

Jack Shanks, Donald Dinnie and the Dinnie Stanes - from Father to Son.

Born on the 16th of May 1935, Jack Shanks started lifting weights at the age of 17. Weighing around 11 ½ stone he went on to take national titles in power lifting including the dead lift and one hand dead lift. His grip strength was always exceptional and he would have broken 6” nails with his bare hands as a ‘party piece’. On one occasion he lifted two 56lbs blocks together in one hand with the intention of pressing them over his head. He got them to his shoulder which is in terms of grip strength is significant. Most notable and a sign of what was to come was his one hand dead lift of 440lbs (200kg) at under 75kg body weight. His dead lift pb at that time was 520lbs (236kg) and hack lift 600lbs (272kg) recorded at a gym in Coleraine, Northern Ireland.

In 1971 Scottish strength author and historian David Webster, O.B.E. posted an article in the press about the Dinnie Stanes. The legend of Donald Dinnie and the Stanes is well documented in Scottish stone lifting history. David had rediscovered them around 1953 and his research showed that no-one but Donald Dinnie and his father Robert had ever lifted the Stanes together let alone equalled Dinnie’s feat of carrying them the width of the Potarch bridge near Kincardine O’Neill, a distance of 17’1½”, all with bare hands and no assistance from hand straps etc.

Over the years some notable strong men had attempted the challenge but could only manage to lift the Stanes with the aid of straps. None attempted to carry the Stanes. David’s article offered a reward of £250 for anyone who could match Dinnie’s feat.

A neighbour showed the article to Jack and it immediately caught his attention and captured his imagination. He made contact with David Webster and also the local police to get measurements etc. His thinking was that the police would be used to taking measurements when attending road traffic accidents etc so he had the best chance of getting an accurate impression of the Stanes. The local police sent a diagram of the Stanes with all the relevant measurements including the thickness and diameter of the two rings which is a very important factor when lifting the Stanes. The ring on the smaller stone stands 17” at its height. It is made of ½” steel and is oval in shape making it difficult to hold. The larger ring on the heavier stone stands 21” at its height, is round and made of ¾” steel. It is also very difficult to hold as it is smooth unlike a barbell. The uneven height, weight and ring sizes are what make the Stanes such a difficult challenge and of course the combined load of 734lbs (332kg) should not be ignored either. The Stanes have been weighed officially on 3 occasions. In 1956 they were weighed at 197kg (435lbs) and 155kg (340lbs). They were weighed again in 1998 and came in at 187kg (413lbs) and 146kg (321lbs). In 2015 they were weighed by the Aboyne Highland Games Committee and came in at 188kg (414.5lbs) and 144.5kg (318.5lbs). There has been some debate as to whether the Stanes have lost any weight over the years due to the number of attempts, repping and such like. The Stanes are made of granite and have been lifted mostly on the gravel outside the Potarch hotel. Given that they weigh exactly the same now as they did in 1998 and that most of the lifting has taken place between then and now, it does raise a slight question over the 1956 figure although that is a matter for you the reader to decide. Either way they still remain a formidable challenge.

Jack, working on the original weight of 775lbs, proceeded to make his own replica stones out of concrete, small stones and iron bars mixed in for stability. His first replicas were suitcase shaped and not really in keeping with the shape of the Stanes so he discarded these and made another set. The second set were a better shape and weighed in at 440lbs and 360lbs, a massive total of 800lbs (363kg). In order to get the balance right he made a cardboard cut out the same shape as the surface of each of his stones and found the balance point. He then marked this point on the top of the stones before they dried and dropped the ring pins in and let them dry in place. As luck would have it the larger stone seemed to tip a bit to the front when lifted which is exactly what the larger Dinnie Stone does.

Jack also had iron pins with removable rings made to the same height etc as the Stanes. This allowed him to load weights on them and work up to the full weight. These are now commonly used by lifters training for the Dinnies. Jack couldn't wait for the concrete on his replica stones to dry and as soon as they had he warmed up and had a go. He was successful at his first attempt!

When lifting his replica stones and training rings Jack initially used a regular grip and was able to comfortably hold the full weight of the Stanes. During his training though he had an idea regarding the shape of the rings. His first thought was that if he placed a small iron bar along the inside top of each ring it would make them feel more like a regular bar. He quickly dismissed this thinking instead that if he placed his thumb on the inside of the ring it would have the same effect. He called this his 'thumb grip'. Even though he could hold the Stanes using either method the 'thumb grip' is the grip he used most as it felt more comfortable and secure. It was only recently that Jack discovered that his thumb grip was not his invention and was in fact a commonly used grip called the hook grip used a mainly by Olympic lifters. We had a good laugh about this. It should be noted however that there is a slight variation in Jack's thumb grip method and a standard hook grip. With the thumb grip the index and little fingers make contact with the ring and the remaining two fingers lock the thumb in place.

