



**Newcastle Family History Society Inc**

**Newsletter of the Scottish Special Interest Group**

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**Martinmas 2024**

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**Failte !**

**Welcome to this Martinmas Newsletter!**

**Ten Cool Facts about Scotland**

- Scotland is home to the tallest waterfall in Britain, named Eas a' Chual Aluinn. It is 658 feet, which is three times the height of Niagara Falls (see page 4).
- The official animal of Scotland is the unicorn.
- Scotland has approximately 790 islands.
- Scotland is home to the oldest tree in Europe. It is a twisted yew, and it has been around for 3,000 years (see page 4).
- Edinburgh was the first city in the world to have its own fire brigade.
- There are over 600 square miles of freshwater lakes.
- The highest proportion of redheads are in Scotland.
- St. Andrew's Links is known as the 'home of golf'.
- Even though Edinburgh is the capital, it is not the largest city; Glasgow is the largest.
- The raincoat was invented in Scotland by a man named Charles Macintosh, who was born in Glasgow.

<https://www.tenontours.com/blog/10-cool-things-about-scotland/>

## Saltire Hunter Valley Highland Games 2024

Article and photos by Leurnyn McInnes

On 24 August, Saltire Estate was host to the fantastic Hunter Valley Highland Games. Despite having the weather of all four seasons in the one day, the rain didn't seem to dampen the spirit of the participants in the crowd.

The Highland Games display strength and endurance of competitors and involve events such as the Stone Put, Stone to Shoulder, Keg Toss, Caber Toss and the Saltire Natural Stones of Strength. Due to the rain some of these were delayed however I was able to watch the competitors in the Caber Toss and the Natural Stones of Strength and the power and strength these competitors have is truly amazing.

Most competitors seemed to find the Caber Toss challenging. The possibility of grip issues could have arisen as the Cabers had been wet due to the rain so maybe this impacted the competitors and I'm sure it also made them heavier as well. None the less, their strength was amazing.

There were a variety of markets that had tartans of many surnames, and I was even lucky enough to find a scarf with the MacInnes tartan. I hadn't seen it before so that was exciting to find my family's tartan. They were also giving out copies of Scottish newspapers with purchases which

were interesting to look at. I was lucky enough to also browse some books on sale and found one that may be helpful with my family history research.



**Irn-Bru is an orange-coloured soft drink made in Cumbernauld, Scotland, by A.G. Barr of Glasgow since 1901. It is available worldwide.**

**A Scotch Pie is a small, traditional Scottish pie, originally filled with minced mutton but usually made these days with lamb or beef.**

There were a variety of food stalls however as soon as I arrived, I snacked on a scotch pie and a can of Irn Bru.

My favourite parts of the day were the opening and closing ceremonies where all the pipe bands combined and performed together. The music

sounded incredible when everyone played together, and I could have sat and listened to it for hours! Each pipe band was then able to showcase their individual skills throughout the day. I loved seeing the different tartans and dress each band wore. It was also fantastic to see a variety

of ages in the pipe bands and that the next generation is participating in keeping their ancestry alive.

A highland event wouldn't be complete without some highland dancers. They performed a variety of dances for the crowd and there was the opportunity to learn some dances as well.



One element I really enjoyed was seeing *The Highland Rose: Jacobite Living History Group*. They had a tent set up and were educating the crowd about life back in the highlands. One element of their display I loved was the person who spoke about medicine back in the time of our ancestors. It was fascinating to see tools and hear ideas on medicine and assessment that, as a nurse, even made my stomach turn a bit! The group also made biscuits over a fire and showed a variety of weapons that would have been used by highlanders. I also enjoyed the display at the end of the day on a variety of guns, shields and daggers. This was probably one of my favourite parts due to the educational aspect and seeing the history behind items that would have been used.

All in all, I would have to say it ended up a wonderful day and would highly recommend people visit next year (date TBC). It is a fantastic day out even if pipe music isn't entirely your thing, there is so much more to discover.



## **The Legend of the Saltire**

Scotland's national flag is the St Andrew's Cross or Saltire. The white saltire on a blue background is said to have originated in a battle fought in East Lothian in the year 832AD. Legend has it that an army of Picts under King Angus aided by a group of Scots led by Eochaidh were being pursued by a large force of Angles and Saxons. King Angus led prayers for assistance and saw a white saltire (diagonal cross on which St Andrew had been martyred) against the blue sky. The king swore that if they were victorious St Andrew would become the patron saint of Scotland.

