad coming second. Duncan Ban, who looked on and felt vexed at the strangers being allowed to beat the Glen youths at anything, cried out when the leaping was going on, and three strangers were taking the lead—Pooh-pooh? these are only foolish things ; try the bodach, which was the test in the Feinne's day for youths who wished to be numbered among heroes.

The bodach was a slippery round stone that had to be lifted on a pedestal some three feet high. It was near the ruins of one of the round towers called "Castulan-nam-Fiann," or "Castles of the Feinne," and the saying was that in ancient times every young man who wished to be enrolled among the Feinne was first called upon to prove his strength by lifting the bodach. It was certainly a severe test, but knack helped strength, and the lithe man succeeded frequently where the heavy strong man failed. It is questionable whether Duncan Ban acted fairly towards the strangers, for he knew perfectly well that practice had made many among the Glen youths perfect in the art of raising the bodach with apparent ease. "But everything is fair in war," was Duncan Ban's maxim, when the credit of the Glen had to be fought for. The strangers

accepted the challenge, and were hopelessly defeated. There was not one of them who succeeded that evening in lifting the bodach stone fairly from the ground, far less in placing it on its pedestal. Six of the Glen youths were put forward against the six strangers who had the courage to accept the test, and every Glen youth performed the feat with seeming ease. So the final victory remained with the Glen, and Duncan Ban was highly delighted.”

Once more there is a heavy emphasis placed on the antiquity of the stone as well as inference that stone was lifted to prove manhood but again, the stone required to be lifted some three feet from the ground and placed on the pedestal. For the interest of the Highland Games enthusiast, the text is dated from the 18th Century, well before the establishment of the modern Games however as can be read, there is little variation between the modern and ancient. Another aspect to this historic text is the assertion of a “knack”, a know-how and any good stone lifter will testify that strength is part of stone lifting but working out the puzzle of an individual stone is the hard part. Little has changed in 300 years.

Another curious aspect of the lifting style of the Bodach is that all known lifting stones on the Scottish Mainland that were required to be lifted onto a plinth or wall, were known as Clach-neart, the implication with these types of stones being that what can be lifted onto, can equally be thrown over.



Revealing the height of the pedestal

The fact that the Bodach is not known as clach-neart is probably down to the more ancient origin of the stone and indeed the lifting application to it.

In modern times there has indeed been a lifting variant attached to the Bodach. It is not uncommon to find the stone some distance from its plinth lying in the grass amongst a jumble of assorted boulders. Although it would be beyond me to even suggest that visiting lifters have in some way been remiss in returning the stone to its plinth, neither would I suggest that the wind had blown it over. If visiting please replace the stone on its plinth as it makes identification and the finding of the stone far easier for the stone lifter that follows.

This common faux pas has indeed caused some lifters to lift and walk the stone to its plinth as demonstrated below by **Roger Davis**. A credible and acceptable lift in itself.



Walking the Bodach

Part of the romantic attraction of the Bodach is the reward for a successful lift. Local folklore states that those being able to lift the stone would be entitled to **“lift the heavy spear of Morven”**. Rìgh Mhor-bheinn is Gaelic for King of Morven, the name ascribed to Fingal himself or the legendary Finn McCool as he is sometimes known.

The background to this myth is that success allows you to fight alongside the Fianna but as they are still asleep inside a mountain in either Ireland or Scotland awaiting their call, I wouldn't be standing beside the phone waiting for it to ring and receive your call up. If of course you had lifted the Bodach in the first instance.

There is no known recent or ancient lifting history save one curious story, but very true.

It was known that a local young woman failed to attend the service at Camusvrachan one Sunday morning and decided herself just to wander about the countryside. She came across the Bodach and realising its history she decided that she might have an attempt at lifting it. Standing below the lowest part of the plinth she tugged hard at the Bodach which simply did not wish to be moved vertically and it promptly fell on top of the unfortunate girl. Fortunately she was uninjured but alas the stone had trapped her petticoat and she was unable to extricate herself from the weight of the stone. It was not until the Church service was over that someone heard her cries for help and with some scolding in her ear for failing to attend Church, the stone was removed.

In the summer of 1990 the stone was rediscovered by P B Martin and my-self. After climbing Stuchd an Lochain, a nearby mountain associated with the Campbells of Glen Lyon, we drove to the Camusvrachan area of the Glen and must have passed by the Bodach three or four times in our search (It can be a hard stone to find). Local assistance was sought and the stone was pointed out by an elderly resident who remarked that he had not seen it lifted in many a year. The opportunity was not missed by the late PB Martin.



First modern lift of the bodach by PB Martin in 1990

Occasionally, the stone is reported as being removed by the local farmer who owns the field but many of these reports are probably as a result of people not being able to find the stone in the first instance however I am assured that the stone was only moved once in its recent past in order to facilitate agricultural rotation of the field. In late 2010 the former owner of Slatich Farm sold it to a consortium of Glasgow Businessmen who separated the farm into 6

lots. The field where the bodach sits is fortunately on an agricultural lot and if visiting due respect should be given.

Another curious aspect to this stone is that it is registered with The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) as site number 258512. Contrary to popular belief within stone lifting circles, this registering does not confer any special protection. It is only a record for the purposes of posterity.

Now as the story told by the old Highlander infers a particular knack in lifting the Bodach, I can honestly say that I have seen this stone lifted so many times in so many ways over the years. Some lifters, intent with that simple lift onto the 10 inch plinth have been happy to grip the stone at its base and lift. It is not that difficult to manage however lifting any further in height brings in to play the obvious bulge and as grip weakens, the stone has a tendency to roll back due to its unique centre of gravity.



Torsten Moser (Germany) lifting the Bodach from the base

Of course bringing the stone up to the chest in this manner would almost, depending on the height of the lifter, totally obscure the face in any photo shoot of the lift as the stone itself is surprisingly long in height.

I have personally witnessed the stone lifted in this manner and it is an impressive feat of strength to see but this stone is a conundrum of strength, once the lifter is satisfied with his grip on the stone, an imbalance will cause the grip to be readjusted and this will not only happen once it will happen again and again. Pondering over the stone looking for the perfect way to lift it will drain strength and the best way to attempt the stone is to lift whatever way suits best, but with limitations of course. In working out the puzzle however some have simply lifted the stone long ways and this in some fashion seems to eliminate the grip problems associated with lifting the stone from its base.

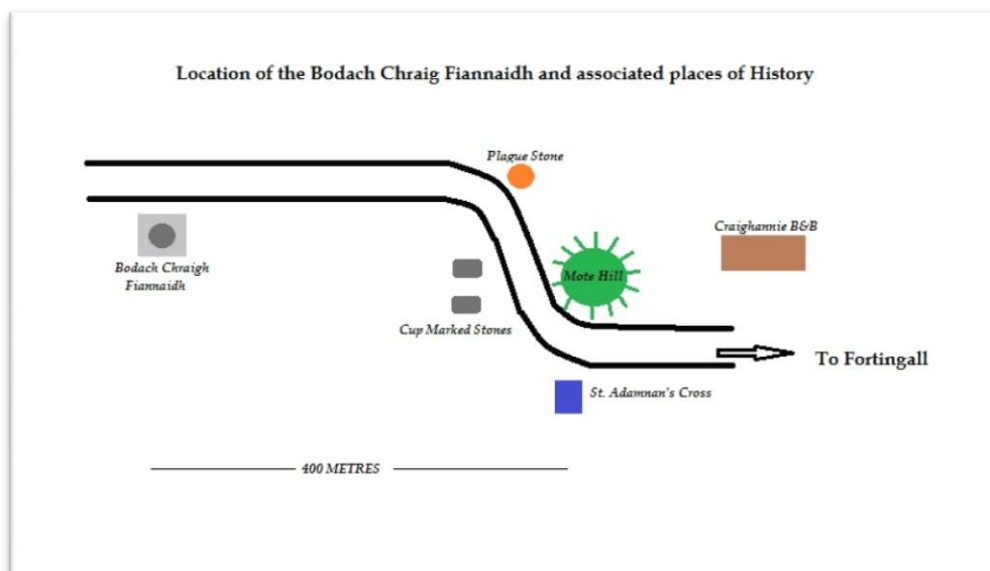


Lifting the Bodach longways by Martin Jancsics (Scotland) and Craig Reid (Australia)

Perhaps the unique shape of this stone highlights the obvious in stone lifting that some lifts are better than others however no-one should be deterred from making that simple lift onto the plinth as it is still, as inferred by history and culture, a lift.

Now as the strong get stronger, there will be a day when someone successfully presses overhead the Bodach. Along the way there may be a few failures but be warned that the area is covered in numerous boulders. Be wary and conscious how the stone is returned to the ground.

When lifting this stone remember its history, The Saints, The Picts, The Romans, The Fionn and if you are successful you may lift the Spear of Morven and be part of the history.



Map showing location of the Bodach in relation to other associated artefacts

As mentioned in "**The Lairds of Glenlyon**" there are further Bodach's situated at Cashlie and at Lochs. Both these locations are situated in the westernmost part of the Glen where the scenery is bleak but still retaining tranquillity. Having searched both areas thoroughly, I can find no evidence of what could be reasonably assumed to be one of the mentioned

testing stones. That is to say they might still exist as there is certainly no shortage of stone in this part of the Glen.

Directions: *The Bodach Chraig Fiannaidh is difficult to find and can be easily missed. From Aberfeldy take the B846 heading north over the Wade Bridge. Continue on this road passing Menzies Castle. On reaching the hamlet of Keltneyburn turn left for Fortingall and Glen Lyon (Signposted). From this point the road is an unclassified single track.*

On reaching Fortingall continue and within a half mile of leaving the village a right turn into Glen Lyon although sign posted, is easily missed. From this turn check your odometer as the stone is exactly 8 miles from this point. Continue through this narrow glen and look out for Slatich Farm on the right. Continue and on the left there will be the angled Standing Stone known of St Adamans Cross. Down a slight incline and the road cambers left onto a straight section of road with a flat field on the left. The stone is situated approximately 100 yards along this stretch of road.

