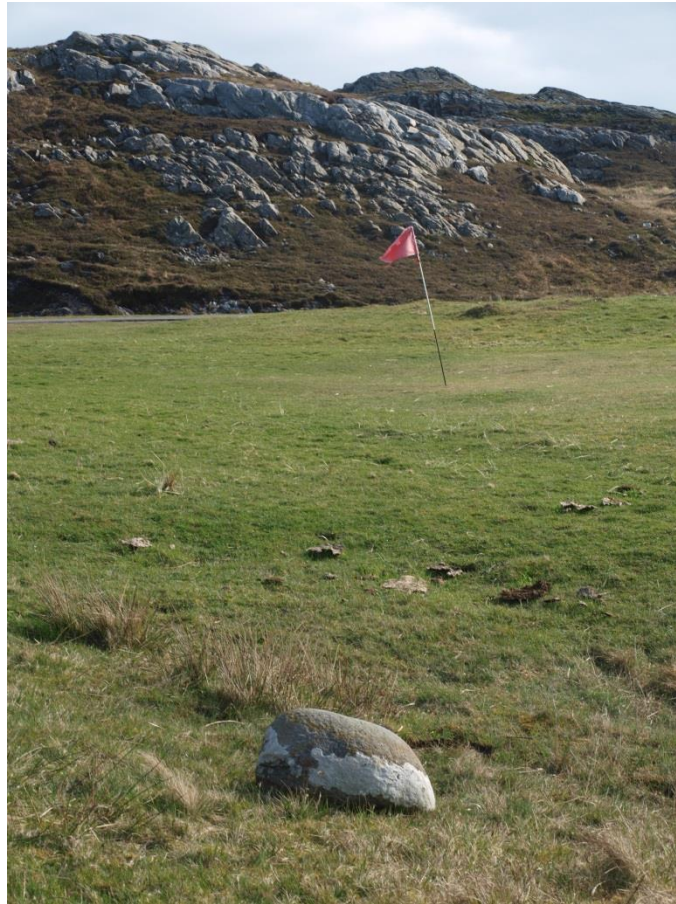


A' Clach Thogalaich (The Lifting Stone) - Colonsay



The island of Colonsay in the Inner Hebrides is not the remotest of islands that possesses a traditional lifting stone although it perhaps one of the least accessible and partly the reason why that since the stone was mentioned in ***Of Stones and Strength***¹, it has received scant or perhaps no visits whatsoever. This is perhaps understandable considering the difficulties associated with a visit to the island to simply lift the stone however this will be discussed later.

What has been missed however is a noteworthy challenge of strength to the stone lifting enthusiast and as such the stone requires a thorough examination as to its history.

The stone was first mentioned by William Stevenson, a Victorian archaeologist who visited the island to examine its historical past.

“On the sands of this small bay, and between high and low water marks, tradition says a battle was once fought. It was called the battle of the spears or sheaves, from the weapons used. Bones are still at times dug up by fishermen when digging bait. On the links here games between the inhabitants used to be held, and on the road side lies the Colonsay lifting stone (Clach Thogalach), which every young male of

¹ *Of Stones and Strength*, Peter Martin and Steve Jeck, Ironmind Publications, California, USA (1996)

Colonsay is expected to be able to lift before he is called a man. It is an uneven boulder, and the difficulty is the catching hold of it as much as the weight.”²

Stevenson associates the stone with manhood, a fact contested by the island's present Gaelic speakers and in a reference to Clach Thogalaich, he further states –

“Or Stone of Strength, Clach Neart – Pennant Vol 1, p 214”

Writing in 1881, Stevenson was no doubt aware of the written works of both Logan and his emphasis of manhood in relation to stone lifting and as shown, he was obviously aware of the earlier writings by Pennant. In the islands of the Hebrides, all known lifting stones are either referred to as ***“Ultach”*** or alternatively defer to the generic ***“Clach”***. Lifting stones known as ***Clach-neart*** are based solely on the Scottish mainland and do not appear on the islands and as the stone was allegedly was brought to use in 1780, this time frame is well after the beginning of the demise of the Highland Clan System and associated Gaelic culture. The stone is not sufficiently old for it to be used as a test of strength for the Buanchaiean of the local Clans or indeed used as test of manhood as the culture associated with these died in 1746 following the battle at Culloden Moor.

The stone is reported to have been found on the shore line of Dun Gallain near Machrins circa 1780 by Donald MacFadyen who is attributed with its first lift. How the stone arrived at its present location involves one of three variations. The first is that the stone was removed by a horse, and the second that the stone was carried by MacFadyen in a fishing creel which I personally find unlikely. The last and more plausible method, perhaps because it shows an aspect of originality which also has been replicated with other stones, is that that the stone was removed by using the plaid as a makeshift harness.

