

WHEN DONALD DINNIE LIFTED THE STEENS

“Those stones are still on the bridge and I myself lifted one in each hand on many occasions and one market day, I carried them across the bridge and back, some four to five yards.” –

Donald Dinnie speaking in 1912.

This is the latter part of the verbal statement made by Donald Dinnie in 1912. In as much that certain factions of the strength world perhaps use this as evidence to suggest that the stones were in some way lifted for repetitions by Dinnie, the greatest historical significance is conveniently overlooked.

Quite clear from the statement is the fact that Dinnie lifted these stones on a market day at Potarch and indeed this quote can give some indication as to the exact date when this famous feat of strength actually took place. The evidence is from what is known.

What is currently known is that at the age of 23, Donald Dinnie lifted the stones in 1860. Now, as Dinnie turned 23 years of age in June of that year, any notion of the lift having taken place before this month can be discounted.

The local fairs held in the area were formally held at “***Marywell***” however this fair was moved to Potarch in 1813 which coincides with the opening of the Potarch Bridge one year before.

The earliest reference to the dates when the Potarch Fair was held is found within ***Leigh’s New Pocket Road Book of Scotland published in 1836.***

Fairs, 2nd Tuesday, May (o.s.); Wednesday and Thursday, September.

From this account it can be inferred that the Potarch Fair was held on the 2nd Tuesday in May and for two days from the 2nd Wednesday in September in or around **1836**, some 14 years short of the year of the lift by Dinnie. It should be emphasised that the great pace of change that existed in Victorian life did have some effect on local customs and local fairs were so effected.

In the days before a formal retail trade though shops etc, the local fair was the only means of selling produce ,wares and livestock. They were vital to the lifeblood of a community and, especially in Aberdeenshire, there were many Fairs, all organised in such a way so as not to compete locally, and like the fair at St Figgats, most had what is referred to as a “***try your strength stone***”

Perhaps the most important change in local commerce which would have had a serious effect of the sale of goods within the locale was the advent of the railways. In **1853** the Deeside Railway line opened allowing transport to Banchory and the line was further extended to Aboyne in **1859** and Ballater in **1866** .It would be remiss to dismiss the railway as having no effect whatsoever on the frequency and timing of the Potarch Fair but by 1859 a trader from Aberdeen could travel with ease to Potarch to purchase goods.

By 1846 we know that there were indeed four fairs held at Potarch each year. From “*A topographical dictionary of Scotland*” - *Samuel Lewis 1846* we learn –

“Four fairs are held at Bridge of Potarch, in April, May, October and November, for cattle, sheep, horses, coarse linen, sacking etc, that in October being the principle.”

Having four fairs every year seems to be the norm of the time period with the timing of the Fairs set along important agricultural dates such as harvesting. At this juncture, and reminding ourselves that the Dinnie lift must have took place *after* his birthday in June of 1860, then there is a need to examine the exact dates the Potarch Fair was held in that year.

“.....and the “Fairs” formerly held at Marywell were moved to Potarch. There are now two markets here yearly – one in May and one in October.”

The author further explains –

“Here is an excellent market stance, and owing to the convenience of the bridge, with good roads from all quarters, it cannot fail to be well attended, as indeed, it has always been.”

The source of these statements is a well known local man of the time. He is Robert Dinnie and in his book “*The Parish of Birse*” which more importantly was published in **1865**, it is quite clear from the narrative, that by 1860, only two fairs were held each year at Potarch which were extremely well attended.

For the sceptics or non believers of the famed lift, why would the great man, many years later lie about his feat of strength which would have taken place with most of the populous of the Parish present? He would never have been allowed to step back into the area without a great deal of derision otherwise, and if one was going to exaggerate a strength claim, perhaps it would have been wiser to make such a claim other than on the busiest day of the year for the people of the area. There is absolutely no doubt of the authenticity of the lift by Dinnie.

We are now at the position where we can reasonably state that the feat of strength was carried out in **October 1860**. Providing an actual day is somewhat more difficult to ascertain but it is possible.

From the “*New Edinburgh Almanac*” by *Oliver and Boyd* which was published in **1857** the dates of the Potarch Fair are given, amongst many others, as follows –

2nd Wednesday in May, after the Durris Fair.....and

November – Thursday before the 22nd.

This may well have been the case of the dates of the two fairs in 1857 but it is contradictory to the October suggestion by Robert Dinnie. This said, and although there is a requirement for some corroboration of the October Fair, it can be pretty much said with a reasonable degree of certainty that, if the stones were lifted at the Fairs as suggested by Dinnie himself, then there would have been an abundance of local strength talent testing their mettle on the **2nd Wednesday of every May**.

