

ULTACH NA – H’AIRDE GLAISE

Also known as ULTACH ALASDAIR MOR



Situated near Malacleit in North Uist, this traditional lifting stone is simply one of the heaviest in the country. The stone is certainly no less than 350 lbs in weight and this in itself makes it an exceedingly hard challenge for the stone lifter although grip is not a problem.

The history of this stone is significant and reflective of turbulent times. The Highland Clearances have been mentioned frequently in this book as quite simply this savage time of Highland History has had such a significant impact on Scottish Stone Lifting.

Sollas in North Uist was badly affected by this enforced depopulation of people and perhaps to put this savagery into a understandable time perspective, Donald Dinnie was 12 years of age when the people of Sollas were forcibly cleared from their homes. In August of 1849, Lord MacDonald (4th Baron) who was the local landowner decided that his land should be given over to sheep for grazing. MacDonald's factors evicted over 600 people from the area, burning their crofts and in doing so they were aided by members of the Glasgow Constabulary of Police who batoned local women for throwing rocks at them. The people were starving and could not afford to pay high rents so they were simply removed.

One of the crofters whom the Laird's factors and Police did not want to meet was Big Alistair Matheson. On the day of the evictions, Alastair was lured by the prospect of free food being handed out far from Sollas and had left to secure sustenance for his family. Big Alastair was known as the strongest man in the area as he was the only one known to have lifted the stone at Malacleit although it is well known that many men did attempt it. Over the years it was known as Ultach Alasdair Mor and in the 1980's the stone was daubed with red paint by Alex MacAulay from Paible to distinguish it from other stones. This history of the stone had

almost been forgotten and nowadays the stone is better known as Ultach Na- H' Airde Glaiss.



The stone lies within the heath and bog of Airde Glaise near the roadside of the A865 road and it was during the construction of that road in the 1930's that the last known lifts of the stone took place. While preparing the road and reaching the ancient stone at Airde Glaise, three men of Sollas took turns in lifting the stone up to waist height. The stone has lain there ever since with no-one even attempting this serious lift in modern times.

Earddsaidh Mor Dhomhnuill Sheumais (Archie MacDonald) from Sollas who was known to have lifted the stone frequently.

Eoghainn Lachlainn Aoidh (Ewan McLean) from Sollas. Ewan was known as an exceptionally strong man but after suffering from an extremely virulent influenza his strength and health were greatly weakened. It is known that he lifted the stone at least once.

Domhnull Eardsaidh a'n Aonghais 'ic Ghalleasbuig Eoin (Donald Archie McRory) from Sollas. Donald emigrated to the USA and settled in California. Again it is known that Donald managed to lift the stone at least once.

There is another known lift of the stone in modern times.

Domhnull Dhonnrachaidh an Dubhghallaich (Donald MacDougall) from Sollas. Donald was the local blacksmith and Angus Macuish has confirmed that he did in fact lift the stone. For some reason Donald would neither confirm or deny the fact to his son Angus who has stated that his father went to great lengths to play down his stone lifting activities, possibly in the fear that his son would be injured if he took it up himself.



The stone is almost pyramidal in shape with its leading edges measuring 30, 27 and 23 inches respectively. Weight apart, adjusting the stone for optimum lifting will take some time.

Another factor to consider is that footing in the wet boggy heath so associated with the islands will be difficult to achieve.

To date no one from outside North Uist has

lifted this stone and as the changes of modern society and culture are equally prevalent on Uist as is elsewhere, the young men of the island have no interest in the activities of their forebears.

The stone appears to be more Icelandic than the iconic granite egg which so depicts the shape of traditional Scottish Stones and this indeed may well be as a result of the heavy Norse influence on the island in both culture and language. For those fortunate enough to visit the island then quite simply a good lift will be one where the stone is lifted into the lap.

Directions - From the Ferry terminal at Lochmaddy follow the road to Sollas (A865). After leaving Lochmaddy the road is completely single track with frequent passing places. The road continues in a westerly direction passing the hamlets of Sollas and Mallacleit. The road follows a sharp camber as it passes over a stream and a plantation of conifer trees are seen on the left. Continue following the road until it meets with a track on the right side (north). Some 200 yards further on park at the next passing area on the left. The stone, daubed with red paint can be clearly seen from the road.



Ultach Na-H'Airde Glaise seen just left of centre (view looking east)

Bibliography – On the Crofters Trail, In search of the Clearance Highlanders by David Craig. Published in 1990 by Jonathan Cape, London.