After their victory, the Saltire became the flag of Scotland.  
(Information from [scottishflagtrust.com](http://scottishflagtrust.com))



Eas a' Chual Aluinn

Image from [Pinterest](#)



The Rambling Scot – oldest tree in Europe

Image from [Sharpscot](#)

## Recipe for Haggis

As Hogmanay approaches the members of the Scottish SIG thought you might be in need of a reliable recipe for haggis.

**A SCOTTISH HAGGIS**  
*Often-Required Recipe*

The secretary of the Western Australian Scottish Union sent to me a copy of a reliable recipe for Scottish Haggis, and as this recipe for making the national dish is a very reliable one, there are no doubt many readers who will be pleased to have it.

Take the stomach bag of a sheep and wash it well, first in cold and then in hot water to which has been added a small lump of washing soda. Scrape carefully, soak in cold water and a little salt all night. Wash the pluck in salt water and boil for 1½ hours. In boiling, leave the windpipe hanging out of the pot so that the impurities may escape.

When cold, cut away dry pieces of skin and gristle and the windpipe. Grate the liver, mince the rest of the pluck with ¼lb. of beef suet and 2 onions. Toast 2 teacups of oatmeal, add to the minced pluck (which includes the heart) and season to taste with pepper and salt. Add ½ pint of the liquor in which the pluck was boiled and stir all together. Put the mince into the bag, filling it only a little more than half full, that the contents may have room to expand.

Sew up the bag, put into a pot of boiling water, with a plate underneath to keep it from sticking to the pot, prick it with a large needle occasionally to allow air to escape, and boil for three hours. Serve hot, with hot champed potatoes.

This recipe was printed on page 26 of the *Sunday Times* (Perth, Western Australia) on Sunday 8 November 1936.



Image from Wikipedia

If you do decide to try it out, please let us know how it turned out.

If you're not keen to make your own, perhaps a visit to the butcher at Marketown, Newcastle West, will help ease your cravings!

(Advance orders may be necessary)

## The Haggis Whistle

Ken Shilling (with tongue in cheek)

When the Haggis hunting season comes around you will need a whistle to attract the elusive delicacy.

The whistle illustrated was made by Whistlestop Pottery from Invergowrie, Dundee and was designed on that used by the ancient Picts and Scots when hunting Haggises (or Haggi) in the hills. This style of whistle was probably used by Robert Burns himself, and in skilled hands can perfectly mimic the mating call of the Haggis. A hole in the base can be opened and closed to the passage of air to make this possible.



This example of the Haggis whistle was purchased from a small museum shop in Kilmartin Glen, Scotland.

As is well-known the Haggis comes in two versions – the four-legged variety (Haggis quadriceps) and the three-legged (Haggis triceps). Both types, however, have the legs on one side shorter than those on the other so they can negotiate their hilly environment that much better. Consequently, when responding to the call of the whistle they are inclined to rush off in the wrong direction and fall down the hill to your waiting companion, who can scoop them up quite easily.

The Haggis hunting season runs from St Andrew's Day (30 November) to Robert Burn's birthday (25 January) and the beastie tastes best when hung for at least 72 hours after dressing.

## Do you know the answer?

See last page to find out if you're right



A 'Munro' is the name for a Scottish mountain above which height?

- 1,000 feet
- 2,000 feet
- 3,000 feet
- 4,000 feet

## Aberdeen Highland Games 2024

Article and photos by Su Carter

On the first Saturday in July each year, Aberdeen plays host to a taste of Scotland. Mae and I went up this year, with some friends, humans and dogs. We had booked a cottage in Scone within walking distance to the town centre and only 15 mins drive from the Showgrounds where the games were held. It cost \$25 (concession) for a ticket, but it was well worth it! The sounds of the pipes and drums filled the air, food stalls, both standard fairground foods, and stalls selling something more in keeping with the Highland theme, abounded. We humans enjoyed scotch pies, made with hot water pastry, truly delicious. A wander around the showground allowed you to find any number of Scottish souvenirs, hairy coos (cows) included. I was rather impressed with one stall holder who recognised my tartan scarf ... 'Ah McBeth' he said, which really cheered me. It was like being back in Scotland with the souvenir shops selling everything from tartans, kilts, books, puzzles of Scottish themes, shortbread and almost anything that I saw in Oban or Edinburgh could have been purchased here in Aberdeen. There was a local whiskey maker, giving away tastings (which was very nice whiskey).