If heading to Glen Lyon from Glasgow or the Loch Lomond area I would suggest heading to the village of Killin which can be reached easily from Callander or Crianlarich. From Killin follow the A827 eastwards for approximately 5 miles. There is a sign indicating a turn to left for a service road to Glen Lyon and the Ben Lawers visitor centre. This road is a single track service road which gains a great deal of height towards a high mountain pass and gradually descends to Bridge of



Bridge of Balgie

Balgie in Glen Lyon. Travelling from the south, this road would save approximately one hour of travelling time as opposed to the route from Aberfeldy but I would warn against using this road in the winter months or extremely bad weather. Scenic, but dangerous. When at Bridge of Balgie set your odometer and travel east along the Glen for exactly 3 miles. The Bodach will be on your right.

If after lifting the Bodach you find the need to replace some calories, the Post Office at Bridge of Balgie also serves as a tearoom offering hot food. The staff are aware of the position of the Bodach and if lost I would suggest asking here for directions. Again remember to refer to the stone as the "Bodach" as staff are well aware of its history.

Alternatively, there is a hotel at Fortingall which gives one the opportunity of visiting one of the oldest living things, the Fortingall Yew Tree which is over 5000 years old.

The Chieftains Stone

(Also known as the Menzies Stone)



The Chieftains Stone outside Menzies Castle. Weem.

As a consequence of this stone suddenly appearing after the release of “Of Stones and Strength” where no mention was made of it, I must admit that my original assumptions were that it was not as old as thought and was perhaps a modern creation, even though the stone was actually used in competition as early as 1994 at the Aberfeldy Games. Fortunately these thoughts have been dispelled and the Menzies Stone is truly an ancient test of strength. A former curator of Castle Menzies assures that there does still exist a Victorian painting depicting Castle Menzies with its stone of strength clearly seen outside the main entrance door which in former times was the door to the east of the newly formed tourist entrance. In 2011 the stone was moved to its present more traditional position.

Not disputing its history, the stone has been previously written about and as early as 1840 we have the following which hints at an alternative name.

“Near the door of Castle Menzies may be seen “The Chieftains Stone”, a large round block of granite, weighing more than I venture to guess, which the next heir, on succeeding to the supremacy of this Clan, was always expected to carry in his arms

upstairs to the dining room, where his health was drank. It would almost be as easy to lift the house or to run away with Schiehallion (a nearby mountain)”⁷

Again we have Victorian writers being involved in misconstruing Clan and strength culture. The power of Clan Menzies waxed and waned over many centuries with the original ***Menzies Stone*** being a boundary marker located in the bog of the Rannoch Moor indicating that at least one time in history, this Clan were a powerful force. Local knowledge states that the Clan lands extended well into Glen Lyon covering the area where the famous ***Bodach*** is located however this said, the powerhouse Clans in this area were the ***Campbell's of Megerinne*** and the ***Stewart's of Garth*** whom it is known were involved in more than a few skirmishes with Clan Menzies. By the time Clan Menzies located at Weem Castle, now Menzies Castle their Clan structure and territory was probably insufficiently large to sustain area ***Chieftains***.

I suspect that the lift and carry of the stone, up all those stairs to the dining-room was more than likely to be a test of strength for the ***Buanachean*** of the Clan, those men who were full time bodyguards to the Clan Chief and, in comparison to those in employ with far larger Clans, these men may have numbered only two or three. Of course the culture of Gaelic strength would almost insure that other lesser clansmen attempted to lift the heavy stone but the lift and carry as highlighted it must be emphasised fits well into the Gaelic concept of ostentatious of strength, to be attempted only by the exceptionally strong.

It would appear again that Victorian romanticism has again prevailed at the expense of the true culture but nevertheless, the important fact to take from this is that the Menzies Stone is indeed a very old challenge in strength.

Clan Menzies suffered much after the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745 which it supported and following on from this, Clan Chiefs were forbidden from having their private armies of strong men. The use of the stone as such would have declined to the point that little if nothing would have been written about it and perhaps the romantic assertions are as a consequence of forgetting its true use.

The stone itself fits well into its location as it is obviously one of those stones located ***at the gates of great houses*** and as far as being a lifting stone goes, this particular stone is a quandary in strength.

I have always regarded this stone as a “brute” and must admit to being slightly shocked in discovering that its official weight is 250lbs. Being 15 lbs lighter than the Inver Stone I have struggled to account as to why some who can lift the Inver Stone with relative ease can have great difficulty with the Menzies and although the stone appears perfectly spherical it is far from it and has an offset centre of gravity which on flat ground causes it to roll back to find its centre of rest. The trick in lifting the stone is to position the centre of gravity firmly between both feet and to achieve this requires a certain degree of turning the stone and a great deal of personal feel.

Gripping the stone is no more difficult than that of other granite stones however over the years the stone has seen considerable use and the grain of the granite is hardly discernible however lifting stones are judged by the difficulty of lift, not how they look. Its use as a

⁷ Page 318 *Shetland and the Shetlanders. Catherine Sinclair (1840)*

competition stone at the Aberfeldy Highland Gathering has caused a considerable build up of tacky and it is not uncommon, especially after the games, to see the stone adorned with tufts of grass. It may lack the natural beauty of other stones but it is a brute to lift.



Getting to grips with the Menzies Stone - Craig Reid (Australia)

In Chapter Four the relevance of the “lift and carry” is fully discussed and emphasises that this form of lifting a heavy stone is one of the most ancient. Each August the Menzies Stone is effectively wheeled out (on a specially created trolley) at the Aberfeldy Games and Show for competitors to lift (hard enough on its own) and then carry the stone for distance emulating its original purpose. What is personally appealing regarding this stone of strength is that although it has an international appeal lifted by many outside Scotland the greatest lifts of this stone have indeed been achieved by the men of strength from Alba.

The first lifts of the Menzies Stone at the Aberfeldy Games in 1994 saw the strength of **Bob Simpson** (Aylth, Perthshire) dominating for many years until 1997 when **Steven King** (Inverary, Argyll) set a new record carry of 168ft. In 2006, **John Davidson** (Glenisla, Angus) set a further distance record of 206ft not bettered until 2012 when **Michael Daly** (Glenrothes, Fife) broke the existing record in carrying the stone a distance of 209ft.

Perhaps the best known lift of the Menzies Stone however was carried out by **Andy Cairney** (Glasgow) in January 2011 where the stone was probably hoisted further in its history when pressed over head in a truly ostentatious show of strength.

This stone is the archetypal **Pullaid** or **Pullag**, the old Gaelic nomenclature for lifting stones in Perthshire which are orb or globe shaped. Perhaps for this very reason, whereas the likes of the Inver Stone is held with the highest esteem as a lifting stone amongst those inclined to the heavy events at the Highland Games, there is an a definite attraction of the Menzies stone to those involved in Strongman as it physically looks so much like an ancient Atlas Stone. On a personal note I have actually seen more personal failures with those lifting this stone than the Inver Stone although this may well be coincidence but I would rather look at the Menzies stone as one of the most serious strength tests available.

Directions – From Aberfeldy take the B846 over the Wade Bridge and continue on to the hamlet of Weem. The entrance to Castle Menzies is well sign posted and the drive from Aberfeldy is approximately 5 minutes.

It should be noted that the present curator of the Castle does not appreciate speculative lifts and has complained about those who chose to emulate the lift and carry but simply leave the stone in the car park to be returned by staff. As such, he requests that anyone wishing to attempt a lift should either telephone or email the Castle in advance. Some more respectful lifters have been asked to sign the Castle visitors book as a consequence of being courteous.

The Puterach and Pudrac Stones



The Puterach and Pudrac

Nestled within a long east/west orientated Glen, the scenic village of Balquhidder (pronounced **Bal-whidder**) is a well known tourist destination with much of its popularity more probably as a result of its ancient church and graveyard being the (supposed) resting place of that archetypal Highlander, Rob Roy McGregor. To the southeast of the church and far lesser known lies a standing stone of antiquity. Known as the **Pudrac** it is regularly visited by archaeologists and examined with many assertions and speculations as to its original purpose with the only concrete fact attributed to it being, that the eastern aspect of this wedge shaped stone directly faces sunrise each morning.

The Pudrac certainly dates to a time well before the creation of the country of Scotland itself but the standing stone did, during the time of the Clan system in the Highlands, have a special purpose and that was as a plinth stone to receive a lifting stone known as the **Puterach**.

The use of a reception plinth is not unknown in the practice of strength and certainly stones lifted in Strongman and Highland Games competitions are known worldwide to be lifted onto either metal frames or wooden barrels however the Pudrac is the reality and not the fabrication. Knowledge of it will show some hitherto unknown and interesting applications of plinths and lifting styles associated with them.

What this particular stone lifting site has is an abundance of history that requires to be put into a stone lifting context with a degree of exactness that will perhaps demonstrate not only the importance of strength in Gaelic culture, but also emphasise just how difficult and complicated the subject is in relation to its present romantic portrayal.

To commence, we require an examination of the nomenclature of the stone, its definition and usage in strength and for this purpose and perhaps as a consequence of various spellings of the stones, the **Puterach** is the lifting stone and the **Pudrac** is the plinth stone.

Lacking the use of the nominal **clach**, the Puterach being apparently non-defined through nomenclature does to a degree give us some indication why it is named as such.

