

## THE BAREVAN STONE aka THE PUTTING STONE OF THE CLANS

*“All hail, Macbeth, hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!”*

**From Macbeth by William Shakespeare (Act 1, scene 3)**

Most Scottish Stones have some form of historic association, some more than others and occasionally there are those that because a stone is lifted with blind indifference to nothing more than the shape and weight, then the lifter misses out on a far greater cultural significance.

The Barevan (spoken Ba – ree- van) stone suffers not by weight, shape nor history and will never be indifferent.

*“A rounded ball of reddish granite, 19 inches by 17 inches in diameter, and weighing 18 imperial stones, lies near to the entrance of the chapel. According to tradition it was the “putting stone” of the neighbouring clachan, but it takes a strong man of the present day to lift it”- History of Nairnshire by George Bain (1893).*



This stone, with its oval shape, size and weight could so easily be a sister to the Inver or Dalwhinnie stones and in itself is a fine looking example of a traditional lifting stone. The Barevan stone does however hint at and indeed does emphasise a number of common notions and beliefs

surrounding traditional Scottish stone lifting.

Some 8 miles East of the City of Inverness and six miles south of Nairn lies an area so much associated in history with the “Thanes of Cawdor” the most celebrated being “Macbeth”. Within the kirkton of Barevan at Cawdor lies a truly ancient church which dates back to the 14<sup>th</sup> Century and within the church graveyard is situated the testing stone known as “The Putting Stone of the Clans”.

*“On the 10<sup>th</sup> May 1880 I visited the church at Barevan.....Near the east end of the church, there lies a rounded ball of reddish granite, 19 inches by 17 in diameter, and weighing 18 imperial stones .It’s shape and weight caused it to be used in the neighbourhood as a test of strength in the older days.....the present tenant of the farm, William MacIntosh who is seventy-seven years old (obviously born circa 1803) .....Mr McIntosh was himself in his younger days able to lift it and place it on the dyke and the grandmother of the friend who had accompanied me was capable of raising it by means of her apron, put below it rope-wise to catch hold of it” – From “Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland Volume 16”, Chapter VIII by William Jolly, published 1882.*

This rather interesting quote alludes to three specific aspects of history and culture surrounding this stone. Firstly, the text is clearly suggestive that the stone was in fact used as a stone of strength well prior to the known lift by William MacIntosh and indeed would have

been lifted in the 1700's. Secondly, MacIntosh states that he lifted the stone onto a neighbouring dyke wall and this in fact is the sole written text in Scottish stone lifting history that mentions this. Although I would disagree that this practice was indeed used throughout the country I have to acknowledge this statement at least.

The third and perhaps most significant statement is not that the stone was lifted by a grandmother but the fact that she used an apron to do so. There are many heavy stones in Scotland such as the stone at Achnangart where it is known that the plaid worn by the Highlander was used as a form of makeshift harness to assist in the lift. (See Achnangart Stone and Lealty Stone). The knowledge of using an apron for a harness is so obviously derived from that of using the plaid.



*“the graveyard of Barevan with its strength-testing stone - 'the clans' putting stone”*

Taken from “A salmon for the schoolhouse” by John Love and published in 1992 the book is based on the 19<sup>th</sup> century diaries of Robert and Elsie Thomson. This text gives an indication as to a name for the stone.

*The Barevan Stone in its rest position beside the “stone coffin”*

Suggesting that the putting stone is derived from “Clach Neart”, the reference to the “Clans” is confusing. There is no written explanation for the stone being called this other than that an area just north of the church, there is an ancient Pictish settlement called “The loch of the Clans”. Other than this, there is no further explanation known for the name save one other. In considering that the battlefield of Culloden is only a few miles away, where in 1746 the great battle took place involving a substantial majority of the Scottish Clans, this may well have something to do with the name. Personally I think this is unlikely.

Again, as seen by the other examples of “Clach Neart” included in this book, the direct interpretation of “stone of strength/force” is equally applicable to a heavy stone that is lifted or thrown and it is not the exclusive Gaelic term used to denote a “putting stone”.

