

THE WALLACE PUTTING STONE



The Wallace Putting Stone

“About two miles south-west of the village of Blackford, on the Sheriffmuir road, and near to the farm-house of Easter-Biggs, is an arch of stones, seven in number, called the "Seven Stanes," varying from perhaps a ton to two tons each. One of these is of a round prismatical shape, and stands in an erect position. Beside these lies a large bullet of stone, called "Wallace's Puttin' Stane," and he is accounted a strong man who can lift it in his arms to the top of the standing one, which is about four feet high,—and a very strong man who is able to toss it over without coming in contact with the upright one. At one time few were to be found of such muscular strength as to accomplish this—not so much from the actual weight of the stone itself, as from the difficulty of retaining hold of it, it being very smooth and circular. This difficulty, however, was obviated about seventy years ago, by the barbarous hand of a mason, to enable himself to perform the feat, since which time a person of ordinary strength can easily lift it.”

Text from “Dunblane Traditions” by John Monteath 1887.

The location of this traditional stone is curious. Sitting as it does on the high ground of the Ochill Hills, it overlooks the lowlands and the expansive breadth of the Highlands stretches to the north. It is close enough to the Highlands to incorporate many aspects of traditional lifting in respect that it had a formal reception plinth of about 4 foot in height but also adds an additional quirk in that there are two options in achieving an accepted lift.

Obviously an acceptable lift would be raising the stone onto the plinth but who would have ever suggested lifting the stone and throwing it over the plinth to achieve success? This may sound unusual but adds intrigue in that this may well have been more of a tradition elsewhere.

This said, the plinth stone no longer exists in an upright position which is extremely unfortunate as the importance of this stone would have been further heightened had it managed to survive the ravages of the nearby farming community. This said, it is possible to upright the plinth stone on the flat section which would have indeed in former times been the reception area for the Wallace Putting Stone.

I would not suggest trying to place the stone atop what would have been the underside however if anyone considers themselves exceptionally strong then an attempt at throwing the stone over the plinth would indeed be interesting.



The recumbent plinth

Local knowledge of this stone is near non-existent and it is fortunate that the text in *Dunblane Traditions* is expressive to the extent that formal identification of the stone can be made.

The putting stone lies closest to the obvious plinth and fortunately the area is totally devoid of any other suitable matching stone. There are two obvious “chisel marks” on one side of the stone and on the snub end of the stone the section that was cut off circa 1807 by the over-zealous stone mason is quite obvious



Showing the obvious cut-off section of the stone.

When examining the stone it would appear that when the stone was being altered, this weakened the actual strength of the stone itself and there is an obvious hairline fracture which may cause problems if the stone is abused in its lifting (ie. throwing it back to the ground). This too has proved an indicator as to the confirmation of the stones identity.

A section of stone, an obvious fracture break caused by the stone mason was found a short distance from the stone. The colouring and stone type completely match and by fitting this section, some indication of the “bullet” stone can be made out.



The weight of the stone at present is a healthy 300 lbs of lifting stone which would have been in the region of 350 lbs had it not been the activities of the stone mason some 200 years ago.

The area of Sheriffmuir has many standing and recumbent stones of archaeological interest, most of which have some form of association with Sir William Wallace. The Wallace himself, unlike his “Braveheart” portrayal has always been described as a stocky and well built man with an exceptional strength.

If you happen to visit the Wallace Monument at Stirling and view the size and weight of his enormous broadsword I am sure you would

conclude also that he was a very strong man. In 1980's the Garnock International Games held in Kilbrinie, Ayrshire, a hybrid Strongman event which incorporated traditional Highland Games and Strongman ran an event called “The Inverarnan Sword Hold”.

The Inverarnan Sword from the famous Drovers Inn at Loch Lomond was considered almost identical to the original Wallace Sword and the contest was to see who could with arms outstretched, hold the sword for the longest time. These were the days when Strongman as an event was in its infancy, and co-ordinated by David Webster OBE the actual events were guaranteed to be authentic as well as historic in nature and also supplemented with such characters as Sigmarsson and Kazmaier.

Perhaps, as a consequence of his known physical strength, there are at least two other known “Wallace Putting Stones” located in the country but neither has any history of being lifted and are more inclined to be named due to local folklore.



The location of the Wallace Putting Stone, in what is still considered the lowlands of Scotland does in some way perhaps verify its age.

Sheriffmuir's single claim to fame is that it hosted a famous battle during the 1715 Jacobite uprising. Many Highlanders were encamped in this vicinity which is a rolling moorland of heather where, even through the history, there has been little or any habitation by man. It can be assumed

with a degree of certainty, that the originators of this stone lifting practice were not local but came from the Highlands.