There was a best dressed pet contest, and NFHS star Mae, was only just beaten by a Jack Russell wearing a kilt and sweet Westie named Bonnie who was wearing a lovely tartan outfit. Mae's mum will have to put more effort into next year's contest!

The entertainments included highland dancing, lots of piper bands, fiddle playing and shows of strength. The tossing of the Caber was very exciting, and yes, the winner, a very tall young man, with muscles galore did flip the 'tree trunk' all the way over! His trophy was a piece of last year's caber, which had broken off during last year's event, attached to a wooden board. I wonder if they will be using up the pieces for the next few years – 'waste not, want not'.

It was a wonderful fun-filled day out and we all enjoyed it and hope to go again next July.





## Podcast on Tartans

An interesting *History Extra* podcast brought to our attention by Su Carter. The podcast, *Tartan: everything you wanted to know*, is produced by the team behind *BBC History Magazine*. The overview of the podcast reads:

We're all familiar with the checks and stripes of tartan. But, how much do you know about the colourful history of the textile famously sported by the Scottish clans? According to historian and tartan expert Peter MacDonald, some of our favourite 'facts' surrounding the chequered material might not be as accurate as we think. Speaking to Emily Briffett, and answering listener questions, Peter charts tartan's long story - from its early origins, to its growing status as a national symbol and commercial icon.

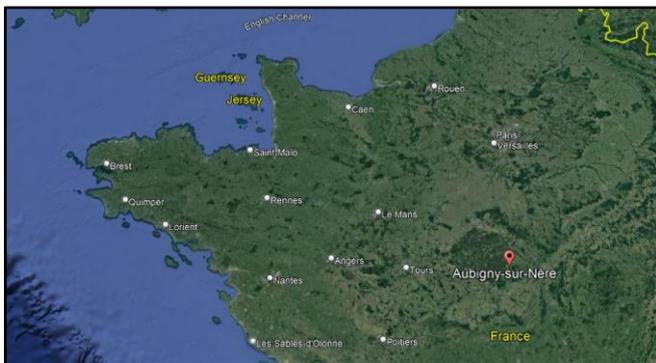
If you would like to listen to the podcast in full, click [here](#).

## Aubigny-sur-Nère - Scotland in France

Article by Ken Shilling

The outflow of Scots from their homeland over the last few centuries has seen them settle in communities all over the world. My Heggie and Cox families from Fife and Angus respectively, have members who made their second home in many places. They settled in Canada, represented now in provinces from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The United States was another destination, while New Zealand saw some as well. Those who came to Australia prospered and have left many descendants across the country.

In our last issue of *Caledonian* Kirstie Carrick introduced us to the village of Gurro in northern Italy where a party of Scottish soldiers settled and made their home in the 1500s. Shortly after, I was introduced to Aubigny-sur-Nère, about one and a half hours south of Paris, by *Scotland Now* and the *Daily Record* via Facebook, and another internet article on the village by Marianne Lohse.



Maps showing the position of Aubigny south of Paris and the village itself. Sourced from Google Maps.

The story goes that King Charles VII of France awarded this village to Sir John Stuart of Darnley, a Constable of the Scottish army, for his services against the English in the Hundred Years War. This was in 1423. John Stuart's grandson, Bernard the 4<sup>th</sup> Lord of Aubigny was called Béraud by the French and nicknamed the 'knight beyond reproach'. Bernard's cousin, Robert Stuart, fought in the Italian Wars (1494-1559) and was awarded the baton of Marshall of France. When a fire ravaged the village in 1512, he helped the locals rebuild with timber from his forests.

The last Stuart died childless in 1672 and Aubigny returned to the French Crown. Shortly after, Louis XIV transferred the duchy to Louise, the Duchess of Portsmouth, a favourite of King Charles II of England. She had arranged England's neutrality during the Franco-Flemish War, so the 'City of the Stuarts' now belonged to an English family. When Louise passed away in 1734 the duchy was transferred to her grandson, Charles Lennox II, the Duke of Richmond.

The Richmond property was seized during the Revolution in 1792 and returned in 1803 following the signing of the Treaty of Amiens. The 5<sup>th</sup> Duke, however, put everything up for sale in 1840 and his Château de la Verrerie was bought by the Vogüe family, its present owners.

Regardless of the changes in ownership since 1672, the village of Aubigny still retains strong ties to Scotland.

