

1. The Curling Stone: We are the Champions

Bruce Henry

Frae northern mountains clad with snaw,
Where whistling winds incessant blaw,
In time now when the curling stane
Slides murmuring O'er the icy plain.
(Allan RAMSAY 1724)

Meteorological comparison can apparently be made with archaeology from an early date. However, this article was prompted both by thoughts following the discovery of a curling stone during the Milton of Lawers survey by ACFA members in the mid 1990s and by visits to Greenacres Curling Rink. In 2002 the memory was revived by the success firstly of our 'British' Olympic Curling Team led by local lass Rhona Martin of Dunlop and also a couple of months later by our definitely Scottish World Champions - Skip Jackie Lockhart who had thrashed the author 17-0 at Stranraer in the millennium year.

The earliest written record of the sport of Curling appears from 1540-41 in the Protocol Book of one John McQuhin, Notary, of Paisley. He records a challenge by John Sclater, monk, of Paisley Abbey to Gavin Hamilton, the representative of John Hamilton, the Abbot. For those of a classical bent he accepted the challenge thus:

'magister gawinus hammiltoun intimavit domino Joanni sclater vt let ad glaciem constituti et ibidem certarent cotibus super glaciem missis vt promissum erat asserens se pro parte sua respondere paratum....'

There is no record of who won the match!

While this evidence is somewhat putative, 'quoiting' (cos-cotis, cotibus) was a common term in the West of Scotland for curling into the 18th and 19th centuries. The first time the word 'curling' is believed to have appeared in print was in 1620. Henry Adamson, a reader in Perth kirk wrote an elegy on his two close friends George Ruthven, a surgeon and James Gall, a merchant, on the latter's death. Adamson perfectly sums up the character of a curler in his introduction to 'The Muses Threnodie', which holds true to this very day!

'Anent the defunct, his name was M. James Gall a Citizen of Perth, and a Gentleman of good stature, and pregnant wit, much given to pastime, as.. curling; and Jovialll companie. A man verie kind to his friends.....'

He makes several references in verse:

'in the inventory of George Ruthven's 'gabions' (chattels) –
His hats, his hoods, his bels, his bones,
His allay bowles, and cuding stones.'

and later, as all poets do, his lyrics become more flowery as he describes the source of the stones-

'And yee my Clubs, [golf] you must no more prepare
To make your bals flee whistling in the aire,
And yee my Loadstones of Lidnochian lakes,
Collected from the loughs, where wafrie snakes

Do much abound, take unto you a part,
And mourn for Gall, who lov'd you with his heart....'

From this it is taken that a source of material for curling stones was Lednoch [modern Lednock] about 24 miles west of Perth and just 6 miles, as the crow flies, south of Lawers.

We may return to the literary references later, however the actual origins of the game are not at all clear either in time or place. A couple of decades after the Paisley challenge match, the Flemish artist, Pieter Breugel, included what appears to be curling players in at least two well-known oil paintings (dated 1565) of winter scenes in the Low Countries including 'Hunters in the Snow'.

The game continues to be well illustrated in Scotland and elsewhere in the 17th century and later by a wide variety of artists.

All these illustrations, artistic and otherwise, fairly accurately show the wide variety of shapes and styles of stones used. The earliest stones, known as 'loofies', were fairly large and disc shaped. Towards one end, holes were bored in one side for fingers and a long indentation on the other side for the thumb. Later, 'channel stones' were used, so called because they were retrieved from the channel of a stream or river. The first handles were attached to these stones, initially a crude iron grip and later the more graceful swan-neck set into the centre of the top of the stone. A sole was also ground and polished on the bottom of such stones.

Naturally shaped stones were used well into the 19th century. Some reaching such enormous weights that it is difficult to perceive how the game could be played with them. The largest known is at Blair Atholl in the collection of the late Duke of Atholl. It weighs 83kg.

Standardisation was inevitable. In the mid 19th century the Royal Caledonian Curling Club (RCCC), the world authority on the game (founded 1838) set out the present day limits. RCCC Rules, Section B, rule 1(b) states the maximum weight of a stone must not exceed 19.96 kg including the handle and bolt. The circumference must be no greater than 91.4 cm and the height of the stone must not be less than 11.4 cm. Finally the stone must be circular.

Argument rages over where the first club was established. Kinross claims foundation in 1668. However it is generally accepted that the beginnings of the club system, which was to become the RCCC some 120 years later, was on the foundation of Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch Clubs in 1716. Growth was slow up to 1770 but by the end of the century there were over 40 clubs. No doubt the establishment of an early road network had also influenced this aspect of 18th Century life. As now, membership covered a broad social spectrum including clergy, lawyers and other professional men mixing with farmers and other 'rugged, rural characters'. In the following century the sport really took off.

Renfrewshire was no different to the more rural counties. The most prominent landowners, such as Cunningham of Craigends, were playing the game by the 1670's. Many dams, duck ponds and even flooded corners of fields were pressed into use; anywhere a stretch 50 metres long and 5 or 6m wide could be frozen. Many clubs and ice rinks have come and gone and some are now hard to find. Being very much seasonal features, OS maps are of limited help. However a very interesting project is lying waiting some research to locate these rinks, if someone has the time to speak to some of the older farmers in the county. Today the county can boast four modern, indoor, curling rinks at Braehead, Paisley Lagoon, Greenock Waterfront and Greenacres, Howwood.

In modern times Renfrewshire has about thirty clubs in the '12th Province', several of which come from outwith the county. A further seven Renfrewshire clubs are in the Glasgow Province. Some fifteen extant clubs were founded in the 19th Century. The oldest Renfrewshire club is Eaglesham, founded in 1821, although they are beaten by nearly a decade by Largs Thistle (1813). Lochwinnoch was founded in 1827 but most of the county's village clubs appeared later in the century: Kilbarchan 1842, Bridge of Weir 1846, Erskine 1854, Uplawmoor 1869, Neilston 1875, Barrhead Fereneze 1878, Kilmacolm 1879.

