

# THE GATHERING

AUGUST 6<sup>TH</sup> 2017

## POTARCH CAFÉ & RESTAURANT



*The day dawned bright and clear with the promise of sunshine and pleasant temperatures. It followed a special day at The Aboyne Highland games which celebrated their 150th Anniversary in style with a great day's competition opened by Her Majesty the Queen. Thousands of spectators watched as she dedicated a new caber which had been commissioned to mark the 150th games, with a dram of whisky.*

*Outside Potarch Café & Restaurant the Dinnie Steens sat in silent anticipation of the day's events while the Ballogie Estate team led by Malcolm Nicol and Helen*

*Knowles prepared the venue for guests and spectators.*

*From all over the globe they came, the old and the young, the large and the not so large. Their common bond? The Dinnie Steens! They had all conquered the mighty boulders in the past earning themselves an invite to the largest gathering of lifters in the history of the Steens. Even having all accomplished this incredible feat there was a real tension in the air as everyone lifting on the day wished only for success in front of their peers...*

*Lifters from across the decades from founding fathers Jack Shanks, Jim Splaine & Imlach Shearer who led the charge in the 1970s to Charlie Blair Oliphant who had lifted them for the first time the previous week donned their event t-shirts and swapped stories while waiting for the day's activities to begin. Old friends met up, internet friends met in person for the first time and brand-new friendships were formed.*

*The guest of honour for the day was David Webster OBE who had researched and recovered the Steens from the banks of the river Dee in the early 1950s. Drs Jan & Terry Todd, who were the driving force behind the global sensation documentary on Scottish stone lifting 'Stoneland' had made the long trip from Texas to attend. Jan lifted the Steens in 1979 and remains the only lady on record to do so.*





*By 12 noon a large crowd had gathered in anticipation of the historic day that was about to unfold. The crowd grew to about 500 strong. The first lift was scheduled to take place at 12 noon. Jim Splaine and his wife Rosemary, both keen photographers, were in place to record the day's events in photo and film along with a contingent from the press. Local hero Jim is credited with 68 official lifts of the Steens since 1973 with many more unofficial lifts under his belt*

*The event had been conceived by Stevie Shanks, son of Jack Shanks. Jack was the first man to lift and subsequently carry the Steens back in 1972 & 1973. Jack also is credited with another first as he and Stevie are the first recorded father and son lifters since Donald Dinnie himself and his father Robert back in the early 1800s.*

*Stevie led the charge and lifted the stones first to kick the celebrations off followed by his friend and local lifter Brett Nicol. Brett like Jim Splaine is credited with over 100 lifts of the Steens over the years. Both Stevie and Brett performed successful lifts agreed by the guest referees including Dr Jan Todd, Tony Aitchison, Imlach Shearer, Jack Shanks, Steve Stainless Murray and Travis Willingham who had also travelled from the USA.*

*All of our referees on the day were previous lifters of the Steens and even though some don't currently lift their places were well earned!*

*With lifting of this nature, the weights involved are extreme and from time to time injuries can occur. Regrettably two of the most accomplished stone lifters to ever go on record, Andrew Cairney and Martin Jancsics were unable to lift on the day due to injuries picked up in training. They have both lifted most of Scotland's most notorious manhood stones including the Dinnies. Andy most notably has pressed two of the most difficult stones (the Inver Stone and the Menzies stone) overhead with relative ease! Martin Jancsics' track record is highly impressive with excellent lifts of all the historic stones and he is also an avid historian who along with James Grahame and Peter Martin worked for many hours researching and locating the many stones we currently enjoy. Martin's website –*



[www.historicstonelifting.com](http://www.historicstonelifting.com) – is an excellent source of information as is James Grahame's – [www.oldmanofthestones.com](http://www.oldmanofthestones.com)



*The next group of lifters up at 12.30pm were;*

*Bryan Edwards who first lifted the Steens in 2011 on his 18th birthday,*

*Charlie Blair Oliphant from Blairgowrie who hoisted the Steens for the second week in succession,*

*David Little from Canada who happened to be on holiday with his family attempted the Steens for the first time and following some advice from Jack Shanks added his name to the Dinnie Steen role of honour*

*Dean Kent had travelled up from Preston with his friend Mark Haydock who was attempting to carry the*

*stones later. As a first timer Dean was granted special permission to have an attempt on the day and he didnae disappoint! Dean executed a strong lift of the Dinnies and later performed a side by side lift.*