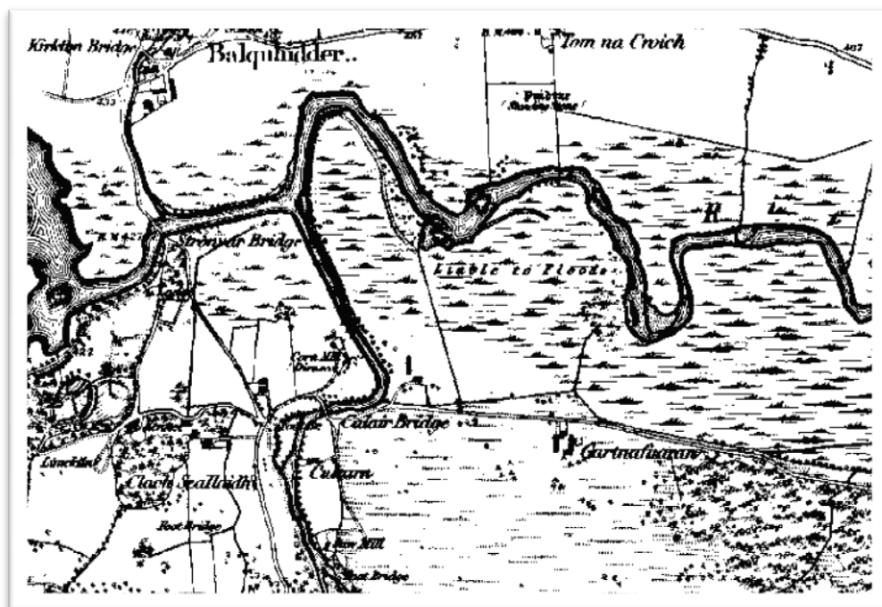
“Major J. Stewart of Ardvorlich, who attached the name "Putehiarach" to a lifting stone near the same site. Such were used for competitive trial of strength. MacAlpine & MacKenzie's Gaelic Dictionary (1832, revised Glasgow 1975) gives no exact help, but the nearest words are "Putah" translated "pushing" or "jostling" and "Puthar" translated "power. " The latter is pronounced poo/ar ("th" being silent). Gaelic "Iarraidh" is "a search, " or "a petition."The latter is very near the second part of Ardvorlich's offering, and it may be speculated that a compound Picto-Gaelic name remained attached to the standing stone. This could suggest "Pit-Iarraidh" the place of petition, involving a semi-translation. It is probable that the name became transferred from one stone to another at different times. The late Mr David MacDiarmid of Broomfield pronounced the name of the stone as Pudj/ya/ach, the first and second syllables short and sharp, and the last slightly longer with the "ch" somewhat aspirated.”⁸

⁸ Highland Settlement Evolution in West Perthshire- Development and Change in the Parish of Balquhidder from the Fifteenth Century to 1851 James Henderson Stewart. The University of Newcastle upon Tyne. Department of Town and country Planning, with the Department of History. Staff Ph. D. Thesis. August, 1986.

The above is quite interesting and although the assertion of “pushing” is quite understandable in that the stone is a **clach-neart** with the Gaelic cultural emphasis on what can be placed on, can equally be thrown over (See *Chapter Four – What Determines a Lift of a Traditional Stone*), the reference to **petition** may also be relevant in respect of its location.

Situated just north of the Pudrac is a rather undefined hillock known as **Tom na Croich**. In archaeological terms it is known as a **Mote Hill** from the old Danish word **moot** meaning meeting. This hillock was, probably in pre- Clan history, an area where local elders would meet and make legal judgements and the Puterach is no exception to the rule with the Bodach in Glen Lyon and the Lifting Stone at Closeburn also being located adjacent to a known mote hill. As a consequence, the legal parlance of **petition** may seem to fit, especially in relation to the Pudrac standing stone.

Due west of the Pudrac, is an area of ground now separated by a stone dyke wall and known as **Clachan-Aoraidh**, which due to a number of stones forming a “stone circle” is alleged to have been a place of worship but more importantly, this was the location of the local fair held to celebrate Saint Angus, the patron saint of the area. The fairs were held in April from as early as the 16th century and its proximity to the Pudrac almost insures that the **Puterach** lifting stone would have featured heavily as part of the festivities.⁹



1867 map of Balquhidder showing Tom na Croich and Pudrac Standing Stone

Another aspect of the location of both the Puterach and Pudrac stones is that they exist on a known “coffin road” leading to the ancient church at Balquhidder and as such can provide us with a reasonable time frame when the stone was lifted. Chapter Five fully explains the relevance of coffin roads with lifting stones in Gaelic culture and suffice to say, Presbyterianism after the Scottish Reformation of 1560 abhorred the show of physical strength on the Sabbath and hence lifting stones located near to a church can be reasonably dated as post-reformation. Knowing the time frame when the Puterach was lifted is extremely important in relation to who actually lifted the stone as is knowledge of the glen’s clans and territories which fluctuated quite considerably.

⁹ The Fair was later known to have been moved to nearby Kingshouse and held in August of each year.

The local history of Balquhiddy certainly underpins the assertion that there is always a good reason for the location of a traditional lifting stone, sometimes quite overwhelming but still fundamentally necessary to give us a full understanding of this ancient tradition. Now as for the physical lifting of the Puterach, unsurprisingly this too is complicated with the earliest reference to it unfortunately provided by the most unreliable of sources.

“Among the Highlanders, are racing, leaping, the running leap, much practised for its usefulness, wrestling, club and foot ball, tossing the caber, throwing the hammer, putting or throwing the stone, lifting a heavy stone, contests in swimming and many other feats of sheer strength and agility. The weight of the stone, called clach-neart or the stone of strength, which was to be lifted from the ground, was sometimes very great, and it was frequently placed near the church and sometimes in the Kirkyard, that the men might exercise their “vis inertia” after the conclusion of religious service. One of this sort, named the Puterach, remains near the Kirk of Balquhiddy in Perthshire, which the strongest may boast having raised from the ground, breast high, which is the trial, and he is accounted a muscular man who can do so”¹⁰

The question has to be asked is to why the author (James Logan) fails to mention the most obvious in relation to the Puterach in that there is no mention of the rather stand out plinth known as the Pudrac. The knowledge of, or rather lack of it by Logan certainly alludes to him obtaining his information by hearsay highlighting the dangers of plagiarism as Logan is the origin of many mistruths regarding Gaelic strength.

Logan clearly states the stone as being a ***clach-neart*** probably without any cultural knowledge of the style of lifting applied to such stones however, Balquhiddy at the time was in the county of Perthshire (*it is now located in Stirlingshire through recent boundary changes*) and this may have had some relevance with regards to the local dialect and nomenclature of the stone.

“Pullaid -(CD) sf The lifting-stone found in many old parishes, near the parish church. Raising it off the ground was a sign that one was fit to take his place as a man. (Perthshire.) Usually called clach togail”¹¹

So the Puterach may either have been ***Clach-neart***, ***Clach togail*** or ***Pullaid*** but one thing it wasn't was the doubtful ***Clach cuid fir***.

As Logan was a known Victorian romanticist living in a world of fabricated Clan tartan, perhaps the better known reference is taken from a visiting archaeologist who provides a better insight on the Puterach than that by Logan.

“Further east, and on the same side of the road, overlooking the strath, there is another knoll, which in later times was the gallows hill of the district, and is still known as” Tom na Croich.” On the level ground below this knoll there is a prominent monolith, standing about 4 feet above ground, quite flat, on the top. It is shaped like a wedge, with the edge to the east, and is famous in Balquhiddy as the place where trials of strength took place. A large round water-worn boulder, named, after the district, “Puderag,” and weighing between two and three hundredweight, was the

¹⁰ *McClans Highlanders at Home OR Celtic Gatherings”, James Logan (1848)*

¹¹ *Appendix to Dwelly's Gaelic-English dictionary, Edward Dwelly, Douglas Clyne, Derick S. Thomson (1991)*

testing stone, which had to be lifted and placed on the top of the standing stone. There used to be a step about 18 inches from the top, on the east side of the stone, on which the lifting stone rested in its progress to the top. This step or ledge was broken off about thirty' years ago, as told to me by the person who actually did it, and the breadth of the stone was thereby reduced about 8 inches. This particular mode of developing and testing the strength of the young men of the district has now fallen into disuse, and the lifting-stone game is a thing of the past. A former minister of the parish pronounced it a dangerous pastime. Many persons were permanently injured by their efforts to raise the stone, and it is said that he caused it to be thrown into the river, but others said it was built into the manse dyke, where it still remains." ¹²

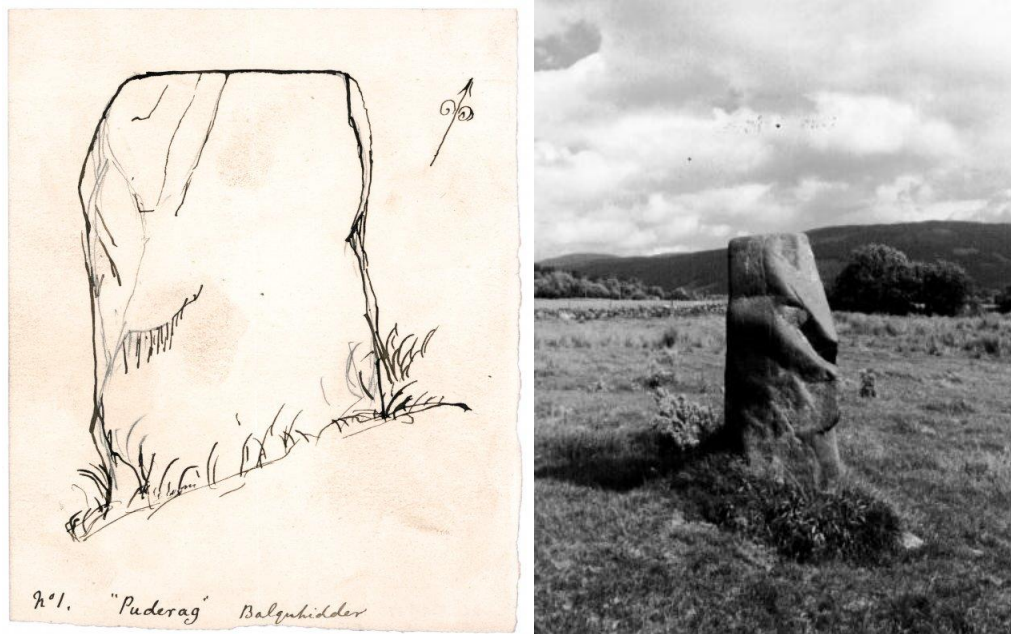
Quite a remarkable amount of information is provided, without the romanticism of Logan but from it we learn that the traditional lift of the Puterach was made from the east, that stone lifting was seen by the Church as dangerous and that to the Gael, at least, it appeared quite in order to rest the stone while attempting to lift it to the full height of the plinth. Gow also mentions that the stone is named after the district which will be explained later.