Towards the end of the 20th Century, clubs began to cover groups of curlers spread throughout the area so the village name has given way to the more enigmatic 'Reform', 'Ptarmigan' and 'Between the Sheets', or all ladies teams such as 'Druids', 'Rolling Stones' and '69'! We mustn't forget the 'archaeologists' team of 'Standing Stones', founded by ACFA in 1998.

Rules had to be introduced whether for the lawyers or others. Muthill Club in Perthshire must have made a profit out of their 'swear box': 'there shall be no wagers, cursing or swearing during the game under penalty of Two Shillings Scots for each oath'.

At the Sanquhar Club one Walter M'Turk, surgeon no less, 'was expelled the society for offering a gross insult in calling them a parcel of damned scoundrels'. Murray considers there must have been some truth in M'Turk's character assessments as he was later reinstated! The Doune and Ardoch Clubs developed a set of rules which many clubs or committees would do well to adopt:

- (1) Only one member shall speak at a time.
- (2) Whisky punch to be the usual drink in order to encourage the growth of barley [perhaps an admission of self interest by the farmers - unfortunately the whisky was not defined as the Macallan]
- (4) No member to speak of the faults of another member in curling [only?] nor deride office bearers.
- (6) Any member who swears, dictates to another how to vote, or persists in trifling motions shall be fined [another bottomless pit of funds].

'Curlers' Courts' were established (and still continue) largely in the east of the country. These were not to deal out justice but to promote the curling beyond the game in a spirit of fraternity. We still refer to brother and sister curlers in the west but these courts also had a 'word' and a 'grip' and an initiation ceremony - I don't recommend playing with your left trouser leg rolled up and your right breast bared. Following the formalities the meeting became 'a frolic with horseplay', perhaps interrupted with a supper of beef and greens and no doubt the taking of strong drink. We still have an annual dinner and a lemonade or two at Greenacres. The Rev. James Muir of Beith at the anniversary meeting of Duddingston Curling Society, summed up the still recognisable conviviality in 'Cauld, Cauld, Frosty Weather.

'But now the moon glints thro' the mist
The wind blows snell and freezing,
When straight we bicker aff in haste
To whare the ingle's bleezing;
In Cuder Ha; sae bein and snug,
About the board we gather,
Wi' mirth and glee, sidoin the tee,
In cauld, cauld frosty weather.

In canty cracks, and san gs and jokes,

The night drives on wi' daffin,
And mony a kittle shot is ta'en,
While we're the toddy quaffing.'

I should 'bicker aff' to an archaeological reference. James Kennedy, Sanquhar in 1823, wrote of a match between the parishes of Crawfordjohn and Sanquhar:

'John kept the tryste ye needna fear,
A Parson, front, and Elder rear,
Their uniform like men O'weir,
Was rig and furr [rig & furrow] White stockings, and their living gear
A dawtit cur.

A gillock [gill] scarce their heart had warm'd
Till a' our lads were fully arm 'd,
Then to the Loch, and Ward, they swarm'd
To try their maught,
Frae far and near folk cam alarm 'd.
Had that auld singer 'mang the Greeks,
But heard their Crawford moodand speaks, Their outer, and their inner wicks,
And witter shot,
He'd kittle been to p-- his breaks
Upon the spot.'

To make some evidential connection with archaeology, the stone found at Milton of Lawers is clearly naturally shaped, a channel stone, rather than a more modern machined specimen. Although broken, it is roughly oval in shape and would have measured an estimated 28 cm on the long axis and 23 cm on the short axis. Its height is 14 cm and the circumference is estimated at 80 cm. The weight of the stone as found is 13.5kg so I would estimate the complete stone at about 20kg. Little finishing has been undertaken although it appears that the underside has been ground reasonably level and polished to make a sole. The hole in the top is forward of centre and there is a short hole at a corresponding position underneath. As the hole has not been drilled all the way through, the stone may have been discarded before it was finished, perhaps because it had broken during the work.

The dimensions of the stone may well have permitted its legal use under the RCCC's rules in the mid 19th century, if it had been finished. However the off-centre position of the handle hole and the rough finishing work undertaken would indicate an earlier date and it seems more likely to fit the 18th century game. The most famous source of curling stones in Scotland is Ailsa Craig in the Firth of Clyde. However, being a channel stone the source of this specimen is likely to be local to Loch Tayside streams.

No curling pond was evident during the survey of Milton of Lawers. In any event a level area at least 4.75m wide and 44.5m long suitable for shallow flooding (and freezing) would be required. There is no such area apparent in the immediate vicinity on the slopes leading down to the lochside. Rinks are recorded in Killen and it is not outwith the bounds of possibility that villagers would take their own stones down there for a match.

Finally in true archaeologist's form the Rev. John Kerr in his HISTORY OF CURLING (1890) denies anyone else the sole right to the origins of the game:

'... for John Frost is a prehistoric monarch, older than any of the mythical kings of Scolland whose doubtful doings are recorded by our early historians. It is more difficult for us to

believe that no kind of ice-game ever existed in Scotland than it is to believe that such a thing was only thought of in the sixteenth century for the first time; and, if it be said we cannot prove this native origin, we reply that the onus probandi has been thrown upon those who deny it, and we leave the origin of curling where we have to leave other origins, in the midst and haze of an unknowable antiquity.'

'Wi' heavy heart we're laith to part,
But promise to forgether
Around the tee, neist morn wi' glee,
In cauld, cauld frosty weather.'

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