

# **ATHOLL AND BREADALBANE AGRICULTURAL SHOW AND HIGHLAND GATHERING**

**By James Macnaughton**

With all the Highland Gatherings both in Scotland and around the world being cancelled this summer, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, you might enjoy being transported back in time to the 1970s and to experience my fond memories of the Agricultural Show and Highland Gathering held in the Highland village of Aberfeldy annually, on the second Saturday of August.



**ABERFELDY AND THE UPPER TAY VALLEY FROM THE EAST**

As you can see from this stunning picture of the Upper Tay valley, Aberfeldy nestles among the lofty Grampian Mountains on the banks of Britain's biggest river- the mighty Tay - and the town's Victoria Park forms a natural amphitheatre for the spectators to gather on and to enjoy the multitude of traditional events unfolding in front of them.

Highland Games in this part of Perthshire date back to the visit of Queen Victoria to Taymouth Castle at Kenmore on Lochtayside (6 miles west of Aberfeldy) during her honeymoon in 1842. Although physical competition between the Campbells and the MacGregors in Glenlyon is mentioned as far back as 1684, when throwing the stone was keenly fought!



**TAYMOUTH CASTLE**

This astoundingly successful royal visit was commemorated for many years afterwards by a Highland Gathering held in the Taymouth parks. It was opened by a procession from the castle to the field, and prizes were given for bagpipe playing, dancing, throwing the stone and hammer, tossing the caber, running and leaping and for the most accurately equipped in the Highland garb. An early poster from the 1934 Breadalbane Gathering mentions the original 1843 Gathering and includes most of the events in its own programme.

**PROGRAMME**

By the 1970s Atholl had joined Breadalbane and an Agricultural Show was put on in the morning before the afternoon Highland Gathering. This Agricultural part grew over the years, until some of its programme, such as the Show Jumping and other horse-based events took place on the Friday.

The Saturday morning events covered the judging of the magnificent Blackface Tups (Rams) with their massive curly horns and their orange washed fleeces, pens of 6 Blackface Gimmers (lambs of the year before becoming pregnant in the autumn), the black Aberdeen

**BREADALBANE  
HIGHLAND GATHERING**  
(First held at Kenmore in 1843 to commemorate the late Queen Victoria's Visit to Taymouth)

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**AT ABERFELDY**  
ON  
**WEDNESDAY, 22<sup>ND</sup> AUGUST**  
1934.

**HIGHLAND DANCING, BAGPIPE PLAYING,  
RUNNING, LEAPING, CABER TOSSING,  
HAMMER THROWING, WRESTLING, CYCLE RACING  
&c. .. Sports commence at 11.15 a.m. prompt.**

BY KIND PERMISSION OF THE OFFICER COMMANDING,

**The Pipe Band from the Depot, Black Watch, Perth**  
Will play during the day, and a detachment of this Famous Regiment, cradled in Aberfeldy, will give a

**GYMNASTIC EXHIBITION**

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Prices of Admission (Including Tax), by Ticket only:  
To Park 1/3, Children (under 13) 6d.; Enclosure 1/3, Children (under 13) 6d.;  
Grand Stand 3/6.

**Carriages, Motors, and Charabancs, 5/- each (Exclusive of Occupants).**  
By Order of the Town Council, Taybridge Terrace Road will be Closed to the Public  
except to Residents therein, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., on the day of the Games.

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FOR PROGRAMME AND RULES OF COMPETITION APPLY TO SECRETARY.

Railway and Bus Arrangements—For Particulars of Service see separate Bills.

**Refreshments on the Ground.**  
Union Bank Buildings, Aberfeldy, August, 1934. C. J. D. MUNRO, Solicitor, Hon. Secretary and Treasurer.



Angus cattle and the beautiful Highland cattle with their long haired coats and wide sweeping horns.

