

A pair of presentation curling stones – Abercairney 1864

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ABSTRACT

By the beginning of the second half of the 19th century the game of curling was well established as Scotland's most popular game, which involved all classes of the community. The important place which the game occupied in the national psyche can be seen in the magnificence of the artefacts, such as the stones described in this paper, which were presented to persons who had fostered the game.

CURLING: THE NATIONAL GAME OF SCOTLAND

At the remarkably early date of 1838 the curlers of Scotland formed The Grand Caledonian Curling Club, the purpose of which was to organize the game on a national basis by uniform rules. In 1842 HRH Prince Albert graciously condescended to be the new club's patron, after there was presented to him by the club a splendid pair of silver-handled, and suitably engraved curling stones, and after a demonstration of the game on an oaken floor of Scone Palace, the residence of the then President. Her Majesty Queen Victoria agreed the next year that the Club should adopt the word 'Royal', and so it has been designed ever since. There were 28 member clubs at the inauguration: in the following quarter century the number had grown to 355. At this time curling was without doubt the most popular of Scotland's sports or pastimes and it involved all classes of the community.¹

THE ABERCAIRNEY PRESENTATION

On 29 November 1864 Charles Stirling Home Drummond Moray inherited the estate of Abercairney in Perthshire, as 19th laird of Abercairney,

in succession to his mother, Christian Home-Drummond; and he succeeded his elder brother in the estates of Blair Drummond, Ardoch, and Millearne in 1876. He was born on 17 April 1816, and he married Lady Anne Georgina Douglas, youngest daughter of the fifth Marquess of Queensberry, on 11 December 1845. He died on 24 September 1881. He was in the 2nd Life Guards and 15th Hussars. The estate of Abercairney is in Fowlis Wester parish about $4\frac{1}{4}$ miles (6.84 km) east of Crieff. The 'splendid Gothic edifice'² which Charles inherited was demolished in 1960.

One of the presentations made to him on the occasion of his 1864 accession was a pair of curling stones, given by the Abercairney Curling Club, which had been founded in 1811 and was admitted to the Royal Caledonian Curling Club in 1853, according to entries in *Annals* of the Royal Club. When it joined in 1853 Charles was their patron and president and he retained these offices until his death. In the grounds of Abercairney there was, and still is, a loch of some acres in extent on which the members of the curling club had been accustomed to enjoy their sport. No doubt the gift of a splendid pair of stones was intended by the club to ensure their continued privilege of so doing.

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It was only 13 years before his accession that the position in the law of Scotland of Scotland's national game had been decided in the Court of Session. The lairds of Castlesemple, near Lochwinnoch in Renfrewshire, were the owners of a large, shallow loch which adjoined the village, the residents of which had:

for time past the memory of man, or at least for upwards of forty years before the institution of the present process, exercised and enjoyed the game of curling, as also the amusement or recreations of skating, sliding, or walking on the loch in question, when covered with ice of the requisite strength ...

according to the averments in the pleadings in the case of *Harvey v Lindsay* (1853).³ It had been the intention of the Royal Caledonian Curling Club to hold a Grand Match of the North of Scotland against the South on Castle Semple Loch in January 1850. For some unknown reason this intention was frustrated and an action for interdict was raised by the owner against the Lochwinnoch people in the Court of Session, in which it was sought 'to interdict, prohibit, and discharge [them] from trespassing or entering upon the lands and estate of Castlesemple ... and from curling, skating, or sliding, or otherwise entering or trespassing upon the loch or lake called Castlesemple Loch ...'.

The laird had based her petition on proprietary right, for as the process went on it became clear that she was indeed superior of all the lands surrounding the loch, and therefore of the entire loch itself. The curlers were represented by eminent counsel at the debate before the Lord Ordinary (Wood). The Dean of Faculty, John Inglis (later Lord President), sought to rely on cases which had apparently established at least the possibility of a servitude of golf.⁴ He emphasized that curling was one of the ancient national sports of Scotland.

