

## CLACHNEART STRATHMORE OF DURNESS



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*Rugadh mis' anns a' gheamhradh  
Measg nam beanntaidhnean gruamach,  
'S mo chiad sealladh den t-saoghal  
Sneachd is gaoth mu mo chluasaibh*

*I was born in the winter  
Among the lowering mountains,  
And my first sight of the world  
Snow and wind about my ears*

*(Rob Donn)*

This stone has no equal when considering the most remote traditional lifting stone in Scotland. The history of the area of Strathmore is the history of the Highlands and its culture and few stone lifting setting could capture the tranquillity and sadness of this remote Glen, and even fewer could match its history.

The area and the location of this stone is a fine example of the cultural Gaelic and Norse ethnic mix with many of the local place names reflective of this culture. Strathmore is situated in the parish of Durness which means "Point of the Deer" in Norse and the whole geographical county is known as Sutherland so named by the Viking raiders as it was south of their homeland.

The “Clachneart of Strathmore” is mentioned in page 20 of “An Old Highland Fencible Corps” by Captain IH McKay Scobie (1924).

***“Shinty or Camanachd, wrestling, lifting the Clach- neart “Stone of Strength” and throwing the stone and hammer were favourite pastimes in those days. There still lies in Strathmore of Durness, close to the ruins of the birthplace of Rob Donn the Reay country bard, a “clachneart”, of enormous size and weight, which only an exceptionally strong man can lift. There are two distinct grooves or “grips” on this stone, worn by generations of strong hands seeking to raise it from the ground.”***

The difficulty in finding this stone is exacerbated by the fact that it was probably last lifted prior to 1808. In so far that much of the Highlands suffered after the 1745 uprising, the demise of the Clan system followed by the “clearances” where whole communities were forced to either leave for the new lands in America, or eat out a meagre existence on the coast, the ferocity of these clearances were worst felt in the county of Sutherland including Strathmore. The clearance of the people in this Glen commenced in 1808 with perhaps the best account of this expressed in “***The New Statistical account of Scotland No 4***” published in 1834 where on page 84 where the Rev William Findlater comments –

***“The only other valley deserving notice is Strathmore, commencing at the north base of Ben Hope, and extending six miles along the river. It is now inhabited by one family; whereas, formerly, it was inhabited by upwards of twenty, by no means affluent, but virtuous and contented”.***

This quotation shows how inclusive stone lifting was within the Gaelic communities. With only twenty families, they still possessed a stone of strength. The stone may have had a specific name, long lost, but once again, it is mentioned as a “Clach neart”.

As defined as such, the stone would have been expected to have been lifted onto or thrown over a static object such as a dyke wall or standing stone plinth. Close by the existing stone there is an obvious standing stone.



Strathmore of Durness



### A plinth for the Clachneart?

The stone perhaps is a marker to indicate the way of the Moine path but the relative flatness (in comparison with the majority of the Glen) of this area, one in which athletic sports could have reasonably have taken place, certainly alludes to the possibility that this three feet high standing stone may well have been the reception plinth

Today, the Glen has an eerie atmosphere, so quiet and lonely when some two hundred years prior, it was a vibrant, noisy and thriving community where the local men would test their strength on the Clachneart. What descendents that remain today, refer to everything, buildings etc after 1808 as modern. The time prior is referred to “as the time before sheep”. The supplanting of sheep for people irks to this day within communities, but those that are descendent from this area are consciously aware that many aspects of their ancestor’s culture too, has disappeared

Knowledge of the Clachneart in Strathmore was unfortunately a casualty of the Highland Clearances so to positively identify this stone through some existence of local knowledge was extremely difficult. The obviousness of the grips on the stone as well as location are perhaps the best identifying points however the Lindsay Smith, the proprietor of a local Bed and Breakfast at Altnaharra has received confirmation from an elderly local resident, indeed the last person to be born in the Glen, that stone identified is THE stone..

The birthplace of Rob Donn was relatively easy to trace and although much of that area is now cultivated he was born at Muisle (strangely pronounced “Muscle”) which exists in the narrower part of the Glen. Other areas nearby, where there was known habitation were also examined, particularly those situated by the “Moine Path”.



Evidence of ancient habitation from the Moine path (most probably an animal pen)

Searching the area, the stone shown above is clearly a contender as it is situated within the area mentioned in the text. What makes this stone an even better candidate is that it clearly has the “two grips” on either side of its breadth. However with this said, the stone is also situated atop a group of smaller stones as a form of base to prevent the stone from sinking into the ground. There are many examples of these large stones supported by smaller ones, most are marker or boundary stones and some of these, the Menzies Stone as an example were used as a boundary stone and lifting stone.

This stone as a marker, being directly opposite the entrance to the Moine path, can be ruled out as a larger and more prominent stone already carries out this function. In the absence of local knowledge, only a description and historical knowledge can possibly suggest this stone as the Clachneart of Strathmore although I was later contacted by my Bed and Breakfast host who informed me that the stone was identified as the lifting stone by an elderly local man who indeed was the last person to have been born in Strathmore..