It should be stated that the Edinburgh Almanac did not include details of every Aberdeenshire Fair and failed to mention the dates of the Fair held at New Deer, one of the oldest established fairs held in Aberdeenshire and known locally as the *“Skippie Fair”*.

Although the Edinburgh Almanac suggests that the late Fair at Potarch was held in November, it does suggest the Thursday before the 22nd as the day of the Fair. This is absolutely of no assistance in trying to ascertain the exact date of the Potarch Fair however there are two final references that, put together, point towards a possible date in October of 1860 when Dinnie lifted those fabled stones.

Important to the arrival of the true date of when Dinnie lifted the stones, we have to examine a link with the aforementioned *New Deer or Skippie Fair*.

The *“Aberdeen Journal” (Newspaper) of Wednesday 30th October 1867* explains as follows

“NEW DEER – Wednesday 23rd October. This old and formerly very important market (Skippie Fair) was held to-day. The surrounding district markets, especially the one at New Maud Station, have had a very deteriorating influence on this one as it is only a shred of its wanted size.....”

This and other supportive evidence conclude that the Skippy Fair, around the period of the 1860's, was held on the second last Wednesday of the month of October. How this links with the Potarch Fair is also taken from the same time period.

“At Skippy Fair of New Deer we nearly came to grief two or three years in succession; it is held on the end of October.....Thom, who was very much hurt, and had to go home instead of going to the Potarch Market the next day”.

The author of this particular text taken from *“Cattle and Cattle Breeders”* which was published in **1867** was the celebrated William McCombie of Tillyfour, not only a man who Donald Dinnie was likely to have known personally but also a cousin to another McCombie who was known to have lifted the stones at Potarch.

This final piece of historical evidence points to the Potarch Fair being held the day immediately after the Skippy Fair at New Deer, in perspective, this would be the 2nd last Thursday of the month of October.

Perhaps the final and most conclusive evidence of the exact date that Donald Dinnie lifted and walked with the stones at the Potarch Fair is found within *The Aberdeen Journal dated 10th October 1860*. The list of Fairs detailed on page 7 of the newspaper specifically states that the Potarch Fair is to be held on *Thursday 18th October 1860*.

Now returning to the *New Edinburgh Almanac* where it states that the Potarch Fairs are held on the following dates -

2nd Wednesday in May, after the Durris Fair.....and

November – Thursday before the 22nd.

It is quite clear from the following table that there is a degree of misinformation contained in this reference. The table below, with two exceptions show a number of years that fair was held either side of 1860 being the year Dinnie lifted the stones.

The general rule of thumb for holding the fair at Potarch in the month of October is *the Thursday before the 22nd*, but however for the month of October.

Year	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th	Notes
1855						No trace of Fair having been held.
1856	2 nd	9 th	16 th	23 rd	30 th	
1857	1 st	8 th	15 th	22 nd	29 th	
1858	7 th	14 th	21 st	28 th		
1859	6 th	13 th	20 th	27 th		
1860	4th	11th	18th	25th		Year of the lift by Donald Dinnie
1861	3 rd	10 th	17 th	24 th	31 st	
1862	2 nd	9 th	16 th	23 rd	30 th	
1863	1 st	8 th	15 th	22 nd	29 th	
1864	6 th	13 th	20 th	27 th		
1865	5 th	12 th	19 th	26 th		
1866	1 st	8 th	15 th	22 nd	29 th	Fair held in November
1867	3 rd	10 th	17 th	24 th	31 st	Anomaly – 17 th should have been used.
1868	1 st	8 th	15 th	22 nd	29 th	
1869	7 th	14 th	21 st	28 th		
1870	6 th	13 th	20 th	27 th		

All the information contained above has been derived from the Aberdeen Journal newspaper and can be regarded as an authentic source.

If for instance one would wish to celebrate a Dinnie lift in 2013, then Thursday 17th October would have been the day the Potarch Fair was held if still extant. In 2014 the date would be Thursday 16th October and in 2015 the date would be Thursday 14th October however the sequence is broken in any leap year.

If however celebrating an annual date for a Dinnie lift then it would have to be on the 18th October every calendar year.

Who was the closest to celebrating the 150th anniversary of lifting the stones on 18th October 2010? As far as what is available, although he overshot by some 50 days, it could well have been a certain Roger Davis!

By 1891 the frequency and size of many rural Aberdeenshire Fairs were beginning to diminish with some falling completely by the wayside –

“All over the country the ancient fairs for cattle and horses are dying out. Railway communications has completely altered the conditions under which they were formerly held, and the auction marts everywhere are taking their place.....There yet survive in the northern counties, the feint remnants of older fairs, but they are shadows of what they were” – Aberdeen Journal, Wednesday 22nd July 1891.

Perhaps it is time to resurrect October for stone lifting at Potarch.