### **THE ABERDEEN ANGUS CATTLE**



### **THE HIGHLAND CATTLE**



### **A BLACKFACE TUP (RAM)**

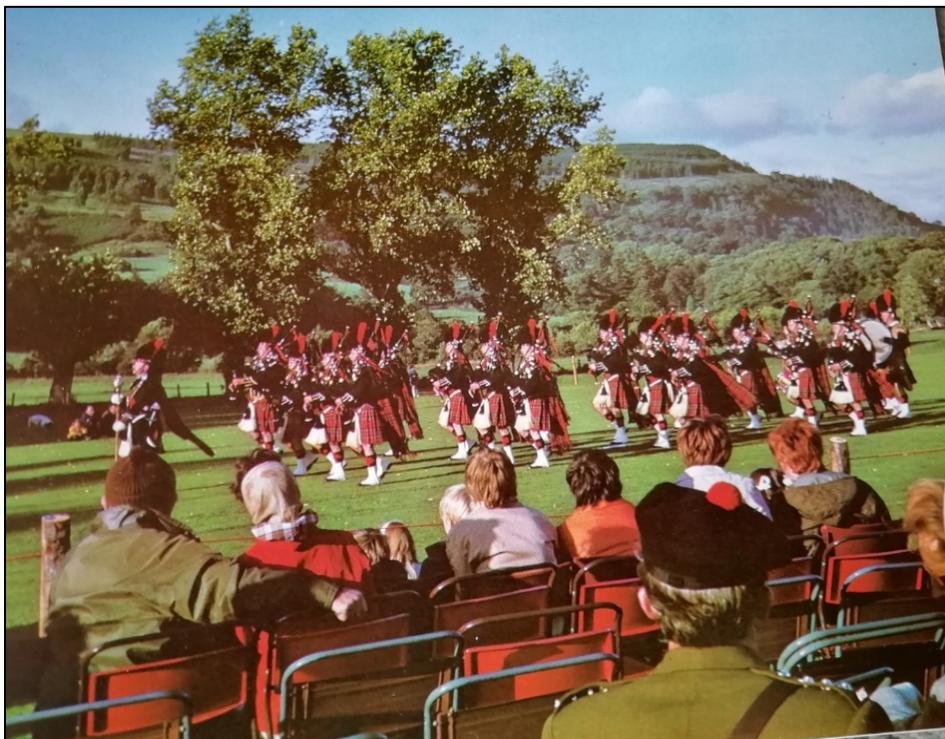
Also, on parade was a massive Shire (Clydesdale) Horse, resplendent in a decorated neck collar with dozens of shiny brass horse brasses, ribbons interwoven into its mane and its carefully combed tail, and its iconic hairy hooves. It was normally used for hauling logs in the forests.

### **A SHIRE HORSE DECORATED WITH BRASSES AND RIBBONS**

At 1.30 there was a parade of the prize-winning animals around the arena, led by the proud, high stepping show jumping horses.



At a few minutes before two, Major Neil Ramsay of Farleyer, - a former Scots Guards officer, and Chieftain of the Games for the year - declared the Highland Gathering OPEN, as the Pipes and Drums of the Black Watch, who had marched to the Park from the Aberfeldy Square, arrived to the tune of “The Atholl and Breadalbane Gathering”, entered the arena and completed a circuit of the 440 yard running track before falling out for a well-earned dram or pint in the Refreshments Marquee. The Black Watch was formed in Aberfeldy in 1739, and were made Freemen of the town in 1970, so they are always very happy to come and participate in our annual Show and Gathering.



### **THE PIPES AND DRUMS OF THE BLACK WATCH (RHR)**

They were succeeded by several items on the programme occurring simultaneously :- the Athletes started by competing in a 100 yards sprint; the Solo Dancers began their competitions on

the stage with a Highland Fling accompanied by a piper; the Heavy Athletes started their events with the spectacular 22lb. heavy hammer, digging their spiked boots into the turf, before swinging their massive shoulders round and round before releasing the long handled hammer , which sailed through the air in the middle of the park, and thumped down around 40 yards away to the rousing applause of the crowd; the Solo Pipers , situated in a far corner of the park , began their competitions in March Strathspey and Reel and Pibroch.