In May 1972 Jack travelled to Potarch with his wife Joyce and some friends. He arrived on a Saturday and the plan was to lift the Stanes on the Monday. Jack at 11stone 7lbs was understandably nervous about his upcoming attempt as many of the world's strongest men had failed. He had been meticulous in his preparations but was concerned that he might have missed something. On the Saturday evening when no-one was around he and his friend Charlie Simms went out to the Stanes and Jack had a go. He was amazed and very relieved to find that they felt lighter than his replica stones. When the time came for the 'official' attempt he was confident and ready to go.

So on Monday 8th May 1972 in front of David Webster, the local press and the expectant crowd which had gathered, Jack Shanks, wearing his weightlifting belt under a short sleeved shirt and tie, a pair of trousers and a nice pair of shoes, entered the history books and became the first man since Donald Dinnie himself in 1860 to lift the Dinnie Stanes with his bare hands.

He recalled at the time still feeling a bit nervous so not wanting to take any chances he put his head back and pulled as hard as he could – the Stanes flew up! The pictures of the first lift show the strain on his face. Some of the photographers had got caught up in the excitement of the moment and forgot to take their photographs so asked Jack if he would do it again. Jack was happy to oblige and this time he comfortably hoisted the Stanes, smiled and held on to them with his wife Joyce looking on at his side. This is the lasting image of that momentous day. He went on to lift them a further 3 times for the cameras.

Jack recalls with a smile that prior to his lift the local press were looking for an interview with the man who was about to make history. They were clearly looking for a giant of a man and understandably walked right past Jack due to his slight build. They had asked almost everyone in the party if they were the one who was going to make the attempt before someone pointed 'Little' Jack out.

Following his achievement Jack went back home to Belfast, Northern Ireland and resumed training. Whilst training with his Dinnie rings Jack noticed that every time he picked the weights up they came back down in a different position. He started to experiment with this and found that if he exaggerated the motion and moved his hips and shoulders they would move forward. He thought that if he repeated this enough times he would be able to carry the Stanes the same distance as Dinnie. So after training on this method for a year, Jack returned to Royal Deeside and this time walked himself into the history books by emulating Dinnie's feat of carrying the Stanes with his bare hands the full distance of 17'1½".

There are some who say Dinnie walked the Stanes the full distance without setting them down and others who think he managed it by the same continuous lift and set down method employed by Jack Shanks. Dinnie is not clear on this in his account and there is no supporting evidence either way but again that is for you the reader to decide. Those of us who have lifted the Stanes know just what this means and how momentous either method is, particularly on the grip. What is verifiable though is that Jack Shanks carried the Dinnie Stanes under his own strength without the use of straps the full distance of the challenge laid down by Donald Dinnie himself in 1860 and remained the only man to have done so until Mark Felix at the Aboyne Highland Games in 2014. Mark achieved his remarkable feat employing the same lift and set down technique used by Jack.

Jack said that while he was carrying the Stanes at no time did he let go of the rings. He described his technique as lift, move forward, set down, secure the grip and repeat. Close to the end there was a point where there were only 6 inches to go and he felt completely drained. It took all of his grit and determination to move the Stanes that last little bit. He recalls with a smile a lone voice from the crowd shouting out 'you'll never be the same again!'

In the following years Jack went on to record an official unassisted lift of 900lbs 7oz (408.6kg) on his Dinnie training rings and an unofficial lift at home of 938.5lbs (425.7kg). This was witnessed and weighed on certified scales by qualified referees Billy Seawright and Laurence McConnell (who also attended Jack's first Dinnie lift in 1972) and by a large crowd at Woodvale Park in Belfast in 1982. He also recorded an unofficial partial deadlift of 970lbs (440kg) on a barbell with bare hands and no hook grip. His body weight would have been just under 12 stone (76kg).

Jack's incredible story doesn't end there though. In his account of his own experiences with the Stanes (published in 'Donald Dinnie, The First Sporting Superstar' – by David Webster and Gordon Dinnie), Donald Dinnie refers to his father Robert Dinnie lifting the Stanes 'with apparent ease'. He also goes on to say that his father carried the Stanes the length of the Potarch bridge which is some 100ft. Now a forklift truck would have some difficulty moving the Stanes that distance let alone a person. However regardless of how the feat was carried out it does set down on record that both Robert and Donald Dinnie lifted the Stanes unassisted.

Jack's sons, Stevie and Keith, were both able to lift his large replica stone with two hands from quite a young age. Stevie even made his Dad a promise at the age of 8 that he would lift the Dinnie Stanes one day. Neither Stevie nor Keith really took things any further until over 40 years later at the age of 49 weighing 9st 4lbs, Stevie took up body building to get in shape for his upcoming 50th birthday.

Prior to this around 1997 Stevie had contracted Guillain Barre Syndrome, a rare potentially life threatening neural condition which strips the peripheral nervous system causing paralysis of the voluntary and non voluntary muscles which affect breathing etc. Stevie was left totally paralysed by the condition and his weight dropped to 7 stone. With time, determination and excellent medical care he made a full recovery and returned to normal life.