As authoritative that the information from Gow appears, it is hardly likely to be a complete guide to lifting the Puterach as quite simply Gaelic strength culture would have probably dictated a more loose approach and certainly, the lifting known by Gow was in a time frame well after 1745 and as such, Clan culture would have played little or no part in the lifting of the stone.

It should be remembered that the ultimate lift of a traditional stone in Gaelic culture was the ***lift and throw*** so the most ostentatious of stone lifters, extremely limited of course, would have lifted the Puterach and then thrown it over the Pudrac plinth stone. Measurements of strength were judged not by weight or distance these being concepts completely alien to the Gael, but to the degree of difficulty and hence the stone would have been lifted from all four sides.

How this translates to the modern is quite simple as there is good evidence to show that land movement around the Pudrac stone hints at the traditional east approach being the easiest lift during the Victorian period. The drawing below, made by Gow in 1885 shows the highest aspect of a lift to be made was from the west and not the east. The approach from the east today is by far the hardest with the greatest height for the stone to be lifted and the contours of the land making getting close to the plinth extremely difficult.

¹² *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, Volume XX1, -Page 83 Notes on Balquhidder – James Gow (1887)*



The Pudrac in 1886 and in 1986

Land movement in well over a century would have to be taken into consideration as the actual site is a flood plain and correspondingly, land heights would be expected to change over a period of time. In comparison, the 1986 photograph shows some differences in the height of the surrounding land with that at present however there is some dubiety over the east approach as stated by Gow. There is an obvious broken section, the resting ledge as inferred by Gow, clearly seen on the **west** side of the plinth with the east side almost completely devoid of protrusions; in fact it is almost sheer. Was Gow meaning that the lifter faces east in his lift, or did he make his approach from the east? The west approach at the time of Gow would appear to have been the far more difficult lift in relation to the height the Puterach was lifted but which today is the complete reverse.

Regardless of what is seen as traditional there is no doubt the stone would have been lifted from all four sides and with varying degrees of difficulty as a consequence. This is traditional stone lifting where standardised is an imaginary word.

One fact that Gow was unfortunately correct on was his account of the demise of the Puterach stone itself. Whether it is in the Manse dyke wall, probably by the account of the present occupier one of the most inspected walls in Scotland or whether it is in the nearby river is of little consequence, the stone is no more.

Whether the traditionalist would balk at the thought, a balance in preserving history sometimes requires to be established and although there are many lifting stones that have been lost to time, they do not all possess a plinth stone of the measure of the Pudrac. With a desire to see stone lifting again being practiced at this site this too was fraught with problems.

Initially the ground surrounding the Pudrac was owned by the Woodlands Trust, a public body wishing to conserve natural woodland far more than traditional culture but fortunately, due to the worldwide economic depression and ongoing austerity, the land was offered for sale and was purchased privately by Kenny and Laura Thomson.

It was during a tour of the stones in January 2011 with **James Grahame** (Australia) and on visiting the site that a chance meeting with Laura sowed the seeds of having a replacement stone for the Puterach put in place. Both Kenny and Laura were wholeheartedly behind the placement of the new stone with one proviso in that it should be a local stone. The local stone is Ben Ledi grit stone but a suitable rounded stone was found at the Tom na Croiche mote hill and taken to sit beside the Pudrac¹³. All was now in place for the stone to be lifted and tradition once again enacted.

On the 22nd August 2011, **Johnny Reed** from Georgia, USA became the first lifter to place a stone on top of the Pudrac in over 160 years and as befitting the celebration of a stone lifting "first", the experience is best left to the words of Johnny Reed himself -

"Our party arrived in Balquhidder late on the afternoon of Friday 22 August, 2011. In addition to Peter Martin, I was accompanied by my wife Gina, our son Michael, and her father David Fulton. As we walked to the site of the stone I was excited and nervous, as well as grateful, at being given the honour of being the first person in recent history to place a stone onto the Pudraik plinth.

The plinth at Balquhidder was guarded by three horses which provided a friendly and curious audience. They were also eager to pose for pictures after the lifting. Their presence, along with the beautiful surroundings made for a picturesque and pleasant environment for stone lifting. The stone itself sat waiting neatly in front of the plinth on slightly inclined ground. As I stood over the stone I was determined to give it my best effort. I quickly found a handhold and lifted the stone above my knees with relatively straight arms. As I began to pull it into my lap the stone rotated slightly. Combined with the uneven ground, this pulled me forward onto my toes and resulted in a moment of panic as I almost dropped the stone. Fortunately I managed to take a couple of small steps forward and recover my balance as I lapped the stone. I then stood with the stone hugged to my chest and placed it on the plinth. After a second spent staring at the stone in amazement, I was filled with the sheer joy of the moment.

After a brief rest, Peter suggested I try loading the stone from the narrow east end of the plinth. I attempted this a few times with the lifts actually being somewhat easier than the first as the stone now felt more familiar, but the lower ground and steeper approach on this end of the plinth thwarted my attempts to place the stone atop the plinth. In my enthusiasm and inexperience I repeatedly attempted to load the stone from my chest. In hindsight, shouldering the stone first would have given me the couple of inches in extra height I needed. Hopefully, I can return someday and give this strategy a try.

I will be eternally grateful for being allowed this opportunity to take part in the history of stone lifting, as well as for the simple enjoyment of lifting a stone in such a beautiful place."¹⁴

¹³ The replacement stone was found by myself, my daughter Michelle and her partner Graham McClung and subsequently cajoled, manhandled and wished to its present location.

¹⁴ Personal thanks to Johnny Reed of the USA for his personalised account of lifting the Puterach.



First modern lift of the Puterach by Johnny Reed (USA)

Just over one week later, the site was visited by **Roger Davis** (England) who lifted the stone from the ***traditional*** east side and placed it on the plinth by shouldering it. The replica stone is not heavy being between 220 and 240 lbs in weight but the difficulties of lifting is not the dead weight of the stone, but manoeuvring the lift to get sufficiently close to the plinth itself. Lifting a comparatively light stone (in stone lifting terms) and getting close to the Pudrac plinth to place the stone with outstretched arms is no easy task and the shouldering lift by Roger Davis has indeed been replicated by other lifters since.



Roger Davis (Eng) shouldering and placing

Following on from these initial visits, the Puterach has been lifted onto its plinth by **Alex Roberts** (England), **Paul Stockton** (England), **Gordon Wolcott** (USA), **Jacob Wolcott** (USA), **Peter Jensen** (Denmark) and **Craig Reid** (Australia).

All these men of strength may well have joined a large list of Highlanders who had tested their mettle lifting the heavy stone to the top of the Pudrac but although their names are no longer known there is just one who in all probability did lift the stone as he too was known for his exceptional strength.

***“Heaven gave Rob Roy a dauntless heart,
And wondrous length and strength of arm,
Nor craved he more to quell his foes,
Or keep his friends from harm.”
– Dorothy Wordsworth***

The Clan history of the Braes of Balquhiddy is reflective of the rest of the Highlands of the period, violent and brutal. Clan MacLaren are perhaps the oldest of the Balquhiddy clans but their strength was tested more than a few times over many centuries with the larger and more controlling Stewarts of Ardvorlich holding sway over vast parts of the area. Perhaps however, in the modern sense at least it is Clan MacGregor that the Braes of Balquhiddy are more associated with.



[Peter Jensen \(Denmark\)](#)

In 1558 men of Clan MacGregor slaughtered 18 families of Clan MacLaren most of whom resided within the vicinity of the Pudrac standing stone and took possession of their farms. The date is important as the Protestant Reformation took place only two years later which effectively caused the death knell to lifting heavy stones after Sunday service at the

Churchyard and hence it took place a distance from it. Consequently the Puterach may well claim to have more association with Clan MacGregor than that of MacLaren who by this time were dispersed as mercenaries throughout Europe and by having no formal land in Balquhiddy their status as a broken Clan became established.

Rob Roy McGregor was born in Glengyle which is relatively close to Balquhiddy and he died in 1734 at Inverlochlarig, Balquhiddy. Rob moved about a great deal during his lifetime and some of his exploits within Balquhiddy were notorious having at one time stolen the local Church Bell and made a gift of it to a church in Glen Lyon. More than likely that Rob Roy would have attended the Fair of Saint Angus and without question he would have attempted the Puterach. Not a historical fantasy but more a reality because as a Gael, stone lifting would have been in his blood.

Was the Puterach a MacGregor Stone? Some would argue no but most would say it most definitely was –

“Their headquarters shifted to be about Balquhiddy, a knot of wild glens to the north of Loch Katrine, where a stone called the Puderach was a palladium of the clan, the lifting of which made a test of strength for young men, and it gave a byname to the Macgregor’s of that branch.”¹⁵

“The term Puderache was applied to inhabitants of Balquhiddy, and a stone near the Church is still extant under this name. It was a test of strength for young men, who had to lift it on to another stone.”¹⁶

The inference from above is that the Balquhiddy residents are named after the Puterach lifting stone however, the time frame would suggest that the majority of these would have been from Clan MacGregor. There are in fact numerous Balquhiddy MacGregors who were named after the lifting stone -

MacGregor, ***Pudreauch*** Allester

Pudrach, Duncan son of Allester

Pudrach, Ewne McAllaster

Pudrach, Neil ¹⁷

Williame ***Pudrach*** in Auclochlinluy

James ***Pudrach*** in Croscrowie ¹⁸

In fact what is obvious is that the name Pudrach (of the lifting stone) has now supplanted the use of the surname MacGregor and to such an extent that over a period of time it has itself become a proper recognised surname.