*Next up at 1pm were:*

*James Grahame, a native of Scotland currently living in Australia is a dedicated historian of stones of strength. He doesn't just write about them though, he is a very accomplished stone lifter! On the day he hoisted them high and proud.*

*Neil 'Nelly' Elliott is a very familiar face on the Highland games circuit and highly accomplished at tossing the caber. Neil chose to lift the Steens side by side on the day and what a lift he did! This style of lift does not suit many lifters but Nelly stood up straight and held them for ages in an immense display of strength.*

*Chris Beetham also took on the stones for his first time and successfully added his name to the roll of honour. He later pulled the little stone to his chest without using the ring. A very impressive feat indeed!*

*Ryan Stewart is one of the leading lights in Highland Games in the USA and has had a long and successful career in both promotion and participation. His lift was fast and solid making the long trip well worthwhile.*



*There followed a short break to present a token of appreciation to David Webster for his significant contribution to the continuation of the Dinnie Steens legend over many years. Jack & Stevie Shanks presented a set of 'Mini Dinnies' to David who made a short speech in which he remembered local Highland Games hero Henry 'Sandy' Gray who had sadly passed away a few weeks earlier.*



*A presentation of 'Super Mini Dinnies' was also made to Drs Jan & Terry Todd who were the driving force behind the Rogue Fitness documentary 'Stoneland' which has been seen by over 16 million viewers worldwide. A moment was taken to remember absent friends Gordon Dinnie & Peter Martin who are sadly no longer with us. Gordon's wife Senga Dinnie was in*



*attendance and later made a lovely presentation to Stevie of a plaque that was posthumously awarded to Donald Dinnie inducting him into the Scottish Sports Hall of Fame in 2002.*



*1.30pm*

*Paul Joseph, who first lifted the Steens in 2010, received his invitation to The Gathering at the last minute and made several excellent and valiant attempts at the Steens to the encouragement of the large crowd.*



*Ewan Massie is the current Scotland's Strongest Man at under 90KG. This was Ewan's first attempt at the stones. He wanted to get the feel of them before joining the group attempting the carry later on. After literally a 2-minute crash course in lifting and grip technique Ewan made an excellent lift. A very impressive feat indeed.*

*This completed a very successful and impressive display. It was pointed out to the 500-strong crowd gathered at Potarch that this was something that had never been seen before and to have so many successful attempts on one day was very special indeed. Normally attempts are made at the Steens by lone adventurers and more often than not attempts are unsuccessful. This is why there are only around 50 men in the past 150 years who have succeeded in this most excellent test of strength.*

*At this point the Steens were transported onto the Potarch Bridge and prepared for the 5 valiant warriors who would soon attempt the ultimate challenge of carrying the Steens across the 17' 1½" width of the bridge. Since Dinnie and his father in the mid-1800s only two men have successfully completed this task: Jack Shanks in 1973 and Mark Felix in 2014.*



*Jack and Mark both took a different approach to their incredible feats. Jack at around 11 ½ stone chose to straddle the Steens as he had done with his lift the previous year and this would still be the most common approach to lifting the Steens. Mark weighing in at around 22 stone chose to carry the Steens side by side in a farmer's walk style. Both men completed the distance using a lift and set down technique.*

*Once the Steens, the press and the spectators were all in place all of the Athletes were led onto the bridge to the sound of the pipes and drums of the Finzean School of Piping. A spectacular and quite emotional sight to behold and to be part of. Any lifters that I spoke to about this said that it was their proudest moment of the day.*



*With everyone in place the tension mounted as the lifters lined up in alphabetical order to make their attempts.*

*First up was Brian Irwin from Belfast, Northern Ireland. Brian is a former 3 times Ireland's strongest man and World's Strongest Man semi-finalist in 2005. Brian took his position, the distance was marked out and off he went to huge cheers from all in attendance. Brian chose to conserve energy and kept the stones low on each lift. His progress was slow and steady and close to the end, looking like he was all but spent, the crowd raised their encouragement and Brian found a new surge of strength and completed a historic carry of the mighty Dinnie Steens proving he was mightier. The atmosphere was electric and the history books opened another page to welcome Brian.*