“He also informed me that the tradition was that the stone had been carried, perhaps from the shore, to its present resting place wrapped in a plaid on a man's back. It says much for the strength of the man and the strength of the home-spun plaid that this should have been possible, but in the olden days plaids being woven very hard, were of great strength.”³

Using the plaid for the transporting heavy items was common-place. Other lifting stones such as at Achnangart, Lealty and at Glenelg were also known to have been lifted in such a manner.

“It is termed the Lifting Stone, because the ability to raise it even slightly off the ground was, and indeed still is, regarded as indication of great strength”⁴

Known as ***“chuir e ga oth eadar a ‘chlach thogail ‘s an talamh”*** or air between the lifting stone and the ground, this was perhaps the minimum cultural and physical requirement for lifting the heavy stone. Anything higher is simply an affirmation of superior strength.

² *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries in Scotland Vol XV Notes on the Antiquities of Colonsay and Oransay, William Stevenson 1881.*

³ *An article on Colonsay by Seton Gordon published in the Scotsman Newspaper (Edinburgh) 23rd July 1932.*

⁴ *P204 Skye and the inner Hebrides, Alasdair Alpin MacGreggor (1953)*

The location of the lifting stone is indeed strange suggesting, as others on the island also suspect, that the stone probably originated from somewhere else on Colonsay and was removed for a purpose. Historically, the Golf Course on Colonsay where the stone presently stands was first used as early as 1775 some 5 years before the arrival of the lifting stone. The Golf Course has probably changed little over the years and is a perfect example of Golf in its early form as it is simply laid out on an expanse of flat machair with 18 holes put into the ground, with grass kept short by hungry sheep. Historically this area was a known meeting point for the local communities where obviously Golf, stone lifting as well as other games and sports were played.

This leads to the obvious knowledge that in Gaelic culture, such activities were participated before and after Sunday Church service. In this respect there is a derelict Church and graveyard of some antiquity just over one mile distant at Kilchattan whose name itself in the Gaelic language implies the existence of a Church.⁵ Although there is no local knowledge of a “coffin road” linking a community to the church at Kilchattan, close by the roadside and near to the old graveyard there is an obvious pile of stones that were clearly used as a remembrance cairn indicating that the present road may well have followed the lines of an ancient coffin road. As with many other stones in Scotland, it could well be the case that the Colonsay lifting stone sat adjacent to the road and hence, its present location may not have been too far from its original position.

Another strange aspect of this old graveyard at Kilchattan conjures up memories and reminisces of the collaboration between Steve Jeck and the late Peter Martin Snr, co-authors of “Of Stones and Strength”.

Clan McPhie were displaced as rulers of Colonsay by the stronger Clan McNeill and although Clan McNeill is more commonly associated with the Island of Barra further North, Colonsay has always been known as a McNeill stronghold. The Martin’s were especially powerful on the neighbouring island of Islay and local knowledge alludes to some of that family staying in caves to the south of the island during the summer months when they sought work. The ancestors of the late Peter Martin were from nearby Islay but perhaps unknown to most, the Gaelic heritage of Steve Jeck is that of Clan McNeill. In the graveyard at Kilchattan, there are McNeill graves besides Martin graves and just perhaps, the collaboration that gave the first book on the subject of stone lifting had been destined in the far reaches of history. Could it be that the ancestors of both authors of that definitive work had lifted the same stone as they did 200 years later? Such is the romantic quality of traditional stone lifting that perhaps gives it that edge over other strength pursuits.

The lifting history of the stone is rather sketchy and devoid of any real certainty.

It is known that in the early 20th Century, Professor William Watson of Edinburgh University and a lecturer in Celtic studies who himself was known to participate in the occasional Highland Games, attended at the stone and in his words “*failed to put wind between it and the ground*”.⁶

⁵ Gaelic “Cill” (spoke – Keel) implies a cell or church and is evident in many place names such as Kilmartin, Kilbarchan, Kilchattan, Kilfinnan and many more.

⁶ “Afoot in the Hebrides”. Seaton Gordon (1950)

The stone has always been purported to weigh 280lbs. I suspect that it is far lighter and indeed does not match the Inver Stone in weight with probably its correct weight being in the region of 240 to 250lbs. Neither should grip itself be a problem as the underside of the stone is almost completely level allowing an edge around the stones maximum circumference.

During World War 2 some British soldiers who were stationed in Colonsay are alleged to have had regular successful attempts in lifting the stone and a small broken off section is attributed to them in making the stone easier to lift. The photograph below would tend to suggest that any advantage gained was probably minimal. Another story regarding the stone is that a strong man from Gigha died from a rupture sustained while attempting to lift the stone which as a consequence caused the local factor to have the stone buried. This may indeed be the origin of the stone being removed but it is known that other injuries were also sustained in lifting the stone.



An up-right view of the stone showing a clear "broken" section

The celebrated Gaelic historian Seton Gordon visited the island in the 1930's and spoke to a local man who alleged that he has lifted the stone and placed it into the back of a horse cart and he also stated that the stone had been successfully lifted by other islanders on many occasions.