¹⁵ Page 142 *The Heart of Scotland. A.R Hope Moncrieff (1909)*

¹⁶ *History of Clan Gregor, Amelia Georgina Murray MacGregor (1898)*

¹⁷ Page 481 *History of Clan Gregor, Amelia Georgina Murray MacGregor (1898)*

¹⁸ Page 241 *Black Book of Taymouth (1855)*

“PUIDREACH: "a Balquhidder man." Gillemichaell Pudroche and Patrick Pudroch were tenants in Clocherane, Glenurquhay, 1594 (BBT., p. 276-277), and John Puderach was a Glenorchy vassal in 1638 (ibid., p. 401). The widow of Ninian Pudrach in Auchintieir was fined for resetting outlawed Macgregors, 1613 (RPC., XIV, p. 638). John Puderach alias Buttar in Crannich, 1638 (FB., p. 354,372)”.¹⁹



The Puterach, Pudrac and Puderache (photo courtesy of Michael Reed)

The reasons for this curious change of surname by the Balquhidder MacGregors is a well understood fact of history as the Clan were, as a consequence of their unruly behaviour i.e. thieving and killing, outlawed through an act of the Scottish Parliament – they were legally not allowed to use their Clan name.

“It was ordained that the name of MacGregor should be abolished and that the whole persons of that name should renounce their name and take some other name and that they nor none of their name and that they nor none of their posterity should call themselves Gregor or MacGregor under pain of death”²⁰

Where this puts the history of the Puterach is quite obvious through history. The stone through its location is most definitely post reformation, i.e. after 1560 and through the transition in the usage of the surname it can be identified to being in use around 1617 making this site as a test of strength being over 400 years old.

¹⁹ *The Surnames of Scotland, George Fraser Black (1946)*

²⁰ *An Act of the Scottish Parliament from 1617*

Of course for the tourist, any visit to Balquhiddy means a visit to the grave of Rob Roy himself, not that everyone agrees that he is in fact buried there. In befitting his status, there was more a likelihood that he was interred within the McGregor graveyard at Glenglye at Loch Katrine which is no further from his place of death at Inverlochlarig than Balquhiddy Church and indeed information boards at the church make mention that there is considerable doubt that he is buried there. Again Victorian romanticism and its love for all things Highlander may probably have been at work in asserting the grave at Balquhiddy being that of Rob Roy although the celebrated poet Wordsworth visited both Balquhiddy and Glenglye just to make sure.



The Grave of Rob Roy MacGregor

To perhaps demonstrate some equality and with no wish to further any celebration of Clan MacGregor, it should be remembered that the area surrounding Balquhiddy was in fact the territory of Clan MacLaren until they were ousted by their oppressors, the MacGregor's. Being without a formal Clan Chief and with no Clan land as a consequence of the actions of Clan MacGregor it was not until 1957 that after securing former Clan land at Creag an Tuirc, the rallying place for the MacLaren's, that they once again established themselves as a recognised Scottish Clan. The present Chief, Donald MacLaren of MacLaren resides at Achleskine which is practically adjacent to the Church at Balquhiddy.



The Abbot Stone

To emphasise the welcomed resurgence of the Clan, its current Chief, Donald MacLaren of MacLaren has his own stone of strength located outside the door to his cottage and is named the **Abbot Stone** after its 6th century originator. The Abbot Stone has been used recently at the nearby Lochearnhead Highland Games and a number of visiting stone lifters have, on asking for permission been cordially welcomed and given an opportunity to lift the stone. The stone is modern of course

with the ringed handle been attached to it by stone lifter/blacksmith **Stan Pike**. All this begs the question about stone lifting prior to the slaughter of the MacLaren's in 1558 as their own culture would also have insured that clansmen would have lifted a heavy stone. Was it the Puterach but under a different name? The answer to that may perhaps lie in the existence of the Pudrac standing stone whose history predates that of any clan but which remains totally unknown.

Directions: From Stirling take the A84 Stirling to Crianlarich Road. Passing through Calander continue onwards towards Strathyre. Continue a short distance after Strathyre where a right turn is taken to the Kingshouse Hotel and Balquhidder. Continue on the single track road for 2 miles and park within the Balquhidder Church Car Park. Walk back (east) along the road to reach a wooden gate at a forested area. Permission should be sought at the house before tending right and down to a gate in a fenced off paddock where the Pudrac will be visible.

It should be remembered that the stone and plinth are situated on private land. The field is used for grazing horses and accordingly all efforts should be made not to frighten or startle them. All gates opened should be closed and locked and as the Thomson's have a young family it is especially important that the stone is not left on top of the plinth.

The Monachyle Stone

This stone is probably not extant but as a sister stone to the **Puterach** it is well worthy of inclusion to demonstrate the complexity of trying to uncover ancient traditional lifting stones. The only clue to the existence of this stone is that provided thus -

There' were similar stones at Monachyle, at Strathyre, and at Callander, and no doubt in every district round about, but the man who could lift " Puderag " was a strong man and a champion²¹

Notwithstanding stones of strength having been known to have been located at Strathyre and the now burgeoning town of Callander it is the stone at Monachyle that perhaps links better with the Puterach.

A number miles west along the road from Balquhidder the elongated Loch Voil ends abruptly with a small stretch of land between it and the much smaller Loch Voil. On the north bank of Loch Voil sits Monachyle Mhor and directly opposite on the south Monachyle Tuarach, so the lifting stone could have existed at either one of these locations. There was no population of any note, nor village or numbers of people that ever existed at these locations to suggest that a lifting stone would have been used regularly so we are looking at other reasons for its existence.

²¹ Page 84 Proceeding of the society of antiquaries in Scotland (1886)

To do this we require to travel some distance, over the hills to that most famous of Lochs – Loch Lomond. The hamlet of Ardlui marks the head of Loch Lomond where the river Falloch drains into the Loch however a mile or so further north lies Inverarnan, perhaps better known as an ancient cattle drovers stop but this is in fact the starting point of a well known “coffin road” that extends eastwards to the church at Balquhidder. The importance of these coffin roads cannot be stressed enough as being important as many traditional lifting stones in the Highlands and Islands are located at coffin stops along their route, most usually at the last coffin stop before the Church and hence the reason for so many anecdotes mentioning lifting stones being located *near* to the Church or Graveyard.

Commencing from Inverarnan, this route travelled east, steeply rising to the aptly named ***Beallach nan corp*** (Pass of the dead) and taking a long decent to Inverlochrraig, (the location of Rob Roy McGregor’s death) and then striking eastwards to Balquhidder. Around 1747, a known track took the direction south of Loch Doine and Loch Voil whereas by 1783, the route was known to have taken the north side of both Lochs.

The lifting stone at Monachyle is obviously associated with the coffin road and in all probability was located at Monachyle Mhor.



Just west of the Monachyle Mor Hotel there is a location which very much appears to be what would could have been the coffin stop where the lifting stone was once located with the obviousness of the flat level plinth stone, so similar to that of Torastan on the Island of Coll but yet, history has forgot and it cannot be confirmed. There is evidence of a track above the main road which passes by the plinth stone but there is nothing like what looks like a traditional lifting stone in the vicinity. Having examined a number of coffin roads and stops I would state that this indeed would have been an excellent location for the Monachyle Stone.

The Sadlin Mare of the Sma Glen

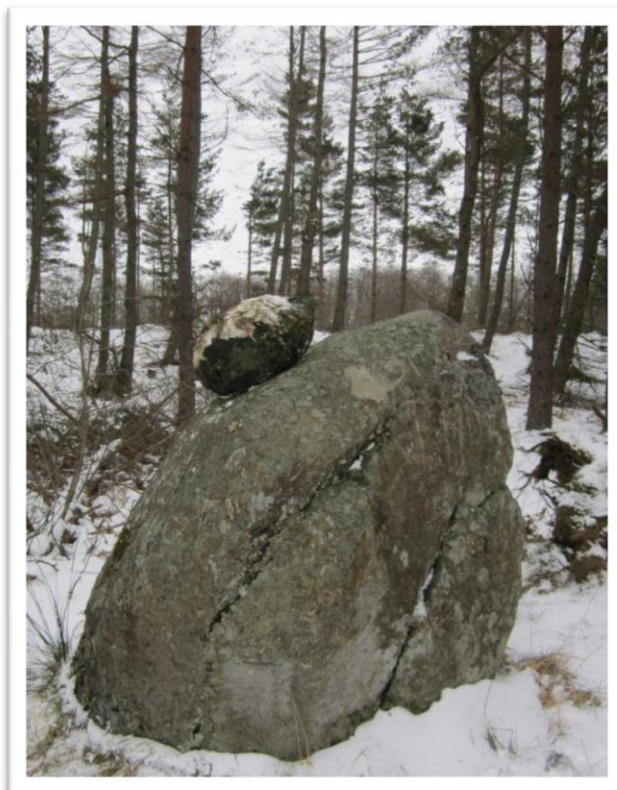
“In this still place, remote from men

Sleeps Ossian, in the narrow glen”

(Wordsworth on the Sma Glen)

Just north of the town of Crieff, on the border between the Highlands and the Lowlands of Scotland, an ancient cattle drove road extends north into the rolling Perthshire Hills passing through the narrow Sma Glen (also known as Glen Almond or Glen Urtach). There is an air of tranquil beauty as one travels into the Sma Glen, and with this an immediate realisation that you are now in the Highlands. Many famous poets and artists have travelled here to delight in its obvious beauties including Burns and Wordsworth. In waxing lyrical about the setting, few have stopped to examine the culture of the area, however have instead stopped only to view the surroundings and then put pen to paper with an indulgence of the romantic. One American writer of the Victorian era however did not fail in this respect.

The Sma Glen has Roman history, Cattle Drover history with Robbers and Thieves and it also possesses its own legend of Ossian. A truly wonderful place for the romanticist however these are the type who tend to disregard the culture of the indigenous people; for those people who stayed in the Glen or nearby had a strength culture which is so unique in Scotland, that any failure to mention would be a travesty.