The village has its own tartan and citizens proudly wear it. Between 10 and 12 June this year a *Fêtes Franco-Écossaises* (Franco-Scottish Festival) was held, celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the twinning with the Scottish town of Haddington. A procession of 200 pipers was planned, along with mediaeval markets, Highland games, feasts and concerts. During the festival all the officials, including the mayor, Michael Autissierare, dressed in kilts made by Lady Chrystel Kilts.

The Aubigny tartan (opposite) is green, yellow, red and blue. Chrystel Amyot and her bagpiper husband, Robert, recently moved to Aubigny where she now makes haute couture kilts, using her much-admired pleating method.



Of course, it would be strange to have a tartan and no pipers. Aubigny has its own pipe band which has been invited to play at Brittany's prestigious *Festival Interceltique de Lorient* where Celtic music is taken very seriously. The Aubigny pipers were taught by Ketty, a Scottish student on a language study holiday who married one of her pupils, Alban, a local fireman.

Other signs of Scotland can be found in the village. The *Cutty Sark Pub* features mahogany woodwork and tartan carpets and serves haggis. Christiane Morice produces fudge and 'The Aubigny Auld Alliance', a 12-year-old pure malt whisky, is sold by local shops.

Obviously, the connection between France and Scotland is recognised from a very early age. The village pre-school, or nursery, is called *Kilts et Culottes* and can be found tucked away on *Allée du Printemps*.



Castle Stuart (above)



A Saltire banner in the main street (right)



**Clan Motto**  
Fortitudine  
(With Fortitude)



Article by Kerren Robards

Variations of the name are: MacRae, Maccrae, Maccraw, Maccreath, Macgrath, Macra, Macrach, Macraith, Macrath, Raith.

The McRae clan trace their ancestry back to the Celts and Ireland but they are now known as a Highland Scottish clan. The early members of the clan in the 12th and 13th centuries originally inhabited the lands of Clunes in the district of Beaulieu in the North East of Scotland before, in the 14th century, the clan members moved to the shores of Kintail in Wester Ross.

The name McRae means 'son of Grace' or 'son of Good Fortune' and is thought to have ecclesiastical origins.

The Irish origins of the clan are traced back to Maurice Macrath, who came to Scotland from Ireland with Colin Fitzgerald, the founder of the MacKenzie clan, and another friend, Gileon na Tuaigh. The trio fled to Scotland following a quarrel in Ireland which had become violent.

Legend has it that, having arrived in Clunes in the heart of Lovat country, the three friends came upon a would-be assassin attacking Bissett, Lord of Lovat. Maurice Macrath went to Bissett's rescue, slaying the attacker. Following this incident a strong bond of friendship was formed between Maurice and Bissett, and Maurice was invited to settle on the Lovat estate. Maurice Macrath had four sons – John, Christopher, Duncan and Finlay, all of whom were believed to be born at Clunes.

Eldest son John was forced to leave Clunes and he went to Kintail in Wester Ross. His first born, Christopher, was the first McRae to be born in Kintail. John re-established his father's connection with the MacKenzies, who were in the process of putting down their roots in the west, having recently acquired Eilean Donan castle near Dornie, in Ross-shire. John's family

became known as Clan Ian Charrich Macrath of Torysich and for around 200 years were a powerful family in the area. Second son Christopher settled in Brahan, home of the MacKenzies, and his descendants were to be found in Strathgarve, Strathbrennen, and Strathconan. Third son Duncan, found his way to Argyleshire in the West Highlands and married an heiress of the Campbells of Craignish. His offspring took the Campbell name, thus ending this branch of Macrath. Fourth son Finlay, eventually joined his brother John in Kintail.

There are some colourful characters amongst the generations and they became known as the 'Wild McRae's'. Christopher McRae, born 1380, great-grandson of Maurice Macrath, became known as Black Finlay McRae. His descendants were in Kintail and eventually became the keepers of Eilean Donan castle from about 1520. Such was the bond between the McRae's and the MacKenzies, that as well as being appointed keepers of the MacKenzie stronghold they became known as 'the MacKenzie's shirt of mail'.

Clan warfare produced a society where courage and tenacity were greatly admired. Red Hector was a courageous clansman as was Big Duncan of the Battle Axe McRae. He was Black Finlay's grandson and during a conflict with the MacDonalds, at the Battle of Park in 1464 near Strathpeffer, Duncan – a huge, wild looking, 19-year-old – found himself on the edge of the battlefield armed with nothing but a rusty old axe. He launched himself savagely on the MacDonald's, turning the tide of the battle as he cut down dozens of the enemy.