On appeal to the Inner House the argument that a servitude right of curling could be acquired by the use 'for time past the memory of man' of someone else's loch 'when covered with ice of

the requisite strength' was utterly rejected by the judges, to the dismay of curlers throughout the land.⁵ Lord Fullerton expressed regret that the question was ever raised, and gave his opinion that the proceedings on the part of the [laird] might have been harsh, but Lord Robertson was much less sympathetic:

Suppose a proprietor for forty years had allowed the public access once a-week to view the scenery in his grounds, or every summer a regatta on his lake, or the inhabitants of an adjoining village and the public to gather nuts every autumn in his wood, or allowed hunting or coursing over his lands, would he not be entitled to put an end to such usage? Some people might deem that this was harsh, and perhaps the curling clubs of Scotland think the conduct of the complainer very unhandsome; others, who do not approve of such games, and still less of what occasionally accompanies them, may think it for the public advantage that they should not be allowed. But the matter before the Court is one of pure legal right, and cannot be affected by such considerations.

The law of unforeseen consequences appears to have come into play, however, for in 1861, the editor of the Royal Club *Annual* for that year wrote, 'It is gratifying to find that landed proprietors are now granting the use of Curling Ponds. After the decision in the Lochwinnoch case they need not fear that Curlers can acquire a right of servitude of curling'.

THE STONES

The actual stones are made from serpentine of a very dark, mottled green (illus 1). Stone of this sort, of which there is an illustration and to which there is a reference in John Kerr, *History of Curling*,⁶ was used for presentation stones. In the author's collection is a single stone of the same metal which was presented to T J G Stirling of Strowan in 1862, as the silver plaque on its handle testifies. Strowan was an estate in the same part of west Perthshire as Abercairney.



ILLUS 1 One of the Abercairney presentation stones

Stone from the same apparent source was used to make the stones presented by the Royal Club to HRH The Prince of Wales on his becoming patron of the Club in 1863, on the death of the first patron, his father, HRH Prince Albert, whose presentation stones had been made of ‘the finest Ailsa-Craig granite’. There is in Rossie Priory, at the eastmost extremity of Perthshire, another pair, which has been embellished by the affixing to the top surfaces of a silver casting of the laird’s coat of arms, and by a pair of solid silver cast handles (illus 2). The donation inscription on one handle reads, ‘To the Right Honble George Fox Lord Kinnaird from the Rossie Curling Club A Small but Sincere Token of Gratitude & Esteem for many Acts of Kindness to the Club March 7th 1865’.

All of these stones were exhibited at the exhibition, *Curling in Scotland*, in Kelvingrove Museum and Art Galleries, Glasgow, in 1985, as numbers 112, 131 and 132 respectively of the handlist of the exhibits.⁷

Both Abercairney stones weigh 39lb (17.7kg.), including the handle. The circumference is 32in (812mm). The height is 5.25in (133mm). These dimensions are given for they are the three parameters which govern the size of curling stones to this day. Rule 4 of the Royal Caledonian Curling Club Rules of Play for 1865 provided:

All Curling stones shall be of a circular shape. No stone shall be of greater weight than 50lb imperial [22.68kg], nor less than 30lb [13.61kg], nor of greater circumference than 36 inches [914mm], nor of less height than one-eighth part of its greatest circumference ...

The present rule is that ‘No stone including handle and bolt, shall be of greater weight than 19.96kg (44lb), or of greater circumference than 91.44cm (36in), or of less height than 11.43cm (4.5in)’.

The flat top surface of both stones is 8.5in. (216mm) in diameter. The sole, or running



ILLUS 2 One of the Rossie Priory stones

surface, of both stones is 6in (152mm) in diameter and is flat. At this period in the history of the game the flat sole preponderated but experiments were being made with hollow soles. These were evidently not experimental stones.

THE HANDLES

It is on the handles that one finds the inscription recording the donation. The handles are of the 'double' variety; that is, each end of the handle is located on a triangular iron post permanently fixed into the top of the stone. The handle is secured to the post by a screw at each end (illus 3). In order to illustrate the high quality of the workmanship involved in the making of these stones it should be recorded that the numerals '1' and '4' were punched onto the top of the posts on one stone and '2' and '3' on the other. On the underside of each handle at the proper aperture were punched '1' and '4' and '2' and '3' respectively. That is, the handles were designed to fit the stones in a precise way only.