The stone itself is almost a rectangular block of approximately 350 lb in weight and the underside is particularly flat with the grips mentioned easily discernible.



**The less defined "left" hand grip**



**The better defined "right" hand grip**

The positioning of what would be considered the left hand grip clearly shows a deep flat area where grip can be maximised and in the picture shown above the flat section of the stone shown is clearly the underside. Could the flat underside of the stone avail it to being placed on a high plinth as part of the test? The physical dimensions would certainly suggest this and

there are no shortages of stones that could be plinths nearby, but then again this is mere speculation.

The shaping of this “grip” does appear, due to its symmetry, more “fabricated” than worn however, regardless, it is clearly meant to be gripped.

The left hand grip as shown is clearly obvious but lacks the depth of the grip on the opposite side. Now having mentioned both left and right grips, I have done so, fully aware that left or right would depend on whether the stone was lifted from the top or from the bottom of its present position. As far as can be ascertained, both grips are reasonably level with each other but are not centred to make weight above and below the grips equal.

Whatever, I am sure there will be a variety of lifting methods and approaches to this stone when attempted. There is over 200 years of experience to catch up on.



#### **The Clachneart with the start of the Moine path to the right**

The stone is situated in the Strathmore Estate which is owned by Mrs Heather Gow. Permission has been granted for general lifting however visitors should be aware that the estate derived its income from sporting activities such as fishing and game shooting. Due consideration should be given to the activities of the estate and please avoid any form of disruption.



**First known lift of the Clachneart Strathmore of Durness by James Grahame. Note use of the "grip" by the left hand**

Mentioned in the text is the birthplace of Rob Donn {McKay} (1714 – 1778) who although being unable to speak English, nor read or write, is perhaps commemorated as the greatest of Scottish Gaelic Poets. Most of his poetry surrounds actual Highland life of the time and is culturally deep but with a sharp wit and humour and he was well known for saying what he felt about the “gentry” most of which was not of a pleasant nature. On occasion, his verse could be somewhat “bawdy” in nature however later translators, mostly Presbyterian Church Ministers somewhat altered his intended flavour by incorporating a more acceptable wording but putting such discrepancies down to the unique nature of the Reay Gaelic.



If visiting this site a visit to the Dun Dornigail Broch is only a matter of minutes from the Clachneart. Built by Picts around 100 AD, the structure best demonstrates the ability of the indigenous people to move and work heavy stones. It is unlikely that the strength of its structure would have been tested in the time of the Picts. The only threat to the country at that time was the expansion of the Roman Empire who came nowhere near as far North.



Dun Dornigail Broch

The Parish of Durness is recognised as being the least populated area of Western Europe but despite this, in the early 1950's a certain John Winston Lennon spent many summers holidaying with his relatives who resided in the area. It was known that Lennon adored Durness and there was mention that prior to his death, he wanted to purchase land in the area. Beatle historians will say the song "In my life" on the "Rubber Soul" album was inspired by his visits to the Parish.

The stone has yet to receive its first lift in modern times. As defined as "Clachneart", the stone in former days would either have been lifted onto a plinth or thrown over it. The grips would have been extremely useful in this respect.

The obvious plinth is directly opposite the stone. Situated at the beginning of the Moine path, just across the road, a large plinth type stone marking the beginning of the path is clearly evident. There is no history other than the name of the stone to suggest that this large stone was indeed used as a formal reception plinth however its proximity, as well as the known style of lifting associated with a clachneart makes it the most obvious choice.

A good lift of the stone however would be one to the lap or fold in the traditional manner but it will be interesting to see just how this stone develops interest and lifting approach over the forthcoming years.

**Directions** - The stone, situated in what is considered to be the most remote part of Western Europe requires some planning to reach it. The area is so remote that fuel for motor cars is a primary consideration. Make sure that the fuel tank is full and that you possess a reserve before entering this wilderness. In addition to this, Cell phones are of no use and if a signal is obtained it will be extremely weak and practically useless.

From the City of Inverness travel north on the A9 passing through the Black Isle for a distance of 30 miles until the village of Tain. On passing Tain a left turn off towards (A836) Bonar Bridge is reached before the causeway. Take this turn which in 13 miles reaches Bonar Bridge. Continue on the A836 for a further 11 miles to reach the village of Lairg. This



is the last place to top up with fuel if travelling by motor car and it would be advisable to do so before entering the rough hinterland of the far North.

Follow the A836 for 3 miles north of Lairg where this is a junction to the left and with the road suddenly becoming single track. Continue northwards on this long stretch of single track road to Altnaharra. If considering staying overnight; I would suggest stopping here as a good base. About a half mile north of Altnaharra, a signpost on the left for Hope is taken. This even narrower single track road is followed for some 15 miles until the stone is reached.