*The Steens were replaced and the distance remarked. Next up was Chad Ullom from Topeka, Kansas, USA. Chad has a lifelong love of the Steens and carries a tattoo of the boulders on his leg. Chad is also a prominent figure in the International All Round Weightlifting Association (IAWA & USAWA) holding a number of World records. Chad started off strong and made a great attempt covering approx. 2/3 of the distance before the Steens got the better of him.*

*David Bagnall, from Belfast, Northern Ireland bravely stepped up to the mark next to pit his strength*

*against the Steens. Davy is a training partner of Brian Irwin. Having had a hugely successful lift of the Steens behind him in February earlier this year Davy was hoping to emulate his comrade's success. Unfortunately, a muscle injury picked up in training a few weeks earlier didn't allow him to lift to his full potential, however even with his injury he still managed a very respectable attempt carrying the Steens approx. 1/3 of the distance. Davy will no doubt be back, injury free and complete the job.*

*Ewan Massie fresh from his very successful first lift of the Steens eyed up the task in hand. The Steens were placed in position and off Ewan went. Ewan gave it everything and made a valiant attempt achieving around 1/3 of the distance. Given his inexperience with the Steens this was a fantastic effort and no doubt given time, he will return to take them on another day. Many older and more experienced lifters would be delighted with his result!*

*Having watched his all his stone lifting brothers make their attempts Mark Haydock from Preston in Lancashire took position over the Steens to complete the day's lifting. The crowd held their collective breath in anticipation. Would Mark walk himself into the history books to join the Dinnie family, Jack Shanks, Mark Felix & Brian Irwin? They didn't have to wait long to find out. Mark set off at a blistering*



*pace lifting the stones high on each attempt and walking them forward drawing ever closer to the finish line. At around 2/3 of the distance it looked like the attempt would be successfully completed in a matter of seconds but then disaster struck. On one lift the smaller stone swung around and struck Mark on the achilles tendon of his right leg causing it to rupture. Mark's progress immediately slowed as he struggled against the injury trying to find his footing. He bravely soldiered on and managed to somehow cover the remaining distance despite his injury and to the delight of his comrades and the ecstatic crowd. A titanic struggle that ended in success.*

*Mark's historic attempt brought the day's proceedings to a dramatic and successful conclusion.*

*At this point all the participants bedecked in their saltire coloured event t-shirts lined up on the bridge for an iconic photograph to mark the day's historic events. At the event dinner which followed everyone agreed that the day had been a huge success and that a fitting tribute had been paid to the achievement of the mighty Donald Dinnie with the historic Dinnie Steens. I'm sure auld Donald was looking down on us all with a big smile on his face.*



*Special thanks must go to all who contributed to the success of the day:*

*Malcolm Nicol, Helen Knowles & all the Ballogie Estate team and Potarch Café & Restaurant caterers for all their work in accommodating the event and feeding everyone – [www.ballogie-estate.co.uk](http://www.ballogie-estate.co.uk);*

*The Aboyne Games Committee for their support [www.aboynegames.com](http://www.aboynegames.com);*

*Aberdeenshire council for their generous donation [www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk](http://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk);*



*Jim & Rosemary Splaine for their generous donation and for taking the official photos and videos of the day;*

*Irn bru for their generous donation of drinks for all participants on the day [www.irn-bru.co.uk](http://www.irn-bru.co.uk);*

*Our DJ and compere for the day Neil Mellis;*

*All the stewards and security staff;*

*Esslemont Marquees for their generous donation [www.esslemontmarquees.co.uk](http://www.esslemontmarquees.co.uk);*

*Finzean School of Piping for their excellent contribution;*

*My lovely mum Joyce Shanks and my amazing wife Heather Shanks for ironing the Saltire patches onto all the event t-shirts, and for putting up with my constant chatter about the event 😊;*

*Andrew Cairney for providing the warm up weights;*

*Brett Nicol for transporting the Steens;*

*Caroline CJ Sear for her assistance in designing the event t-shirts;*

*Drs Terry & Jan Todd & Kim Beckwith for travelling all the way from the USA to join us [www.starkcenter.org](http://www.starkcenter.org)*

*Tony Aitchison for providing Jack Shanks' old training rings for warm up and for generously gifting them back to the Shanks family; & finally*

*Thank you to my Dad, Jack Shanks for inspiring us all!*

*We look forward to welcoming everyone back next year for the next chapter in celebrating Scotland's first sporting superstar, Donald Dinnie and the legacy of the mighty Dinnie Steens.*