It is more probable that the stone in ancient times was referred to as the “**Clach neart Barevan**”.

As the written texts stand, the lifting history of this stone can only be attributed to a sole lift by William McIntosh who was the farmer at the adjoining Barevan farm. It is known however that stone was lifted countless times after the circa 1820 lift of McIntosh and the knowledge of this and indeed how the stone was recently found was simply as a result of pure chance.

In February 2012 I visited the island of North Uist to research the local stones and the strength culture which still exists. Just prior to leaving the island, my host Angus McDougall informed me that an elderly resident called John McLean knew that his father had lifted a large heavy and oval stone at Muir of Ord just north of Inverness. The lift allegedly took place at a farm called "Barevan Farm" during the Second World War when a group of five or six men from North Uist were working there. John McLean's father, Peter McLean was one of the group and a strength contest took place using the stone.

Now I must admit to being slightly confused for a time and indeed when knowledge of the Barevan stone came to light I indeed thought I might well have two stone of the same name, one near Nairn and one at Muir of Ord some 30 miles away. On contacting Angus McLean the owner of Barevan farm at Muir of Ord the story became a little clearer.

Angus McLean's father, Donald McLean was a Gaelic speaker born on the island of Skye. As a young man looking for work he left for the mainland without a penny in his pocket but secured work as a farmer and as a Police Officer in the county of Nairn. Between 1922 and 1924 he had sufficient money to purchase the small farm at Barevan next to the ancient church.

He stocked his farm with cattle purchased in North Uist and became quite friendly with a number of North Uist men including Peter McLean. On the outbreak of the war, Peter McLean was one of a number of North Uist men who worked on the farm as well as assisting the horses of the famous Lovat Scouts who were billeted nearby. It was known that the stone was lifted frequently during the War years as a diversion from the hard and tedious work of supplying the war effort. After the war, the farm was sold on and Donald McLean purchased a new farm at Muir of Ord renaming it Barevan.

It is known that Peter McLean and others had a strength competition utilising the Barevan stone during the War years. McLean won the competition with apparently others being unable to lift the stone however in what manner is unknown. To lap the stone would be considered as relatively easy to strong farm hands from North Uist, there is no doubt about that. To shoulder the stone would possibly eliminate others from the competition so I am left with the supposition that the stone may have been pressed overhead. I would see this as a more likely outcome to this particular test of strength.

Regardless, the activities surrounding the Barevan stone emphasise its use primarily as a traditional stone of strength.

Angus is more than sure although cannot confirm for certain that his father had also lifted the stone. Donald McLean was indeed a strongman himself and it is more than likely that it was he that showed the North Uist men the location of this traditional stone.

Now we have two **confirmed** lifts of the stone –

William McIntosh.....circa 1820 and Peter McLean between 1939 and 1945.

With all the associated history attached to the Barevan stone, it is perhaps fitting that the first lift of the stone in modern times should fall to a local man of strength. On 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2012, Martin Jancsics from nearby Elgin visited the site and had no trouble in shouldering this ancient stone. Martin confirms that the weight is approximately 252lbs and was strangely surprised just how similar the stone is to the shape, grip and weight of the more famous (for now at least) Inver Stone.



First 21<sup>st</sup> Century lift of the Barevan Stone by Martin Jancsics (photos courtesy of Martin Jancsics)

As Martin explains, ***“I remember as I jumped in the car & drove off to go & find the Barevan Stone I was full of excitement as the stone hadn’t been lifted in about 70 years or so. It was a hot & sunny day which made things even better. As I found the church where the stone sits I couldn’t wait to get out the car & attempt my lift.***

***I walked over to the stone & rolled it away from the stone coffin where it sits & onto a nice piece of grass ready for my attempt. The stone is smooth & slightly oval but not by much. I stood over the stone, bent down & placed my arms underneath. I picked the stone up to my knees & squatted down rolling the stone onto my lap & against my stomach. I wrapped my arms around the stone as much as I could holding it in tight against my body I squatted up simultaneously pulling the stone up towards the top part of my chest & once I was fully standing up I rolled this great piece of history onto my shoulder.***

# Powerlifter shoulders an ancient tradition

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IN years gone by, Highland men had to lift mighty rocks in a show of strength to earn their right to join a clan.

