

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 "larraidh" 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-larraidh" 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/yar/ach, the first and second syllables short and sharp, and the last slightly longer with the "ch" somewhat aspirated.”¹

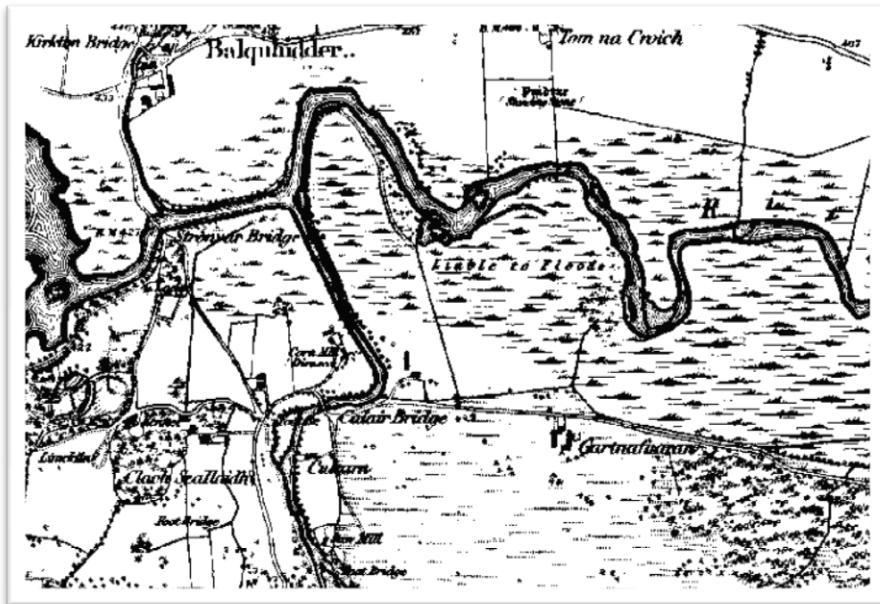
The above is quite interesting and although the assertion of “pushing” is quite understandable in that the stone is a **clach-neart** with the Gaelic cultural emphasis on what can be placed on, can equally be thrown over (See Chapter Four – What Determines a Lift of a Traditional Stone), the reference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

¹ *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.*

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.²



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.

The local history of Balquhidder 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 Balquhider in

² The Fair was later known to have been moved to nearby Kingshouse and held in August of each year.

*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*³

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 to 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, Balquhidder 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"⁴

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 Balquhidder 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 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."⁵

³ *McLans Highlanders at Home OR Celtic Gatherings*", James Logan (1848)

⁴ Appendix to Dwelly's Gaelic-English dictionary, Edward Dwelly, Douglas Clyne, Derick S. Thomson (1991)

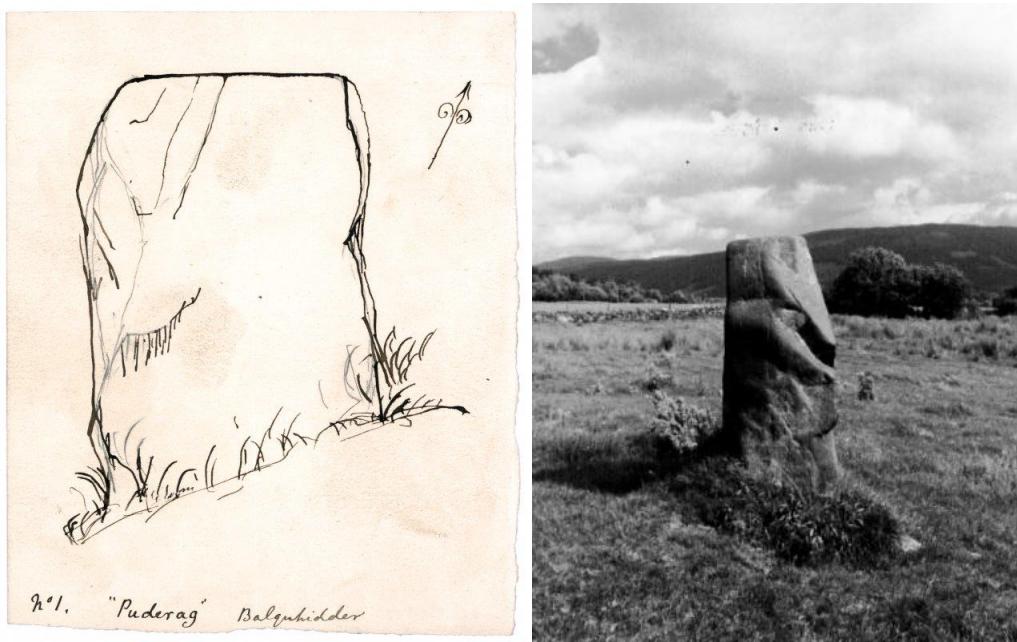
⁵ *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, Volume XXI,-Page 83 Notes on Balquhidder – James Gow (1887)*

