

The Puterach & The Puidrac Standing Stone

Puterach possibly from the Gaelic Putaireachd meaning "pushing" and perhaps a reference to the broken off section of the Puidrac suggesting that the final section of the lift incorporated a push to the flat section of the plinth. OR Pudhair which is the Gaelic form of the Scots word for "Power". As the Puterach was supposedly named after the inhabitants of Balquhiddy it could suggest that the area had a former name.



The Puidrac Standing Stone – Plinth for the Puterach

The Puidrac standing stone is situated approximately 400 yards east of the Parish Church in the hamlet of Balquhiddy in Stirlingshire and has many associations with the Clan McGregor and the Clan Stewart. Famous or infamous depending on one's perspective, the area is very much regarded as Rob Roy McGregor country and his birthplace of Inverlochlarig is further west of Balquhiddy and Rob himself is buried within the churchyard at Balquhiddy which itself is a prominent tourist location.

The first written reference to the Puterach was made in page 209 of "McClans Highlanders at Home" by James Logan and published in 1848. Logan who was famous for his rather

romantic portrayal of Highland life and culture the accuracy of which, on occasion fails to hold up to scrutiny, makes only a reference to a “Stone of Strength” named the Puterach.

In his text he neither describes the stone, nor the fact that it was lifted onto the Puidrac Plinth stone, but waxes lyrically regarding the reasons for the stone being lifted in the first instance. Initially, Logan describes all heavy lifting stones as Clach Neart for which the Gaelic translates directly as *stone of strength* and which the etymology is now understood to refer to a putting stone. I would perhaps agree with Logan in that Clach Neart was the generic phrase used for **all** stones of strength, not only putting stones however Logan, in his text begins to deviate and makes reference to Clach cuid fir and that a youth would only become a man after he had lifted such a stone.

In his earlier book “A Scottish Gael” written circa 1830, Logan again refers to a Clach cuid fir which was lifted by a youth to allow himself to be called a man but states that in doing so, he was now permitted to wear a bonnet. Fortunately, the text mentioning the Puterach omits this.

Clach cuid fir translates directly as *stone of a man’s portion* which allows the successful stone lifter to be presented with a man’s portion of food and hence its modern translation as “Manhood Stone”.

The Gaelic of Logan I would suggest was misrepresentative of actual stone lifting in Gaelic culture, having failed to mention the many variances in the Gaelic language and the diversity of meaning depending on area. An example of this would be the phrase Clach Utaich being a stone which is lifted into the lap like most testing stones, however in Perthshire or Arran this would mean a burden lifted on the back. Similarly, on the island of Skye an Utaich was the maximum that a man could lift and indeed this would be representative of the famous Clach Utaich at Dunvegan which weighs in excess of one ton.

There are many Gaelic phrases used for stones of strength listed in various Gaelic Dictionaries however Clach cuid fir does not appear. I would accept that there may well have been some stones that were lifted to prove manhood however from Logan’s text I would suggest that the Puterach was not such a stone.

I would further suggest that there is a reasonable inference from the text of Logan, which is bereft of any description of the stone, that there is the probability that he indeed never visited the stone and made mention of it through pure hearsay.

I think there is a place for Logan’s work however it should be remembered that he had some personal problems in his lifetime. He was known as being extremely unreliable in his employment, probably as a consequence of his heavy drinking and in his youth was rather unfortunately struck on the head by a flying Highland Games Hammer causing him to have a large metal plate attached to his skull for the remainder of his life.

Logan's books were well received and many later books of this era, by other authors, quoted him with reference to the phrase Clach cuid fir.

The second and more detailed text which was made regarding the Puterach was written in 1886 by James Hamilton Gow. A chapter in the 1886/87 issue of the "Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland" entitled "Notes on Blaquhidder" written by Gow is far more descriptive and informative.

Gow clearly describes the "wedge shaped rock" being a prominent monolith situated on the level ground below "Tom na Croich" where feats and tests of strength took place. Although not mentioned by name, this plinth stone is clearly the Puidrac. Gow makes no reference to the Puterach being a Manhood Stone or Clach cuid fir.

He further describes the Puterach lifting stone as being, a round water worn boulder weighing between 2 and 3cwt. This description is of significance which will be later explained.

Further explanation of the plinth stone describes a former stone projection some 18 inches from the level top and on which the Puterach was rested on its journey. It is only a suggestion, however I would say that there is some significance in the fact that the stone after receiving its rest, may well have been pushed to its final resting place on the flat top and I would suggest that the name of the stone itself is suggestive of this. On the other hand I could be wrong.

I just wonder where, in the context of the ethics of the modern stone lifter, that the inference or even suggestion of using the former ledge for a rest, would cause a substantial debate as to whether the actual lift was clean or not. I am sure the Highlander stone lifter would disagree and be well prepared to argue his ethics.

It is clear from Gow's text that there was some concern by the Parish Church Minister over the degree of injury being sustained by lifters and hence the stone was either disposed of by it being thrown into the nearby river or built into the boundary wall of the church manse.

As read, this would be a fair and understandable outcome however there are many examples around 1820 to 1850 of a Presbyterian push to rid various parishes of any form of strength athletics. The minister of Old Dailly Church in Ayrshire managed to rid the church of the fabled blue stones by also depositing them in the nearby river however they were retrieved by some locals and still survive. There was also a push by the minister in Glen Lyon to rid his parish of not only stone lifting but also putting the stone and hammer throwing.