On the ebony grip of each handle is a silver plaque, on which the donation is engraved. On both handles this plaque has been subjected to such severe polishing over the years that a large part of the inscription has been obliterated. My reconstruction of the inscription is as follows:

Below the motto in a scroll: Sans Tache, an earl's coronet

below which is the legend:

[Presented]

[By]

THE AB[ERCAIRNEY CURLIN]G CLUB

[To]

Ch[arles Home Drummond Mo]ray, Esq.

o[f Abercainne]y

AS A TO[KEN OF THEIR RESPE]CT AND

[ESTEEM]

[1864].



ILLUS 3 Detail of the handle attachment of one of the Abercairney stones

The motto and the crest consisting of an earl's coronet are part of the armorial achievement of the family of Drummond Moray of Abercairney. Both are discernible.

In reconstructing the inscription I was able to use my knowledge of similar inscriptions, but I would like to acknowledge the assistance of the Strathclyde Police Forensic Science Laboratory. A casting of the silver inscription was made by them, and low power microscopy on the casting provided the date '1864' and the word 'esteem'. The illegible parts of the inscription on one handle are within square brackets in my reconstruction.

The main part or body of both handles consists of two L-shaped pieces of cast brass, which are attached to the ebony grip by a steel, threaded bolt. What is remarkable is the finish: despite their appearance the handles are neither of solid, cast silver, nor of silver plate. The silversmith has created a sleeve of silver

which entirely covers the brass castings, apart from the inside of the triangular apertures which are designed to accommodate the iron posts, and the part which meets up with the ebony grip. Each sleeve of the handle appears to have been constructed in two halves by forming it on the casting by hammering so that it fitted precisely. The very fine joint between the two halves of the L-shaped end of the handle can barely be discerned. The end was completed by the soldering on of a base plate. Each end is octagonal in cross section, and the base is also octagonal. On every second facet of the eight is engraved a different thistle motif. The screw-holes at each end are also embellished with engraved thistles; and on each shoulder where the vertical part of the handle turns to meet the wooden grip there are more engraved thistles. The depth of the engraving makes it clear that the silver is of significant thickness.

As is usual in this type of handle the screws, of iron, have large modelled heads, through an aperture in which a small lever could be inserted to assist in tightening the screw to ensure that the handle was securely fixed to the stone.

I am very grateful to Mr Stuart Maxwell, formerly of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, and to Mr George Dalgleish, curator of Scottish History at the National Museums of Scotland, for expressing an interest in these handles. Their opinion is that the mode of construction is unique; and represents the highest degree of skill on the part of the silversmith. The silver-plating of such a pair of handles, or the casting thereof in solid silver, would each have entailed much less work.

Although the stones show some sign of use, in that the striking bands are to some extent worn, the metal of which they are made is not really suitable for the ‘sair dunts’ that are an important part of the game of curling. Their owner might have been distracted from proper play by anxiety that a forceful shot from an opponent might shatter one of the stones and bring into consideration another part of Rule 4, ‘... No stone ... shall be changed after a game has begun, unless it happen to be broken, and then the largest fragment to count, without any necessity for playing with it more ...’

CONCLUSION

These stones were primarily intended as aesthetic objects. The metal was chosen for its beautiful appearance: the silver of the handles was intended to add to the sumptuous impression.

Moreover, a presentation of such ostentatious sumptuousness displays to some extent the high regard in which ‘Scotland’s ain game’ was held by its votaries. Whoever designed and made these stones – and a search of the contemporary Perthshire press has failed to discover who he was – has admirably achieved his objectives.

NOTES

- 1 Smith 2000, 69–86.
- 2 Groome 1886.
- 3 15 D 768.
- 4 A servitude is an obligation attached to a piece of property limiting the proprietor’s use of it or permitting others to exercise specified rights over it. See *Magistrates of Earlsferry v Malcolm* (1829) 7 S 755 and (1832) 11 S 74; *Cleghorn v Dempster* (1805) Mor 16141.
- 5 The bench consisted of Lord President McNeill and Lords Fullerton, Robertson and Ivory. Of these Lord Ivory was a member of the Duddingston Curling Society, which he joined on 10 December 1823. (Minute Book of Duddingston Curling Society, NAS GD266/123/1.)
- 6 Kerr 1890, 384–5.
- 7 Margaret Buchanan & Sheriff David B Smith, *Handlist of Exhibits of Exhibition, Curling in Scotland*, Glasgow Museum, Kelvingrove, 1985.

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