## THE HIGHLAND DANCERS



## THE HEAVY HAMMER

Next up was Jim McLeod and his Scottish Country Dance Band from Dunblane with a stirring selection of Scottish melodies, which had the spectators clapping in time. A local singer, Jimmy Fraser, then joined them to delight us with his clear tenor rendering of that soulful Gaelic song “The Dark Island”.



## CLAN MENZIES MARCHING TO WEEM

The Black Watch Pipes and Drums then fell in and led the March of the Clansmen round the arena to “Scotland the Brave”. Among the Clansmen were a big party of Clan Menzies, who always hold their annual gathering at Castle Menzies to coincide with the Aberfeldy Highland Gathering ; a busload of Clan Macnaughton from Edinburgh, organised by Frank McNaughton, the Clan Historian; plus groups of Stewarts, Robertson, Campbells, MacGregors, McDougalls, and McIntoshes.

After the March was concluded, a member of the Stewart party, soberly dressed in tartan trews and a leather doublet, approached a much more colourful Clansman, resplendent in kilt, plaid and a cap with a large eagle feather on it. The Stewart murmured some words in Gaelic, of which the spurious Clansman understood not a word, but when repeated in English, asked of which Clan he was the Chief. He then had to admit that he was not a Clan Chief, at which the Stewart told him in no uncertain terms that he was therefore not permitted to wear a Chief's eagle feather, and, much embarrassed, he slunk off in ignominy.

Meanwhile, in the middle of the arena, it was time for the Terrier Race, in which a dozen gamekeepers' terriers chased a swiftly moving fox's tail for a hundred yards or so across the arena. Or at least some did, but others ran in completely wrong directions, some fought furiously and some started "humping" energetically. Totally hilarious!

### **THE TERRIER RACE**



By now it was 3 o'clock and time for the intrepid athletes to take part in the traditional Hill Race. Off they went, over General Wade's Bridge across the Tay, along the Poplar Avenue to Weem and then up the steep slopes of Weem Hill to its thousand-foot summit.

While they were away, some of the spectators wandered off to the S.W.R.I.(Scottish Womens' Rural Institute) marquee to admire inside the colourful Flower Show, the fruit and veg. tables, the cake, biscuit and scone exhibits, the jam, jelly and cheese, the embroidery, tapestry ,knitting and other craft work-all skilfully made by enthusiastic locals.

On the outskirts of the park were lots of stalls showing shiny new tractors, electric fencing materials, veterinary products, fertilisers etc and there was even a tent with " Gypsy Rose Lee", who would read your palm and predict your future for a fee.

The Show and Games are always very sociable affairs because country folk gather at them from all over Highland Perthshire, perhaps only meeting once a year, so with lots of news and gossip to exchange. Also, there are house parties from many of the shooting estates in Atholl and Breadalbane, with the grouse season about to start. Numbers of the spectators are swelled, too, by tourists from all over the world. All these were now treated to one of the highlights of the afternoon when the 32 dancers from the Royal Scottish Country Dancing Association Summer School at St. Andrews gathered in the centre of the arena. The men in white shirts, tartan ties and kilts and the ladies in flowing white dresses with tartan sashes on the shoulder. They formed smoothly into 4 sets of 4 couples and accompanied by Jim McLeod and his Band, performed a

sprightly Duke of Perth Reel (also known affectionately as Broom's Reel). This was followed by the more-stately rhythm of Dalkeith's Strathspey. Finally, the piece de resistance, they formed a huge circle and treated us all to a spectacular 32some Reel.



### **THE ROYAL SCOTTISH COUNTRY DANCERS FROM THE SUMMER SCHOOL**

By now the Hill Race Runners were back, exhausted, but proud of their good finishing times – the winner had achieved a new record.

Now it was time for a very popular event – the Tug of War. Teams had come from many parts of Scotland to compete, but the contest everyone was looking forward to was between the team from Atholl Province against the one from Breadalbane. Eight massive brawny men in each team, composed of farmers, forestry workers and gamekeepers, took up the long rope and, on the word from the referee, dug in their heels and heaved until one side eventually

collapsed and was pulled beyond the mark. It was one all in the best of three pulls, and in the final deciding pull, after a titanic struggle, Breadalbane won, to the vocal delight of most of the crowd.