The Sadlin Mare of the Sma Glen

The Sma Glen boasts a unique test of stone lifting strength and ability that is simply called “Saddlin the Mare”.

This stone lifting site was during initial investigation considered to be more a curio rather than a severe test of strength but the knowledge of it as a test has expanded over a few years. The truth is that it may well be one of the severest of stone lifting challenges available in Scotland.

The Mare is the rock plinth which stands close to the roadside passing through the Glen but which for most of the year is hidden from view by numerous conifers. The most obvious aspect of the mare is that it has an upper surface that slopes from south to north at angle of approximately 30 degrees. The lower edge of this slope is over five feet above ground level and slopes upwards to just over seven feet in height. The sloped surface is flat and quite smooth. The stone and plinth were known to a local Church of Scotland Minister who made comment on this particular feat of strength -

“We next came to "the saddlin' mear". The mare is a tall, druid-like boulder stone, shaped at the top like a sloping desk, and it needs a tall, long armed man to lift from the foot of it a round stone like a cannon ball, and place this "saddle" on the mare's back. If the man himself is not tall, or his arms not long enough, the saddle topples down and makes him jump back, to save his toes. Some of the seniors—and some of the carters—made highly unsuccessful efforts, and were ironically cheered. So we left the mear bare-backed."Mere nonsense to think of it”²²

The above text makes “saddling the mare” appear to be more of a game than a strength activity and the Rev Hardy’s appreciation of the activity as “nonsense” would appear to be pretty much in line with Victorian Presbyterian attitudes to ancient tests of strength or anything that appeared to be pagan in origin.

In the summer of 2011 the mare was found with a small rock of approximately 40 lbs sitting proudly on its summit.



²² Preacher Pastor Poet, Thomas Hardy (1910).

What was overlooked at the time was the far larger 200lb stone sitting at the base of the mare. Whatever purpose it fulfilled was unknown but the initial reasoning for its presence it was speculated to have been an aid to make the effort of saddling the mare easier. A step that gave additional height.

Later that year the site was visited by **James Grahame** (Australia). James had no problem in placing the 40lb stone onto the plinth and making it stick however the larger stone was of interest.



Saddlin the mare with the small stone and lifting the "step"

The larger "step" stone was duly lifted and most obvious was the large jug handle grip on one side of the stone. The stone appeared to be designed for lifting but again its purpose was unknown.

At this point this would have been the sole history of "The Saddlin Mare" if it was not for the chance finding of a text that throws more light on this unique location.

Clifton Johnson was an American writer who visited the Sma Glen circa 1896. Johnson was celebrated for his writings which on the most part were travelogues in various countries, but in one of his books he makes a rather exciting visit to the Sma Glen, not to see its natural beauty or observe its historical artefacts but rather a desire to see the Sadlin Mare. Johnson describes his visit to Glen Urtach, the more local name given to the Sma Glen and in which he describes with some detail the Sadlin Mare –

"Near to the entrance to the Glen were the grassy embankments of a Roman Camp, but a feature of the valley that interested me more than this relic of the dim past was a great boulder about a mile beyond. It stood a little aside from the highway, and a much used path leading to it was evidence that it had many visitors. What the attraction was, I could not have conjectured, had I not heard its story previously. It had a smooth, rounding top, and rose above the ground to a height of seven or eight feet. At its base lay three heavy stones, the largest about the size of a peck measure. It was a common custom among travellers who happened into Glen Urtach to try "Saddling the Mare" – that is, to attempt putting the stones up on the boulder. They slid off with surprising ease, and few persons had the strength or cleverness to lodge all three. Still it was allowable to boast, even if you only succeeded with the two

smaller ones. That the sport was a popular one was attested by the battered whiteness of the top of the boulder²³

The writings' of Johnson clearly states that there were three stones of varying sizes that were used as saddles for the mare. It is interesting that this stone lifting site was of more interest to him than the neighbouring Roman fort, perhaps a testament to the peculiarity of the location. A peck measure, at the time of this writing, was more a measurement of volume used commonly in America and not surprisingly it is the volume of the larger "step" stone.



The large saddle

The larger saddle, 200lb in weight and beautifully marked and scraped through the number of times it has been pushed onto the plinth was now wonderfully obvious and without the strange assistance of what in essence was an American Tourist, we would never have known the full extent of this spectacular feat of strength. The problem now was to once again initiate this unique feat of strength and in doing so, ascertain all the relevant lifting difficulties hitherto unknown to the modern stone lifter.

It was not until the 25th March 2013 that the first lifter in modern times arrived to take his chance with saddling the mare with the heavy saddle. Ignoring the snow and freezing conditions, **Alex Roberts** (England) arrived at the Sma Glen and successfully lifted the stone and made it stick to the plinth. It was no easy task.

²³ *The Land of Heather. Clifton Johnson (1903).*



Alex Roberts of England "saddlin the mare" in difficult conditions

Alex found lifting the actual stone broadways quite effortless, lifting and then placing the stone long-ways onto the plinth was far more difficult. The footing was soft and loose but still effort was required to push the saddle up the sharp slope of the plinth. Having to release occasionally to see if the stone stuck frequently resulted in the stone beginning to slip back and further effort was required to move the stone higher up the slope. Again the stone began to slide and then after one final effort, Alex removed his hand and the stone stayed where it was. Success, well at least for a few seconds as while enjoying the sight of the motionless stone, it slid back to terra firma seconds later which was perhaps inevitable due to the ice and snow. Regardless of conditions this feat of strength (and agility as well as patience) is considerably difficult and if not treated seriously may result in injury if the lifter is careless.

As Alex explains –

“The stone itself is around 200lb so not a difficult stone as lifting stones go but no other lifting stone has to be pushed up a smooth rock slope and above head height.

When I first encountered this unusual trial of strength, the lifting stone itself was covered in snow and ice and I found myself having to scrape off as much of this as possible so that I could try to figure out the best way to lift it.

I managed a couple of small hops with the stone, trying to find the balance point. The stone has a protruding lump on one end of it, very much like a jug handle and this aids the gripping of the stone a great deal but I did find that when using this grip aid, the stone had a tendency to twist or roll away from you when it lifts off the ground so a firm hold with the other hand is required.

When I had the stone in my lap there were no problems in standing up but this where it gets tricky. In hindsight I should have shouldered the stone as a little extra height would be an advantage in getting the stone placed onto the start of the slope. I had

the stone at my chest and had to lean against the plinth and change my grip to get my hands underneath the stone to start the push up the steep slope.

This is where a taller lifter would have a definite advantage. Being five foot eight inches in height, I found myself having to fully extend the arms and push with my legs and even with just my fingers at one point. The ground around the base of the plinth slopes away at quite an angle so getting in close is very difficult.

I had a few problems getting the stone to stay in position on the slope, ice and snow did not help at all and every time I let go of the stone, it would start to slide back towards me and if I had let my concentration lapse at all, I could have ended up with rather a bad injury. I would not want to visit this stone alone, just in case of any mishaps.

I eventually, after much frustration and effort, got the stone to stay in position and allow me to step back carefully.”²⁴

Just as there are many ways to skin a cat, there are also many ways to saddle the mare. On 15th June 2004 **Martin Jancsics** (Elgin, Scotland) visited the site and saddled the mare in a completely different way than Alex Roberts by lifting the stone and placing it long-ways on the plinth allowing a portion of the stone to fall back and give a better degree of friction allowing it to stick.



Martin Jancsics willing the saddle to stick

The summer of 2014 opened up this stone to many of the stone lifting fraternity with the poor mare eventually succumbing to some of the best that modern strength could throw upon its sloped back. Visits by **Martin Jancsics** (Scotland), **Peter Jensen** (Denmark), **Lance Holland Keen** (Australia), **Craig Reid** (Australia) and **Dan Gregory** (USA) added a truly

²⁴ Special thanks to Stone Lifter Alex Roberts of Birmingham England for his personal account of sadlin the mare.

international flavour to this traditional test of strength and although each lift could be said to have been carried out in differing climatic conditions, so much of how it was once done was learned and each lifter came away with a greater respect for those who had went before.



Summer 2014 -L to R Lance Holland Keen (Aus), Craig Reid (Aus), Peter Jensen (Den)

Perhaps not so obvious from the photographs but those of added height are at a distinct advantage with this lift and if you happen to be low and squat, I would suggest either training to be able to jump backwards rather quickly or wear a protective helmet because the saddle does have a propensity to slip back to the ground.

If you are interested in the history of when this feat was achieved then this has been duly recorded. It would appear that those successful in previous attempts of saddling the mare have simply etched their initials and year of lift on the south west face of the mare. Along with some curious designs, the last recorded lift marked on the stone is 1941 however there are many markings which far predate this which are slowly eroding.



Record of a previous attempt?

As stated, the jug handle grip on the side of the large stone gives considerable assistance in its lifting. There are no serious grip issues with lifting the stone but lifting it onto the “mare” and making it stay in place is a serious matter which is extremely difficult to achieve. This a more contrived form of lifting the heavy stone on top of a plinth, but a plinth with considerably more height which requires substantial upper body strength to raise the stone to head height. This contrivance from the norm of accepted stone lifting may well have something to do with the locations proximity to the central lowlands of Scotland but it is in itself, a curio of Highland Strength Culture which has been replicated nowhere else and again proves the point that in Scottish Stone Lifting, there is no generic or standard that was applied throughout the country.

In September 2012, the site was visited and the small stone was missing. The heavy stone is still in place but with the location of this site having recently been highlighted on a popular website had attracted the vandal who had attempted to score his name in a vulgar fashion on the west side of the plinth. This will eventually be weathered leaving only the carvings in the rock made by those who have been successful in the past in managing to saddle the mare. There is no visitor’s book here, just a large slab of rock where your initials can be carved for posterity.