And the centuries-old tradition is being resurrected by a Moray man who is determined to raise the profile of stone-lifting across the UK.

Elgin powerhouse Martin Jancsics, a competitor in last year’s Scottish Open powerlifting competition, discovered the location of a number of historic stones once lifted by Scottish warriors.

One, the Barevan Stone, is situated close to Moray, and Mr Jancsics recently became the first person since the Second World War to lift it.

He has since picked up the challenge of attempting to lift others, and has already ticked several of the toughest stones off his to-do list.

Enlisting the help of Peter Martin, a Scottish amateur historian whose father wrote a book on stone-lifting heroics of the past, Mr Jancsics discovered one local stone in a churchyard near Moray.

“Peter gave me information on a stone called the Barevan Stone, at St Barevan’s Church, near Cawdor,” he said. “The stone is about 18 stones in weight and has an interesting history.”

Mr Martin’s research revealed how the stone coffin in which the Highland stone sits was once used as a form of punishment for those who flouted the church’s rules and regulations.

The miscreant was forced to lie down in the open coffin and a large slab was placed on top of them, exposing only their head. They would lie there for the period of their punishment, during which church-goers were known to show their displeasure for the person’s crime by spitting on them as they passed.

The Barevan Stone was a great lift, and it was a great day for it, said Mr Jancsics, who has also put a video clip of him shouldering the stone on YouTube.

Records show that it had not been raised since the War, when a man from North Uist is known to have achieved the feat.

But between Scotland and

Wales, there are believed to be between 25 and 35 traditional stones which can be lifted onto the lap or shouldered, each with their own unique history.

Two lie in Aberdeenshire, including the Inver Stone, a hefty 19-stone rock which Mr Jancsics also managed to raise.

He said: “If people successfully lift the Inver Stone, they have the right to write their name in a book of past lifters. I noticed that people from America and Canada have also signed the book.”

One of his next challenges will be the Dinnie Stones, made famous by a man called Donald Dinnie, a strongman who travelled the world competing in the 19th and 20th Centuries. He would carry the stones across a granite stone bridge which crosses the River Dee at Potarch, Aberdeenshire.

“Stone-lifting is still a big part in some Highland Games and in strongman competitions,” he said.

Mr Jancsics plans to take on six Scottish stones over the course of a weekend in June, before taking on his greatest challenge of all – Wales’ mighty Criccieth Stone.

Weighing in at an estimated 178 kilograms – or 28 stones – it dwarfs anything he has previously attempted. Renowned powerlifters have tried – and failed – to raise the Welsh stone, but Moray’s strongman is confident he can successfully complete the task.

“I can’t wait; that big brute is going on my shoulder,” he said.

Mr Jancsics finished second in last year’s Scottish Championships in Glasgow in the 105kg class.



Martin Jancsics lifting the Barevan Stone near Cawdor.

***As I was standing there with this stone on my shoulder that hadn’t been lifted for all these years, it felt great to be able to put my name down as a lifter of the stone & be a part of its history.”***

Interest in stone lifting feats is still part of modern Highland culture and an article published in the 27<sup>th</sup> April 2012 edition of the “Northern Scot” newspaper reflects the cultural importance of Martin’s lift of the Barevan stone.

The lifting history of the stone could in fact be much older as the history of the stone itself can be dated even earlier. It was known that services at the church ceased in 1619 and with Scottish Reformation having taken place in 1560, its use for Presbyterian services would have spanned less than sixty years. Prior to 1560 the church would have been used for Roman Catholic worship.



The Barevan stone sits beside what is regarded as a curious antiquity, a stone coffin and this indeed can give some indication as to the age of the stone. This stone coffin was not for the dead but was used either as a form of punishment to those who were deemed to have broken the law by the Kirk Session during the short time in Presbyterian use or as a form of penance whilst used for Roman Catholic worship. Whatever, in the case of the law breaking miscreant at least, he was placed inside the stone coffin, the space for the head

remained open and a stone slab was placed over the remainder of the body. To assure the slab was not removed the Barevan stone was placed on top. Although it is known that on occasion, those attending the church used to spit on the open face of the miscreant being punished, then this demonstrates that the stone itself can be reasonably dated back to 1560 and possibly before.

