

The Isle of Skye Highland Games
How it all Started:
Remembering the Skye Gathering Games

By RUARAI DH HILLEARY

I suppose that Games of one sort or another must have been held in the Highlands for centuries, as trials of strength and endurance have been features of the Highlander in peace and war.

Indeed, I recall coming off the hill some years ago with Iain Campbell, the stalker at Eileanreach, when he stopped beside a rock and invited me to try to lift a large rounded stone on top of another rock nearby. It was both awkward to lift and very heavy; I failed to manage the lift completely. Iain then told me that in days gone by, when a young man considered taking a bride he would lead her up to this stone... and if she could lift it she would be suitable.

More recently, and perhaps fortunately, ladies perform at the Games in a more elegant fashion, running and dancing beautifully, while gracing the proceedings with encouraging noises to their menfolk. Of course, the Ladies Tug-of-War team does liven up the situation greatly, but in the main, it's the big men of muscle who draw the crowds.

Early records of the Skye Games date back to 1877; the co-founders were Harry Macdonald, Viewfield and Donald Macdonald, Tormore. It was held first in September, then after 1881, in August. In those days, many visitors came to Skye in fine, big yachts and the Games included a regatta with skiff races for the yachts.



Harry MacDonald, Viewfield

I remember in the 1930's Lord Malcolm Douglas-Hamilton arriving in a seaplane called 'The Cloud of Iona'. We were taken up for a flight round the island and I particularly recall being told not to stick my head out of the window because it might be blown off!

Parties involved dancing at the Balls on two consecutive nights with the Games as an invitation to visitors to compete with the locals, after the first night of the Balls. Sometimes the last reel of the second night was danced on the pier before boarding the steamers at 8.00am and on one occasion, a couple who scarcely knew one another took the wrong boat and spent the weekend going round the Hebrides in borrowed jerseys

over their evening attire.

The Skye Gathering acted as hosts for all these festivities, and the members provided the prize money for competitors in the Games. Only the piping events were open to non-locals initially, and considerable prize money could be won on every event. The Gathering created the Games ground out of an old quarry on The Lump, recently reconstructed and improved by the present Games Committee.



Alterations to the Lump, 1997

The Hall was built in 1879 to be used for the holding of the Balls, and subsequently, other community purposes, including the Open Piping Competitions. After the war, Dame Flora MacLeod of MacLeod and my father, Iain Hilleary, started Skye Week in order to try to lengthen the tourist season. Skye Week featured a Games for locals which became a big feature of the Week in May. Meanwhile, the Games in August continued as before, but 'Open' for the 'big men' who go round the circuit of Inverness, Braemar, Oban and so on.

After World War Two, the Games Committee separated from the Gathering and became the effective, self-supporting organisation that it is today. The Skye Gathering still owns the ground, and continues to hold the Balls, but the two events have become independent.

Many of the big houses which used to entertain guests in those early

days are now hotels and the tourist has become the most important contributor to the Island's economy. Consequently, the pre-war amateur element of the Games is inevitably overshadowed by the professional athlete whose prowess is hugely admired by all. Nevertheless, the very important opportunity for everybody to 'have a go' remains, and long may it continue to do so, for the great thing is to try. The Skye Games remain, as in the beginning, a Gathering, which is a meeting place for all, and a great day for Highland hospitality is, as ever, the object.

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