In 1867 the Mare was incorrectly named as “Clach Ossian” when the real stone paying tribute to the mighty Fingalian is easily seen from the road a further mile northwards. Not satisfied with getting it wrong first time, the Mare is now referred to in some web sites and the current OS map as the “Giants Grave”.

“Approaching it from Crieff, our attention was directed first to a huge block of whitish stone lying only a few yards to the right of the road, at a point not many score yards before the seventh milestone from Crieff is reached.¹ This is wrongly named on the O.M. Ossian’s Stone (OM – Ordnance survey map). The real Ossian’s Stone of the local tradition is rather more than a mile farther up the Glen, close to a strip of ground”

¹ This boulder is locally known as Saddle the Mare ²⁵

There is much confusion in this locale as the Giants Grave is actually a cairned mound situated 90 yards south of the Mare. Fortunately some early 20th Century archaeologists as stated above were able ascertain the error while they were searching for the Stone of Ossian. To some historians the true site of the giant’s grave is that of Ossian. It is recorded that when the massive stone known as Clach Ossian was moved by General Wade when constructing his military road, a burial cist was found underneath it and the remains and artefacts suggested at the time that the stone was a burial marker for a Roman Centurion which fits in well with there being a known Roman camp site nearby.

General Wade’s road was also utilised as a Drovers route and Highlanders as far away as from Skye would drive their black cattle through the narrow Sma Glen on route to the cattle market at Crieff. It is perhaps unfortunate that when only 6 miles from the market, the Highland Drover would have to pay tribute (Blackmail) to the Cateran’s (cattle thieves) who would descend from the steep slopes. One of the Cateran’s Caves is clearly seen on the eastern flank of the Glen and it would be reasonable to assume that it was these men that

²⁵ *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries in Scotland, December 12, (1910).*

started the game of Sadlin the Mare. The Cateran were formally Gallowglass and were notorious strongmen who would have practiced with stones daily.

To emphasise how frequently the activity of blackmail took place within the Highlands, the word itself, so commonly used in the legal language of English speaking nations, has its etymology rooted in the activity of the Gaelic stone lifting caterans.

“Black-mail, The word mail is derived from the Gaelic “Mal”; rent, tax or tribute, and “mala”; a bag, a sack, a purse, a budget to contain the tribute.....it has been conjectured that blackmail derived its name from the black cattle of the Highlands, for whose protection against thieves and caterans the tribute was levied.”²⁶

Strangely, despite its obvious Scottish origins, the word blackmail is not used within Scottish legal parlance, it has been supplanted with the common law crime of Extortion however travelling further up the Glen, to the east of the road stands a resplendent, monolithic stone which is **the** Ossian’s Stone.



Clach Ossian

If visiting the Sma Glen it would be worth stopping at Clach Ossian itself and for the believers in all things Fingalian, I would ask for a simple comparison between the photograph of PB Martin at the stone as shown in MILO June 2004, Vol 12, No 1 and with the photograph opposite and it is clear that a few stones have been added to its top. It is an ancient Highland tradition to “add a stone to the cairn” of the deceased to show respect. I am sure that a few believers will wish to continue this tradition.

There is however another assertion of how these stones have ended up on the upper surface and strange as it may seem, modern archaeologists have mentioned the Clach Ossian as being a reception plinth for traditional stone lifting!²⁷ Personally I have never came across anything historically that alludes to this being a stone lifting site and I do think

²⁶ A Dictionary of Lowland Scotch, Charles McKay (1888).

²⁷ <https://megalithix.wordpress.com/2014/10/08/ossians-stone/>

that the stones on top of Clach Ossian have been placed there simply as a statement of remembrance – it is Gaelic culture.

So there we have the Saddlin Mare of the Sma Glen. A stone of strength seen by the likes of poets such as Wordsworth and Burns, a site where Highland Drovers passed by and no doubt the Mare was also known to the Romans who were camped less than 1km away. A stone of strength perhaps known to the Highland Catheran's who sought Blackmail from the Drover herding cattle to Crieff. This is the beauty of stone lifting as its associated history is the most compelling and colourful.

Directions . From the Town of Crieff which is easily reached from the M9/A9 Stirling to Perth Road, travel east on the A85 to the village of Gilmerton approximately 3 miles east from Crieff. Turn onto the A822 for Aberfeldy and a further 3 miles along this road is the Sma Glen. As you enter the Glen a wooded section of Conifers is seen on the east of the road and the Saddlin Mare can be seen hiding within a clear section of the wood. Clach Ossian is a further one mile along the road and is obvious.

The Ardvorlich Stone



The Ardvorlich Stone

This stone is not a curio of stone lifting rather it is a curio of history. It is neither well known in stone lifting circles and in addition it also seems to lack any formal written or associated history, making an attempt to explain its inclusion in this book somewhat difficult. However, those that have attempted this “muckle brute” of a stone have left with a deep respect and appreciation of it.

The historic attributes are indeed difficult to ascertain save one important aspect of the placement of stones of strength. Many writers have mentioned that such a stone could be found at the Clan Chiefs door or in this case at the entrance to an estate house.

“A great stone, which formerly was laid at the gate of a laird in Scotland, and by which he tried the bodily strength of each man in his clan.”²⁸

The Ardvorlich Stone purely by its location fits well into being an example of a stone of strength laid at the gate of a laird and Ardvorlich House is occupied by Alexander Donald Stewart of Stewart of Balquhidder, 15th Laird of Ardvorlich but not chief of Clan Stewart and the estate has been the ancestral home of the Balquhidder Stewarts for over 400 years.

The Ardvorlich stone is so obviously a test of strength which through the passage of time, its lifting history has been long lost. In so far that there are hundreds of such stones situated all over the Highlands of Scotland, this stone is perhaps the best that matches the definitions as laid out above.

Personal knowledge of this stone was simply acquired through one of the many forays that the late PB Martin accompanied by his brother in law Matt Blaney made into the high mountains of the Highlands with my-self as official photographer. In 1989 an early Sunday morning drive took us to Lochearnhead to tackle Ben Vorlich, a relatively simple but steep walk with no serious difficulties. Parking on the shores of Loch Earn, we entered Ardvorlich Estate looking for the signed path for hill walkers and there at the beginning of the long driveway that extended to the mansion house was the unmistakable sign pointing south. At this point it was all stop as sitting proudly beside the marker was a large rounded stone which was more than a decorative ornament. It was a lifting stone. PB Martin approached the stone, no towel to dry the excess moisture from it and no chalk for grip he simply walked up to the stone and lifted it. Pulling it up to his knees the stone could rise no further and that was it for the strength test of the day with a returning focus on clambering up the large hill ahead of us.

Many hours later on returning via the estate we again passed the stone with just a short pause to admire its bulk and with a shake of the head, the old man simply walked on. The time frame is modern, just being over 25 years ago but it was a time before any serious research had been made into lifting stones in Scotland and well before any thoughts on the creation of ***“Of Stones and Strength”***. Why indeed the Ardvorlich Stone failed to feature in the seminal book on Scottish stone lifting is not so much a mystery rather it was a simple omission. One has to consider that at the time of the lift, bringing the stone up to knee height was not considered a lift proper and putting it into perspective through the knowledge we have now, anyone who has attempted this stone will simply say it was a remarkable lift.

So there we have the Ardvorlich Stone and although it was later mentioned in a MILO publication, the stone lay there at the entrance to Ardvorlich House, devoid of history and devoid of lifting.

²⁸ *A Military Dictionary. Lieutenant Colonel William Duane of the United States Army (1810)*



Roger Davis (Eng) and Peter Jensen (Den) putting air underneath the Ardvorlich stone with two contrasting styles

Estate workers at Ardvorlich have confirmed the stone as a stone of strength and it is well known that the Stewarts of Ardvorlich were well acquainted with the more famous Puterach at Balquhiddy, indeed one of the ancestors of the present Laird explains the pronunciation of the Puterach. It is more than likely that this branch of the Stewarts has their own testing stone and this is most obviously it.

As expected from most stones of strength, grip or rather the lack of it is a serious issue with this stone. It is exceptionally smooth and being situated in a wooded area it also boasts a layer of algae compounding any attempt at grip. Having an off-set centre of gravity, it is best perhaps to roll and get a feel for the stone first, feel its weight and then attempt grip. The stone requires a thorough examination as preparation and a straight forward lifting attempt without this will likely result in failure.

Since the release of "Of Stones and Strength" the stone has only been budged four times with **Peter Jensen** (Denmark), **Roger Davis** (England), **Alex Roberts** (England) and the late **Peter B Martin** (Scotland) holding the honours. With more exposure to its existence the stone will someday entice more to test their muscle on this particular stone which has been lifted and put into the lap only once by Alex Roberts.



Alex Roberts (Eng) getting to grips with the Ardvorlich Stone.

If visiting this site I would suggest taking the opportunity of viewing a fine example of Highland legal justice. In 1620 AD, a group of MacDonald's of Glen Coe carried out a cattle raid at Ardvorlich. In the skirmish that followed, seven of Clan MacDonald were slain by the Stewarts and their bodies lay in a shallow grave near the loch until their remains were discovered some years later and they were then afforded a decent grave.

A stone marker, situated to the west of the stone bridge and entrance to the estate can easily be identified.



Burial Marker Stone

The inscription on the stone reads – *Near this spot were interred the bodies of 7 McDonalds of Glencoe killed when attempting to harry Ardvorlich Anno Domini 1620.*

Most people visiting the area are totally unaware of this stone, then again most are equally unaware of the stone of strength a short distance away.

Directions – *From Stirling take the A84 road to Callander and continue through the town centre onwards to Strathyre and Lochearnhead. Note that a turnoff at the Kingshouse Hotel gives quick access to the Puterach at Balquhidder. Continue northwards on the A84 and just prior to Lochearnhead, a right turn is taken onto the Loch Earn South Road.*

This road, which is single track, is followed for just over 2.5 miles when the entrance to Ardvorlich is clearly seen on the right. Parking may well be difficult as the route is well used by hill walkers however a space is usually found on the loch side of the road. Walk into the estate following the obvious road and the stone is quite obvious at the entrance driveway to Ardvorlich house some 400 yards from the loch entrance.