Perhaps the underlying reason for this attitude was that, in many cases in the highland parishes, it was difficult for ministers to have parishioners actually obey the law of the Sabbath. King James VI produced an act called the Book of Sports which actively encouraged

men to participate in war like or strength activities regardless of day and many ministers went to great lengths to insure full participation of a Sunday service despite this act being common knowledge. Apart from the examples of denial, there are many more where ministers also participated in feats of strength, beat the best and then demanded attendance at church. I would suggest that the Parish Minister at Balquhiddy was perhaps one of those in denial of strength activities however I am consciously aware of the many colourful ministers and personalities that the Church has been fortunate to have over the years, and the book "An Octogenarian Highlander" is testament to that.

The finality of the Puterach is subject to much folklore. Was the stone deposited within the Manse wall or was it thrown back into the river? Having spoken to the present occupant of the Old Manse and had a brief examination of the wall (and according to the owner, I have not been the first) I would conclude thus.

From the description given by Gow in his text, the Puterach was water rounded. The predominant rock type in the area of Balquhiddy is Ben Ledi Grit Stone which much of the Manse wall is constructed. The nature of Grit stone, although suitable for building and millstones etc has a tendency to fracture in a slate like manner and would not be well suited for lifting onto a high plinth. However, it is well known that there are various granite intrusions within the nearby river bed.

It is well accepted, in Scotland at least, that Granite makes the best lifting stone for various reasons. The surface texture makes it slightly difficult to grip adding to the test of lifting and it has a tendency to have a higher specific density, except of that of Dolerite, than many other rock types. In addition, the mottled surface of Granite makes the stone more visually pleasing to the eye.

I would conclude, that there is little doubt that the Puterach was originally taken from a granite intrusion in the river bed and that is where it remains today. There is little or no evidence of Granite within the Manse wall.

The third and final text was written in 1898 by Amelia Murray McGregor in her book "The History of Clan Gregor" and was simply a confirmation of the existence of a lifting stone at Balquhiddy and that it was named after the inhabitants of the area.

It is abundantly clear from what has been written, that although the Puterach has been lost and it will be unlikely, if ever, to be retrieved, the Puidrac plinth stone still exists. Within the context of the Scottish tradition of Stone lifting this is one of few sites that possesses a formal reception plinth, and although there are many books and written references to such plinths, the Puidrac stands alone save the possibility of a similar plinth in Glenelg and the possibility of one at Cashlie in Glen Lyon.

The possibility of a replacement for the Puterach at this historic site would cause much excitement within the Stone Lifting Community worldwide. The history of the site, it's

obvious association with Rob Roy who would have undoubtedly stood at Puidrac plinth, or perhaps even attempted the Puterach, would make this a must do for the stone lifter should a replacement for the Puterach be found. The draw of a genuine plinth, so commonly mentioned but until recently lacking in existence would perhaps be the greatest draw to this site and would afford the lifter a genuine cultural and historical experience far greater than lifting manmade stones onto manmade barrels. Add to this the natural beauty of the surrounding's, the overall ambience is such that Disney would be unable to replicate the experience.

And how would the draw of such a site effect the new owners of the land on which the Puidrac plinth is situated. As stone lifting is very much a minority activity within the greater and wider expanse of Strength Athletics it would be only fair to make comment regarding Stone Lifters and their personal ethics.

For the majority of participants, stone lifting is strength at its base level being simply a test of man against heavy stone and as this involves the lack of formal competition against another, stone lifting is seen simply as the purist and cleanest of all strength activities.

The centre and focal point for the history of Stone Lifting is Scotland. The history of existing stones within the country is well known and indeed cherished by individual lifters who defer to the culture which instigated their sport in the first instance. Stone lifters are not drug orientated strength athletes who shame their sport at Olympic and lower levels but are athletes, regardless of where they are from, who are likely to have an historical knowledge of Scotland that would shame most and there are many who can quote verbatim lines from McPherson's "Poems of Ossian" or otherwise are conversant of the mythology and folklore.

The association with Stone Lifting and its link to the heavy athletics participated at Highland Games cannot be understated. This association with an iconic Scottish activity which has participation at various levels throughout the world has lead to a higher awareness of Scottish culture including stone lifting to the many of Scottish decent throughout the world. It is perhaps regretful that many of those of Scottish decent show a greater awareness and desire to retain many aspects of Scottish culture which is being lost.

Many stone lifters refer to a concept called the "journey". This journey involves acknowledging the history of the stone they intend to lift as well as the high degree of preparation and training required to actually lift the stone. Many lift the stones with a pride that the ancients also carried out the same feat of strength. Perhaps a romantic notion but perfectly true.

At present, to demonstrate the level of visitation to Scottish stone lifting sites and to perhaps alleviate any fears of a loss of privacy to the new owners of this ancient site, I would state that it is common knowledge that the two most visited stones are the Dinnie Stones and the Inver Stone, both situated in Aberdeenshire. Although hard to record the actual number of

attempts for the Dinnie Stones the number of successful lifts in any given year are few. With the Inver Stone, the keeper retains a journal of attempts within her house and from which it is clear that in recent years the number of attempts made to lift the stone range from 8 to about 14 in a busy year. It is also obvious from the journal retained by Mrs Richards that those attempts are made by a wide range of nationalities. I am sure that the Puterach would take some time to establish by the usual "by word of mouth" reference to the stone and that it would be fair to suggest that it would possibly sustain the same level of visitation as that of the Inver stone at a later date. That said, and in the full knowledge of its existence, the Colonsay stone has not been lifted since 1971 and has probably not been visited since then as well. It is indicative of the minority nature of Stone lifting that the Colonsay stone through lack of attention was nearly consigned to history.

The foregoing has been written to alleviate any fears by the new owners of this site that their individual privacy would be effected by a replacement for the Puterach being placed at this site, and as the owners, regardless of access laws, their rights and entitlement to enjoy the peace and tranquillity of their home and surroundings should always be jealously safeguarded. I am almost certain that all within the stone lifting community would echo this sentiment.

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