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.



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 baulk 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 Pudrac⁶. 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

⁶ 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.

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.”⁷



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

⁷ Personal thanks to Johnny Reed of the USA for his personalised account of lifting the Puterach.

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 Balquhidder is reflective of the rest of the Highlands of the period, violent and brutal. Clan MacLaren are perhaps the oldest of the Balquhidder 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 Balquhidder 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 Balquhidder their status as a broken Clan became established.

Rob Roy McGregor was born in Glengyle which is relatively close to Balquhidder and he died in 1734 at Inverlochlarig, Balquhidder. Rob moved about a great deal during his lifetime and some of his exploits within Balquhidder were notorious having at one time stolen the local Church Bell and made a gift of it to a school 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 Balquhidder, 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."⁸

"The term Puderache was applied to inhabitants of Balquhidder, 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."⁹

The inference from above is that the Balquhidder 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 Balquhidder MacGregors who were named after the lifting stone -

MacGregor, ***Pudreauch*** Allester

Pudrach, Duncan son of Allester

Pudrach, Ewne McAllaster

Pudrach, Neil ¹⁰

Willame ***Pudrach*** in Auclochinluy

James ***Pudrach*** in Croscrewie ¹¹

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.

"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)".¹²

⁸ Page 142 *The Heart of Scotland*. A.R Hope Moncrieff (1909)

⁹ *History of Clan Gregor*, Amelia Georgina Murray MacGregor (1898)

¹⁰ Page 481 *History of Clan Gregor*, Amelia Georgina Murray MacGregor (1898)

¹¹ Page 241 *Black Book of Taymouth* (1855)

¹² *The Surnames of Scotland*, George Fraser Black (1946)



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" ¹³

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.

Any examination of history should also include those elements that appear to detract from what appears factual and the following is taken from a chapter on Balquhidder contained in the New Statistical Account of Scotland (1838).

"Antiquities – In a field to the south-east of the manse, there is a stone resembling an obelisk, about five feet high. The people call it Puidrac: but the nature and origin of it, the writer has not ascertained." ¹⁴

¹³ An Act of the Scottish Parliament from 1617

¹⁴ Page 346 The New Statistical Account of Scotland - Volume 19 (1838)

The Statistical account is a well used resource in historical research. Written by the individual Parish Ministers, it details information as to the physical state of the local parishioners' of the time and includes details of many of the local antiquarian artefacts. The above text was prepared by the **Rev McGregor** who was the parish minister at Balquhidder at the time of writing. It is strange that with so much knowledge of the Puterach and the Pudrac stones, especially so due to the existence and practice still taking place in this period, that the minister himself has no knowledge of it.

In as much the Statistical account is an excellent source of history, one should be reminded that the Presbyterian Church of Scotland at this time held an aversion to anything seen as "popish" which, as a consequence of the Gaelic language being seen as "Erse" (Irish), Gaelic cultural practises including stone lifting were despised. It would appear that the Rev McGregor preferred to hold sway with religious belief when tested against Clan loyalty.

Of course for the tourist, any visit to Balquhidder 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 Balquhidder 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 Balquhidder being that of Rob Roy although the celebrated poet Wordsworth visited both Balquhidder and Glengyle 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 Balquhidder 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 Balquhidder.



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 Locearnhead 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.