Clach a' bhoisgein

Well over fifty years ago I was born at Strone in Cowal, Argyllshire which could be no more than 5 miles distant from where this stone once stood. As a babe in arms I was brought into the world with the slopes of Ben More steeply falling into the dark slither of water known as Loch Eck and my first home, a foresters cottage on the opposing shore line was not afforded the luxury of electricity and rooms were lit by gas. For reasons that are obvious, the Clach a' bhoisgein is a special stone.



Ben More and Loch Eck

Personal sentiments put to the side for a moment, the Clach a' bhoisgein is more than a special stone as its existence demonstrates a peculiarity of Gaelic culture which might not be as rare or as unique as once thought and again, by virtue of its name, it does give us some indication as to how the stone was lifted.

To start with, the name of the stone throws up all the common problems associated with the Gaelic language in that many just simply fail to correctly assess nomenclature and are quick to assert, in most cases, a romantic assertion to the language.

CLACHABHOISGEAN (DK): Clach, a stone, boillsgean, flashing shining. Dwelly gives "Clach a' bhoisgean, a putting stone (Cowal)"²⁹

Of course Dwelly in his own dictionary does not expand on the descriptive but simply states that stone is a Putting Stone i.e. a lifting stone, perhaps for good reason. The translation of

²⁹ Page 41 *The Place names of Cowal: their meaning and history.* Angus McLean (1982)

“**The Flashing Stone**” has stuck for many years and even appeared in some books that mention stone lifting.³⁰

Gaelic language expert, **Michael Baeur** who created the acclaimed “**Am Faclair Beag**” on-line Gaelic dictionary gives this explanation of what appears to be a misconstrued interpretation in language -

“Clach a' bhoisgein is ambiguous but I seriously doubt the 1907 translation as 'flashing'. The problem is that boisgean/boisgein is not recorded as a root but there are two possible contenders. One is the root boillsge 'flash, gleam, sparke' but while that has a plural in boillsgean, it doesn't fit because a' is the genitive singular article. There is a word boillsgean but none of the meanings fit (centre of a fire) but theoretically, the grammar would work i.e. clach a' bhoillsgein is grammatical and the loss of ll in this position in speech is very common.

But I think we're more likely dealing with a dropped vowel here, making the word boiseagan (bas 'palm' gen. boise, -(e)ag which is a diminutive suffix (giving us boiseag 'palmful') and -an which is another diminutive but also often used as a nominaliser i.e. to make a concrete noun out of something), giving us boiseagan which Dwelly glosses as 'coddle' (meaning cuddle). So that would make it the 'cuddling stone' though I'd probably translate it more freely as 'cradling stone'. As you can cradly objects on your shoulder, that works much better than the flashing.”³¹

Such is the assuredness in language that **Am Faclair Beag** now shows the following translation -

clach-boiseagain

boir. gin. cloiche-boiseagain, iol. -an-boiseagain
putting stone (lifted onto the shoulder)

So we now have the direct translation being “**the shouldered stone**” which apparently ties into the associated culture of why the stone was lifted.

“Clach a Bhoisgean – A Gaelic word signifying “Putting Stone” is the name of a boulder in Glen Masson, about a mile from Garrachra House, Cowal. Tradition had it that the young men and maidens had to raise the stone previous to getting married – the youths having to shoulder it and carry it round a circle, and the maids to raise the stone to the knee.”³²

Requiring a prospective bride and groom, each to lift a heavy stone as part of a Gaelic

³⁰ On page 132 of *Scottish Highland Games*, David P Webster (1973) it mentions that the stone was so named because it was made of polished granite and flashed in the sun light.

³¹ Per email dated 22/10/2013

³² *The Celtic Monthly a Magazine for Highlanders* Volume 15 (1907)

marriage ritual is certainly not a generic practice and some may say that it is indeed unusual at the very least but it should be emphasised that for a substantial part of Gaelic culture and history, marriages like funerals were not always seen as a religious ceremony and could be best described as a civil service without the requirement of a Minister or Priest to be present. As such, local practices seemed to have evolved independently with no overall generic ritual procedure. Other lifting stones are alleged to have been lifted with a similar association to a pre-marriage ritual.

A stone lifted onto a plinth stone in Glenelg was allegedly a requirement for a prospective bride and on the island of Coll, both the island's lifting stones, the Clach Altruman Mor and Clach Altruman Beag have a "his" and "hers" lifting association but nothing certain to be confirmed as part of a marriage ritual.

Perhaps the closest lifting stone that duplicates the lifting requirements of the Clach a' bhoisgean is strangely not even Scottish, it is located just south of the border in England.

Bewkly Blue Stane, Bewkly Blue Stane,

Many a youth has broken his bane, However so good at a putting were he.

Nelly of Elsdon, with kyes and with land, shall marrow the man who lifts Bewkley Blue Stane

They come from the east, the west and the north, to put for her tocher oh faith they are fain

Bewkley Blue Stane, Bewkly Blue Stane never a youth of them a' has thee stirr'd

There's Willy of Ovingham, Haltwhistle Dick, and Billy of Reedwater, Otterburn's herd.

And Charley of Framlington, Watty of Cambo, with Roger of Wooler, are straining their back;

They grin as they strive, and they roar and they rive, And the bones and the sinews stretch out with a crack.

Then Diccon of Bewick came into the midst, for a sailor was Diccon, a fair seeing wight,

And he threw off his jacket, and rolled up his sleeves, and grappled the Blue Stane wi'pith and wi'might

He raised up the stane from the ground to his haunch, then shoulder ways bore it ten paces on high,

And told Nelly of Elsdon to sit on the top, and segs with it Diccon o'er Cheviot could fly.

Then Diccon took up the muckle Blue Stane, and flang it six shathmonts over the lea;

Ne'er a one there, had he been Wallace Wight ,I trow could have lifted it up to his knee³³

Clearly, as indicated on the underlined section above, lifting the stone, shouldering it and then walking ten paces with it is almost a complete mirror of the marriage culture associated with the Clach a' bhoisgean. The question to be asked is whether this similarity is simply a coincidence or indeed is there some Gaelic link to both stones. Another aspect of the rhyme about the Blue Stone of Bewkley is that not only does it have the stone carry as a lift, it also

³³ *The Minstrelsy of the English Border by Frederick Sheldon (1847)*

mentions the “lift and throw” which is decidedly Gaelic.

Perhaps this could be explained due to the obvious Highland Gaelic influence in the area –

“Bewkley or Bekely is a small village near Elsdon, a wild mountainous region. The putting or lifting of the Bewkley Blue Stane is often reported to at holidays or fairs held in the immediate neighbourhood of the stone. The Drovers of Morpeth, from one of whom I received this snatch”³⁴

The village of Bewkley was situated in Northumberland close to the Scottish border and was reputedly a stop on the **great drift road**, a route used extensively by Highland Cattle drovers taking their cattle to market at Morpeth. The rhyme is full of known Scots words and associations but again one has to remember that even in stone lifting, crossovers in cultural practice occurred.

Another aspect of this stone is that Sheldon in his article also mention the occasional requirement for the prospective bride to lift the Bewkley Blue Stone into her lap and this only demonstrates that there are far too many similarities to make both the Clach a’ bhoisgean and the Bewkley Blue Stane simply a coincidence – there has been quite a remarkable carriage of Gaelic culture over the border into England.

The Clach a’ bhoisgean too has its own rhyme, one in which there is a clue to it being completely fabricated for the purposes of the original magazine article and which will be explained at its conclusion.

“The following lines, composed by a descendant of Lag Uaine, may interest some of our readers

*History has handed down,
Clach a Bhoisgean,
How our Patron, Old St Munn,
Raised this stone,
And to all his charge made known,
That by raising thee alone,
Youth might Manhoods title own,
Or maid be won.*

*Centuries have flown since then,
Clach a Bhoisgean,*

³⁴ *The Minstrelsy of the English Border by Frederick Sheldon (1847)*

*Countless Maids and stalwart Men,
Raised this stone,
View thy boulders mossy green,
Towering Monarch, Mighty Ben,
And the race that claims thee kin,
Thou'lt disown.*

*Every youth must shoulder thee,
Clach a Bhoisgean,
Every maiden to the knee,
Raise this stone,
Still like those of yore to be,
Blessed by a posterity,
Worthy of their pedigree,
And renown.*

*Shall the sons of Cowal cower,
Clach a Bhoisgean,
Daunted in their manly power,
By the stone,
Shall the shade of huge Ben More,
Garrachra alone explore,
And our hoary sires deplore,
The old race is gone. “³⁵*

The clue to the rhyme being fabricated is that the original opening mentions that it was composed by a descendent of **Lag Uaine** which, according my knowledge (as a son of Cowal) is an area located high in the steep North East slopes of a mountain near Arrochar³⁶ called Ben Ime. Local folklore mentions that Lag Uaine was a place where fairies lived so the inference is the author has fabricated the poem himself.

The Clach a' bhoisgean is no more and simply cannot be found and was apparently located

³⁵ *The Celtic Monthly a Magazine for Highlanders Volume 15 (1907)*

³⁶ *Arrochar is a small village at the head of Loch Long where in my youth many long summer weeks were spent either with my grandparents or uncles. The ashes of the late PB Martin, co-author of Of Stones and Strength were scattered over the bridge parapets leaving the village to the west.*

close to Garrachra Farm in Glen Masson, famous for the Glen Masson Scroll, a written Gaelic document dated around 1000 AD which tells of the story of "Deirdre of the Sorrows" predating the epic poems of Ossian as translated by James McPherson some 700 years later.

As for all lifting stones, there should be a reason for its existence and location and for the Clach a' bhoisgean, knowledge of the existence of an old graveyard close to Garrachra could point to the stone owing its existence to a now defunct "coffin road". Unfortunately this has not aided in finding the stone but the search will continue.