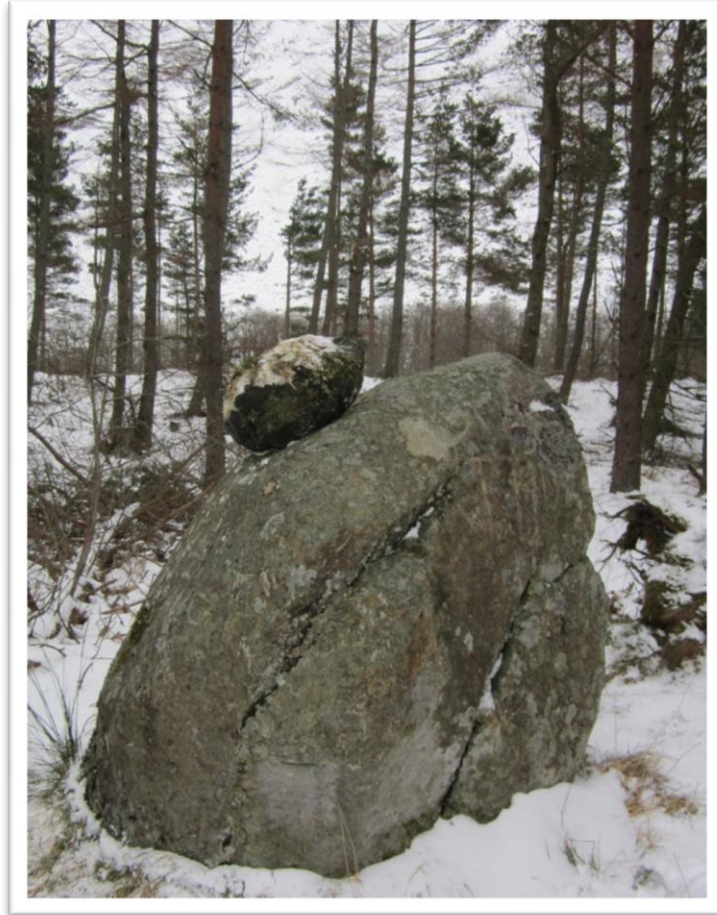


The Sadlin Mare of the Sma Glen

“In this still place, remote from men

Sleeps Ossian, in the narrow glen”

(Wordsworth on the Sma Glen)



The Sadlin Mare of 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 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”¹

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.



¹ 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 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 of 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 boulder²

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 from England arrived at the Sma Glen and successfully lifted the stone and made it stick to the plinth. It was no easy task.

² *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.”³

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 of 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

³ Special thanks to Stone Lifter Alex Roberts of Birmingham England for his personal account of sadlin the mare.

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 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.

One contemporary visit to the mare occurred on Wednesday 25th July 1900. During an annual excursion of the **“Cults and District Field Cabbage Association”** these Aberdonian agriculturalists stopped off at the mare during their horse and carriage tour of Perthshire.

“A halt was made at a large stone by the side of the road called “the Mare”. It is considered a feat of strength in those parts to be able to saddle the mare. The saddling consists in one man lifting a round stone of about 1½cwts onto the top of the larger stone. This was easily done by two of the Cults men, much to the

amazement of the driver, who had driven on that road for 23 years, he said, and had never seen it done before”⁴



Forestry workers stopping of at the Sadlin Mare in 1954 (Photo courtesy of Jim McIntyre - no 14 in photo)

In the summer of 1953 a group of forestry workers engaged in planting at the nearby Keilour forest stopped off at the Sma Glen. The majority of the men then engaged in saddling the mare to varying degrees of success however by some margin the lift of Ronald MacAulay (No 8) was the most successful when he lifted the stone atop the plinth and made it stick without any requirement to push it.

What is clearly evident from the photograph is the strange array of stones with the smaller stone placed atop the larger. Obviously by this time the third stone as mentioned by Johnson has disappeared and the upper stone does appear to resemble the small stone as delicately placed by James Grahame when the site was initially visited but this too is now lost.

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

⁴ *The Dundee Courier* Friday 27th July 1900

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.

One would be expected to think that the mare is well known locally however the converse applies and it appears that as the conifers year by year grew around the mare the memory of it as a place where strength was tested also sadly disappeared. To most the Sma Glen is synonymous with its most famous artefact known as “Clach Ossian”.

In 1867 the Mare was incorrectly named by Ordnance Survey cartographers 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 ⁵

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 however this confusion continued till as late as 1929.

The Ordnance Map wrongly marks, as ' Clach Ossian,' another stone on the E. side of the road through the Sma' Glen about a furlong short of the 7th milestone from Crieff. This is the stone known locally as ' Saddle the Mare ' ; the upper part of it is worn smooth by the attempts, successful and unsuccessful of many generations of Glenalmond boys and other visitors to the Glen, to saddle the mare, i.e.to push up and poise on the top the large round stones that lie about it. ⁶

To some historians the true site of the giant's grave is that of Ossian. It is visible from the Mare as a rounded raised mound set within the deeply wooded surrounding area. The stone known as Clach Ossian was moved by General Wade when constructing his military road at which point a burial cist was found underneath it. 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. The reverence held for Ossian by the Gael is behind the fact that the probable remains of the Roman Centurion were repatriated by the locals who then buried Ossian at a secret site.

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

⁵ *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries in Scotland, December 12, (1910).*

⁶ *Page 323 The Glenalmond Register (1929)*

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 of the enclosing hills. 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 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.”⁷

Strangely, despite its obvious Scottish origins, the word blackmail is not used within Scottish legal parlance and 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 Fingallian, 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 above 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.

⁷ A Dictionary of Lowland Scotch, Charles McKay (1888).

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! ⁸ Personally I have never come across anything historically that alludes to this being a stone lifting site and I do think 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 Cateran'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 location of this site and its ease of reach should really make it a “must visit”. The Mare can be reached in just over 30 mins by road from the Wallace Putting Stone and on continuing, Aberfeldy and the Menzies stone is also only 30 mins travel by car.

⁸ <https://megalithix.wordpress.com/2014/10/08/ossians-stone/>