In the 1970's the island of Colonsay was visited by the "Schools Hebridean Sociey", a charitable trust that brought teenage boys to various Scottish Islands to allow the young men to experience outdoor life. The Society camps when visiting Colonsay was always on the flat Machrins adjacent to the lifting stone.

On the 29th August 1971, the stone was attempted by the campers and their attendant supervisors and the following account of how the stone was lifted by Peter Carlile demonstrates a modern uptake on placing the wind underneath the stone by using a stick -

“The Lifting Stone lies in the north-west corner of the old golf course, where our camp was. It is said to have been lifted by Donald Macfadyen on the shore near Dun Ghallen in 1780. The stone was taken by horse to its present resting-place. At one time no male on the island was considered a man unless he could lift the 21/2 cwt. stone. Many people injured themselves in attempts to lift it, and a man from Gigha died shortly after an attempt in which he ruptured himself.

As all these attempts took place many years ago it was decided that the officers should disturb the long rest which the stone had had. It was decided that for a lift to count the stone must be lifted in such a way as to allow a stick to be passed under it. So, on August 29 we all trooped over to the site of the stone. First the ‘small fry’ such as Alan Howard, Derek Newton and John Lace tried in vain to life the seemingly unconquerable rock. Pete Carlile was our last hope. The great hulking mass known as ‘Carcus’ stepped forward before a hushed assembly. The stick was made ready and Pete’s attempt began. With a great heave he gripped the stone and tugged. The stone just rolled, undefeated. Once again Pete tried, and again he was beaten. Then, on his last chance, Carcus made a superhuman effort, straining every tendon on his body. The stone rose from the ground which had borne it for so long. A stick was passed underneath it and amid cheers the conqueror returned to the camp-site”⁷

Four years later (1975), the society made a return visit to Colonsay where again the stone was a focus of attention –

“Also on a sporting theme, we organised an Olympic Games consisting of the 82½ yard dash, hurling the pebble, and lifting and sometimes tossing the caber. Associated with this was the lifting stone near the campsite reputed to weigh two and a half hundred weight and used in years gone by to prove a young islander’s masculinity. After repeated attempts some of the officers managed it. The most noteworthy feat was when Ian demonstrated his prowess by lifting the stone waist high and holding it there. Even our visitor, Paul Caffery, managed it so perhaps it was not so difficult after all.”⁸

Ian Gough and Paul Caffrey were supervising officers in attendance at the camp and showing the ability to raise the stone waist high, I am sure that such a show of strength would have deterred any of the youths with a leaning towards mischief.

Most islanders are aware of the stone and its location and if you are fortune enough to visit, try lifting the stone facing the Atlantic Ocean and consider that the nearest landmass is Greenland and the North American Continent.

The present population of the Island is approximately 100 however many centuries ago it would have been far greater. Close to the capital of the Lords of the Isles at Finlaggan on the nearby island of Islay, Colonsay itself produced many men of strength. One particular man of strength, a Gallowglass whose initiation involved lifting a heavy stone, was Alaster Mac Col.

⁷ School’s Hebridean Society Report 1971, A Chlach Thogalaich (The Lifting Stone), John Williams

⁸ The School’s Hebridean Society Report 1975, Leaders Report by Phil Renold

Born in the early 1600's, Mac Col was distantly related to the Marquis of Antrim, showing another example of the Scots/Irish mix. Mac Col was left handed and as a consequence he was simply known as Col *Keitoch*.

He was a celebrated warrior, especially In Ireland where as a Gallowglass he fought against English Colonialism. One of his feats of strength which is recorded took place on Colonsay. One particular day, a rampaging Bull was loose. Mac Coll approached the Bull which on seeing him made straight in his direction. He did not flinch a muscle and as the Bull approached him at speed, he simply grabbed it by the horns and pulled it to the ground. On bringing down the beast Coll purportedly celebrated by carrying out the feat of the “**cold fist**” –**dorn fuar** upon it Whether the story was actually true, it was known that in the 19th Century, residents of the Island could point out the location of this feat of strength however this has been long lost to the current community.



At present the Colonsay community have no knowledge of anyone living on the island who has lifted the stone although it is known there have been a few attempts. The Clach Thogalaich therefore sits forlornly neglected awaiting its first lift in modern times, a feat for which most of the island community would be justifiably proud of when their stone achieves its true purpose as a test of strength rather than a curio for the tourist.

Directions – *From Oban a ferry service is provided by Caledonian MacBrayne Ferries. Check timetable for sailings however the timings may invoke the requirement of an overnight stay on the island. There is a plane service from Oban Airstrip to the island which gives the advantage of a quicker trip and with the opportunity of spectacular views of Scotland's West Coast. The Colonsay airstrip is a 10 minute walk from the stone. Regardless of which method taken, there is only one hotel on this small island, however once there finding the Golf Course and the stone should be relatively easy.*