### **HARD FOUGHT TUG OF WAR**





Attention now returned to the centre of the arena, where the heavy athletes were preparing to toss the caber. Each highland Games has its own locally cut caber, about 19 feet long and weighing well over a hundredweight and a half. The first heavy took up the caber, helped by a Steward, leaned it against his shoulder, then staggered forward several paces to gain momentum before, with a superhuman heave, projecting it high into the air to tumble over and to land, he hoped, pointing at exactly 12 o'clock away from him. As it flew the crowd roared their support, only to subside with a groan if it landed pointing to half past two. If, however, a perfect 12 o'clock was achieved, the biggest shout of the day echoed off the surrounding mountains. The heavies had also been busy demonstrating their skills at throwing the 56lb weight for distance and for height over the bar.

### **TOSSING THE CABER**

All afternoon the young Solo Dancers had been entrancing the spectators sitting on the grassy bank above the stage with their Highland Flings, Sword Dances, Hullachans and Sailors' Hornpipes, but now it was the turn of local lass, Alma Coull, with her beautifully deep resonant contralto voice, to pull at our heart strings with her rendering, accompanied by Jim McLeod and his Band, of:

“For these are my mountains, and this is my glen”

“Follow that”, you might say, but the Pipes and Drums of the Black Watch certainly could, and they marched to the front of the stage, formed circle for a Strathspey and Reel and closed with the  $\frac{3}{4}$  time retreat - “My Home”.

It was now 4pm and Major Ramsay returned to the stage to present the prizes to all the winners of the many events. He then officially closed the gathering, and the Pipes and Drums took that as their hint to march out of the Park and back to Aberfeldy Square to the stirring notes of - “The Road to the Isles”.

However, this was not the complete ending to the day's activities, because from 7.30pm – midnight there was a rousing Ceilidh and Dance in the Aberfeldy Town Hall.

The Atholl & Breadalbane Agricultural Show and Highland Gathering has continued every year on the second Saturday of August, but since 2008 it has moved across the Tay Bridge to Wade's

Park, where there is much more space for all the events and stalls which make it such a worthwhile occasion – Highland Perthshire’s top draw of the year.

### **SOURCES:**

**TEXT** – My own memories of the occasion.

### **PICTURES:**

Unfortunately I could not obtain any photos of the 1976 Show and Gathering, despite contacting the current Secretary of the Aberfeldy Show Society (their records no longer go back so far), so I have had to borrow photos from other Scottish Highland Gatherings, but all the illustrations depict actual events on the Aberfeldy programme. I am most grateful to the other Games and list their credits below:

- Black Watch Pipes and Drums – Aberfeldy Guide-Book, which I produced in the ‘70s.
- Picture of Aberfeldy – Aberfeldy Museum.
- 1934 Poster – the original Poster.
- Blackface Tup (Ram) –  
<https://silo.tips/viewer/web/viewer.html?file=https%3A%2F%2Fsilo.tips%2Fdownloa...>
- <https://www.highlandcattlesociety.com>
- <https://www.facebook.com/aberdeenanguscattlesociety/photos/a356065294425387/1...>
- <https://www.shirehorse.org.uk/shire-horse-gallery>
- [https://www.discogs.com/The-Great-Jim-Macleod-Band-Scotland -Swings-Again-Wi...](https://www.discogs.com/The-Great-Jim-Macleod-Band-Scotland-Swings-Again-Wi...)
- <https://rscdsbelfast.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Pic-2-dem-Bfst@M/StJul06...>
- <https://www.facebook.com/TerrierRacing/photos/a.895374610602070/111624271851...>
- Scottish Official Highland Dancing Association.
- Clan Menzies Annual Gathering Castle Menzies, Weem.
- Pitlochry Highland Gathering.
- Crieff Highland Gathering.