Stevie has been a musician since he was a teenager and had never taken part in any serious weight lifting activities, however playing the drums in a rock band had kept him reasonably fit over the years. Approaching his 50th birthday he decided to get in shape for his big birthday so started training with PT Vinty Johnston who was a 3 time Mr Northern Ireland bodybuilder. When he started his training he weighed 9 stone 4lbs (59kg) but quickly bulked up to around 11 stone (69kg). Deadlifts were a part of his training programme and he noticed his numbers coming up quite fast and to a decent standard.

Stevie entered the Northern Ireland Powerlifting Federation (NIPF) deadlift championships in February 2014 and won the overall Masters class, setting a new Northern Ireland record in the process. Since then he has added 3 Senior World records, 15 Masters World records, 5

Senior British records and 15 British Masters records to his tally through the International All Round Weightlifting (IAWA) drug free Federation. During this time he started to think about the possibility of lifting the Stanes. Jack had given his training rings and weights away about 10 years previously to Scottish lifters Tony Aitchison, Blythe Stevenson and Tom Love who had been training for the Dinnies (they all went on to successfully lift the Stanes unassisted in 2006). In the absence of his Dads' apparatus Stevie concentrated on heavy partial Jefferson (straddle) deadlifts and very quickly got up to the combined weight of the Stanes.

At this point the challenge was definitely on to chase the Stanes so Stevie contacted Tony who very kindly let him have the use of his Dads' old rings and weights to allow him to train for the lift. Stevie and Jack headed to Scotland in October 2014 to pick up the equipment and like his Dad before Stevie couldn't wait to have a go when they got the weights home. The outcome was somewhat different though and Stevie ran out of steam at 550lbs (250kg) which was a long way off the target of 333kg. Stevie and Jack worked together for the next year to get Stevie's strength up to where it needed to be to make his attempt.

Working in his garage, Stevie used the same training methods his Dad had done previously such as hack lifts and one handed dead lifts along with heavy lifts on the training rings and heavy partial Jeffersons. The first breakthrough came around Christmas 2014 when Stevie managed Jack's small replica stone with one hand. This was followed a few months later by pulling the large replica stone with a strap and very shortly after he managed an unassisted lift.

Gaelic strength historian and stones expert Peter Martin heard of Stevie's quest and made contact. They very quickly became friends and Peter was instrumental in setting up his attempt through Ian Scott and the Aboyne Highland Games Committee. Peter sadly passed away one week before Stevie's attempt but was definitely smiling down on the day.

Stevie abandoned all other supplementary training to focus on the stone lifts around February 2015. Training twice a week things continued to move in the right direction over the following months until finally on October 3rd 2015 on the village green of Aboyne in Royal Deeside at 52 years of age and weighing 11 Stone 6 lbs (virtually the same as his father in 1972) Stevie kept his 44 year old promise to his Dad. He successfully added another chapter onto Jack's incredible story by lifting the Stanes twice without straps while his Mother, Father, girlfriend Heather and a group of friends looked on. He now follows his Dad into the history books and Jack and Stevie have become the first Father and Son lifters of the Stanes since Robert and Donald over 150 years before.

Tony Aitchison and local lifter Jim Splaine, who at 10 Stone 4 lbs remains the lightest man ever to lift the Stanes unassisted, were also in attendance to witness the event. Jim, Jack and Stevie are the three lightest men ever to lift the Stanes. Stevie is also the second oldest.

The local press reported:

"There were tears of pride and relief from Stevie and his family after he, with a loud roar, successfully hoisted the mighty boulders in the sunshine of Aboyne on Saturday morning".

One week after his lift Stevie won his class at the IAWA World Championships. He was drug tested at the event which was perfect for him as it validated his drug free status for both the World Championships and his Dinnie lift. Is there a lift & carry of the stones ahead....?

Stevie followed up his feat by proposing to his fiancée Heather and they were married at Gretna Blacksmith's shop in April the following year.

Although Stevie's lift cleared the ground he was never happy with it as he did not fully lock out and hold the Stanes. In August the following year Stevie and his father Jack were invited by Drs Jan & Terry Todd to take part in the Rogue documentary 'Stoneland'. Not wanting to just talk about stonelifting Stevie went back into training and with the cameras present he

performed a lift and carry of the Nicol Stones located near Potarch. A few months later on February 18th 2017 Stevie also returned to Potarch and put an old ghost to bed by completing a proper lift and hold of the Dinnies. He repeated this feat 1 week later at the Arnold Sports Classic Rogue record Breakers event in Columbus Ohio with a set of replica Dinnies created by historian Gordon Dinnie.

Inspired by the Stoneland documentary where a group of Dinnie Stone lifters lined up for a photo together Stevie thought that it would be great if All the previous stone lifters could congregate at Potarch for a photo together and relive their memories of these incredible boulders. On August 6th 2017 at 'The Gathering' this dream will become a historic reality.