

CLACH THOGALAICH A BAILLE UR ANT- SLEIBH
(THE LIFTING STONE OF NEWTONMORE)



The Lifting Stone of Newtonmore

The village of Newtonmore is or was aptly once known for a lifting stone at its Highland Gathering called “The Stone of Heroes”. The stone is no longer available for lifting and is presently buried underneath the local shinty pitch, which by some incredible quirk of fate is situated only a few hundred yards from this site.

Perhaps the finding of this stone will assist the loss but then again this Clach Thogalaich may well support a stronger history of stone lifting within the Newtonmore community.

In the days of the Highlander and Gaelic culture, death was looked on with a special reverence and many customs and procedures were adopted. Within the vastness of the Highland Glens, special roads were used to carry the coffin of the deceased, often over an extremely long distance, to the nearest burial site. Whilst the coffin was being transported by the local men they would often stop and place the coffin atop a plinth or cairn whilst the cortege would drink whisky and enter into a stone lifting competition. As a mark of respect, large stones were putted or thrown to one side near this coffin stop and evidence of this practice can be seen clearly at the site of the Clach Torastan on the island of Coll. It is also known that the Paudraik plinth stone in Balquhidder was such a coffin stop and to the west of Balquhidder, the lost stone at Monachyle would have sat close to a stop on the lengthy Inverarnan to Balquhidder coffin road.

Identifying a coffin road and its coffin rests or stops can lead to the finding of a traditional lifting stone nearby. In all cases, it was the last stop before the church or graveyard that would normally have a traditional stone and after Sunday Church service, this is the area that the local men would head for to meet up with others and enjoy social entertainment in the form of stone lifting.

On the western fringes of Newtonmore a short coffin road runs from the hamlet of Nuide direct to the graveyard of St Brides in Newtonmore. For the most part the path is straight and there is one spectacular coffin stop, so old that a tree, now considerable large has grown through the cairned coffin stop but adjacent to the tree is a large round stone, too large for the

cairn and its presence here only cements its purpose as that of a traditional lifting stone.



The coffin cairn split by the tree. The Clach Thogalaich is clearly seen on the left.

From the scatter pattern of the smaller rocks, some still lodged within the tree itself, it is clear that cairn would have been at one time a substantial size and its ancient position would have been slightly to

the right of the tree. The Clach Thogalaich itself would not have formed part of the cairn as it is too large and even a growing tree would do well to dislodge this heavy stone a distance of some 12 feet.

Neil Ramsay of the Scottish Rights of Way and Access Society is an expert on these traditional paths and is currently gathering information on their use especially in relation to Gaelic Funeral Customs. Neil is of the opinion (as am I) that this large stone could in no way have formed part of the traditional resting cairn and as such, in being the last stop before the graveyard, would have been used solely for the purposes of lifting.

The granite boulder is approximately 240 lbs in weight and has the usual gripping difficulties associated with smooth granite. It may well have been lifted onto the cairn as part of the challenge or probably more likely that style would be the classic “ultaich” lifted into the lap.

When it was last lifted could be easily verified if anyone cares to put an age to the tree but regardless, this old traditional stone would be a fine test with the added bonus of the Dalwhinnie Stone being situated so near.

The Clach Thogalaich and a likely putting stone.

At these coffin stop sites as previously mentioned, stone putting also took place and there are a number of stones that would not look out of place in a Highland Games Stone Putt event.

As an ancient site please be respectful and avoid the urge to take home a memento of your visit. The history of this site can be clearly read in the positioning of the



stones themselves and any removal is in fact a destruction of its history.

On the 25th May 2012 the site was visited by Roger Davies of Hemel Hempstead, England when the stone received its first lift in well over 100 years.

Remarking on the smoothness of the stone he was able, due to its irregularity in shape, to secure a sufficient handhold and lift the stone into his lap.



Coffin stop and tree from the B9150 road.

On getting to grips with the stone, Roger noticed some man-made scratching in the form of straight “count” lines. Whether these were done to indicate each time a successful lift was made is pure speculation. Rob Ritchie who is a local man and first person known to have lifted the *Stone of Heroes*, has visited this site and has stated that neither he nor anyone from the village have any formal knowledge of it. This is not surprising as the knowledge of Heavy Stones situated at Coffin Stops on such paths is an aspect of history that is little known in general. Much of the evidence of this stone is purely circumstantial but nevertheless it is quite compelling to the proof of this stones heritage.



Roger Davies lifting the stone



Man-made scores on the side of the stone

Directions – The village of Newtonmore is easily reached via the A9 Perth/Inverness Road. From the centre of the village the B9150 leads south west and the section of the Coffin Road is clearly seen on the right side of the road. There is space for parking and a short distance of 200 yards leads to the stone.