The area is littered with stones associated with Wallace. Whether reality or folklore the stones were placed to remember a victory by Wallace over the English in this area however there are scant details available and in truth, it would have been more likely to have been a skirmish rather than a full thrown battle involving thousands. The date would have been on or before 1297, the date of Wallace's famous victory at Stirling Bridge.

The 1715 battle of Sheriffmuir involved many Highlanders who were encamped locally for some time prior to engagement. Could they have conjured up this stone lifting feat? But regardless, whether the Wallace Stone is 800 or 300 years old, it is truly a traditional test of strength of ancient origin.

Having had little if any lifting history in the past 150 years or so the stones lifting difficulties were relatively unknown however it shares many characteristics of a traditional stone in that grip, as always is difficult and the stone has an off centre of balance.



The Wallace Stone in the moorland of Sheriffmuir

In the absence of a formal reception plinth a formal lift would be regarded whereby the stone is lifted into the lap. This said, perhaps the name of the stone itself gives some indication of how the stone was approached. Although cinematically portrayed as a belted plaid Highlander, William Wallace was in fact from the lowlands and there is uncertainty whether he

was actually born in Ayrshire or Renfrewshire. Some aspects of his life are known, especially when he was younger and resided in Lanark.

The Wallace was a strong man who excelled at most sporting events however it is recorded that he excelled at Putting the Stone. The stone would not be as used at the Highland Games but would be the heavy stone thrown for distance and had the truth been depicted on celluloid the result of his reunion with his friend Hamish would have been completely different.

While in Lanark, it is recorded that William Wallace participated in throwing the heavy stone in competition with soldiers of the English garrison based at Lanark, but this fact perhaps underlines that stones of strength were also popular amongst those in Southern Britain.

The Wallace Putting Stone is simply what it says it is.

In the absence of a formal lifting history it would be remiss to fail to mention the first and only known recorded lift of the stone in what would be a period of time far greater than 100 years. On 26th May 2012, Roger Davies of Hemel Hempstead, England visited the site as part of the research for this book.



The stone was given a thorough examination by Roger, principally as part of the research into the cut section of the stone and this due constant turning, allowed him to get a good “feel” for the stone as well as ascertaining balance and grip. It was no surprise that Roger managed to lift the stone cleanly into his lap and in doing so, stamped his name into the history of Scottish Stone Lifting, and not for the first time.

Consideration is being given to approaching the owner of the farm land to assess whether permission to raise once again the plinth stone would be possible. It would be fair to state that the importance of the plinth cannot be overstated in that the actual name of the stone...*putting stone* is derived from the

fact that stone required to be lifted and then thrown over the plinth.....*the putt*.

I would stress however that the potential damage caused by the stone mason all those years ago may come to light if ,over many years of being lifted and thrown over the plinth, the obvious fracture on the stone widens and splits the stone completely. It may be prudent in the

meantime to assess a good lift as one where the stone was simply lifted into the lap, and as a thoughtful stone lifter always does, returns it to earth with ease.

For those visiting Scotland's Stones of Strength I would suggest that this stone, due to its proximity to both Glasgow and Edinburgh would be the first to engage. Following on from this stone, the Puterach at Balquhiddar is no more than an hour away.

Directions – Despite its bleak and remote setting, the Wallace Putting Stone is relatively easy to find.

From Stirling the A9 arterial route to Perth is one of the major roads travelled when venturing north to the Highlands. Between Stirling and Perth the village of Blackford is well signposted for services. Travelling east from Stirling, there are a number of roads indicating "Sheriffmuir" however the last exit should be taken just prior to reaching the off ramp for Blackford. Care should be taken when taking this right turn as it involves crossing a busy dual carriageway.

When the correct turning is taken the road into the Sheriffmuir quickly becomes a single track road which is followed for just over a mile until a farm called "Easter Biggs" is seen on the left. The farm name is clearly indicated and cannot be missed. As the farm is passed by a wooded area is seen to the left and passing over a cattle grid the wooded area becomes closer to the road. At the end of the wood there is an old track, clearly seen which leads down to the disused building of West Biggs. Park in this vicinity and walk down the track. A single Scots pine tree is seen on the right and cut over the moorland to the tree where a fence line is seen. Do not follow the fence line to West Biggs but continue in a southerly direction for approximately 100 yards where the stone is clearly evident.

An alternative is to continue along the road until a parking area at a radio mast is available. From here walk over the moorland to the fence line and the stone should be seen by following it northwards. (the radio mast is seen in the third photograph above)

Bibliography –

Dunblane Traditions by John Monteith, published by John Miller, Glasgow 1887

The Scots Magazine & Edinburgh Literary Miscellany Vol LXXXII (Part Two), published by Archibald Constable & Co 1818