The stone is 252 lbs of rounded smooth granite. Lighter than the Inver stone but heavier than the Dalwhinnie stone and exactly the same oval shape. All the difficulties associated with these stones such as lack of grip are equally applicable to the Barevan stone. I would strongly suggest that when attempting a lift of the Barevan Stone then the stone is moved slightly away from the stone coffin to prevent possible damage. There is ample green space to throw the stone about and enjoy oneself but it should always be replaced.

Having said this, due to the antiquity of the site the churchyard has been scheduled as an historic monument by Historic Scotland although the site is owned by Highland Council. This situation mirrors the site at Old Dailly Church in Ayrshire and although there is nothing in legality preventing the lifting of the Barevan Stone this could easily change. At present, representations highlighting the historical significance in lifting the Barevan Stone are being made to both authorities from the outset.

The preamble to this stone highlights an association with MacBeth and the Thaness of Cawdor. Adjacent to the church is a modern extension where in 1993 the remains of Hugh John Vaughan Campbell the 6<sup>th</sup> Earl of Cawdor and the 25<sup>th</sup> Thane of Cawdor are interred.



*Memorial to Hugh Campbell, 25<sup>th</sup> Thane of Cawdor*

The Earls resting place is marked by a most unusual and significant memorial and one which I am sure that those with an interest in strength and stone lifting would understand. The simplicity of the stone.

As a final point and one that must be emphasised is the fact that one of the text references mentions that the Barevan Stone was placed upon the stone dyke wall by William MacIntosh. Now before anyone suggests that this would be an idea that could be replicated and worthy of a test of strength, for historical value at least, I would point out the following.

The dyke wall closest to the stone is approximately 6' high however this reduces considerably towards the North West section of the church and would require carrying the stone a substantial distance. This said, the dyke wall is considered as a part of the graveyard and unlike the stone, it forms the boundary of its historical scheduling. If a mere coping stone is knocked out of place in lifting the Barevan Stone upon the dyke wall then this act will be seen as a danger to the history of the site and there is absolutely no doubt that stone lifting would then be prohibited.

In mentioning this aspect of the stone's history, and also including it within this written narrative, this is done so as to project the full history of the Barevan Stone for those interested in lifting it. Lift the stone, shoulder it, press it overhead and indeed walk with it but do not place it on or anywhere near the dyke wall.



*The Barevan Stone and Dyke Wall*



*Entrance to Barevan Churchyard*

*Directions – The best way to reach the Barevan stone is via the city of Inverness. Although according to the map, a quicker and more direct route exists from a road south of Inverness on the main A9 road from Perth, this should be discouraged as the road, single track for some 12 miles intersects with many other similar tracks and it is extremely easy to find yourself lost.*

*From the A9 Perth/Inverness road at Inverness the A96 Aberdeen road is clearly marked. Take this road east for 8 miles where a right turn onto the B9090 road indicating Cawdor is clear. Follow this road for a few miles which leads straight into the village of Cawdor. On entering Cawdor and after passing the customary “Welcome to” sign, take the immediate first turn on the right. Follow this track for one and half miles where there is a fork on the road with a sign indicating “Croy” to the right (west). The sign should also indicate that the road forms part of the National Cycle Route (Route No1). Follow the road for one half mile and the churchyard, although not obvious, can be seen on the right (north). Drive up the entrance and park at the entrance gates where there is ample parking space.*

Bibliography –

“Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland Volume 16”, Chapter VIII by William Jolly, published 1882.

“History of Nairnshire” George Bain published 1893.

“A salmon for the schoolhouse” John Love. Published in 1992 by Canongate Academic, Edinburgh, Scotland.

*Special thank you to Martin Jancsics for his account of lifting the Barevan Stone*