In 1644, the Marquess of Montrose raised the Royal Standard in support of Charles 1 in the north. The McRae's joined forces with Seaforth, the MacKenzie chief, and again in the Jacobite rebellion of 1715. Another Duncan at this time fought under Seaforth. He was also noted for his formidable size and strength and was reputed to have carried a massive stone for a considerable distance before finally laying it down at *Auchnagart* farm, where it can be seen to this day. This Duncan was a writer of poetry as well as a man of great strength, but sadly he met his death in 1715, along with his two brothers, at the Battle of Sheriffmuir. His sword was preserved for a long period in the Tower of London, where it was described as 'the great highlander's sword'.

In the subsequent Jacobite rising of 1719, the McRaes were again involved in the Jacobite cause. The Spanish dispatched under the Duke of Ormonde 30 ships carrying 6,000 troops, but only 300 reached Eilean Donan. This paltry force was quickly dealt with when, on 10 May 1719, three British men-of-war, the *Worcester*, the *Enterprise* and the *Flanborough* sailed up Loch Alsh and set their cannons on Eilean Donan, destroying the stronghold. The Jacobite rising ended one month later, on 10 June, with the defeat of the Jacobites at the Battle of Glen Shiel.

Unfortunately, despite their rich history, the McRaes today are sadly without a Chief. The two rival branches of the clan, the Inverinate branch and the Conchra family, vigorously opposed each other's previous claims and no petition has been lodged in recent years for Chieftainship.



Blue McRae Hunting Tartan

Some notable McRaes throughout the world, Australia and some with Hunter Valley connections:

- Rev. Farquhar McRae's grandson, Duncan McRae of Inverinate was the compiler of the famous Fernaig manuscript of 1688-1693.
- John MacRae, late 1700s. His poems and songs celebrating the Loyalist cause remain an important part of Scottish Gaelic literature and are equally popular among speakers of Canadian Gaelic.
- Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae (pictured c.1914), Canadian war poet of Scottish descent, scribbled down a poem following the death of a close friend on the Western Front during the First World War. *In Flanders Fields* has become a world-famous poem. Apparently, John threw the poem away but one of his orderlies retrieved it for posterity.
- Tate McRae – 21-year-old Canadian singer, songwriter and dancer.
- Craig McRae - 51 yrs. Former Australian Rules footballer. Current coach of the Collingwood Football Club.
- Myles McRae, the member for Morpeth, NSW, in the 14th Parliament under Responsible Government – 9 February 1889 to 6 June 1891. Myles lived in Sydney and became Mayor of Kogarah Council three times: 1888-89, 1894-95 and 1896-97. McRae Estate in Penshurst was Myles's land and he built a substantial mansion, *Kintail*, on Laycock Road. This property is on the State Heritage List.
- Finlay O'Neill McRae – Fought in AIF at the Boer War 1899-1902, and the Great War 1914-1918. Served at Gallipoli where he was decorated with the Distinguished Service Medal. Served at the Western Front also.
- Donald Alexander McRae - Fought in AIF at the Great War 1914-1918. Served at Ypres, Belgium and died of wounds 21 October 1917.



Image from Wikipedia

You cannot write about Clan McRae without writing about Eilean Donan Castle. It is one of the most beautiful castles, if not the most beautiful, in the Highlands. It is certainly the most photographed castle in Scotland. The



Eilean Donan Castle – photo by Lea Harris

name derives from a religious hermit, St Donan, who lived on the site at the beginning of the 7th century when Celtic monks came to Scotland from Ireland to spread the Christian gospel. The name Eilean Donan means Island of Donan.

Eilean Donan possesses an ethereal quality as it is portrayed rising out of the mist on the promontory that marks the meeting point of three lochs: Loch Long, Loch Duich. and Loch Alsh, amidst the romantic beauty of the silent hills. In reality, however, it was a solid, virtually impregnable stone fortress built not for beauty but for defence against foes. The castle's location was chosen for its strategic value.

John MacKenzie is reputed to have given Robert the Bruce refuge in the castle in the early part of the 14th century when he was out of favour with many clan chiefs and was being hunted by the English. When Robert the Bruce established himself as King of Scotland in 1331, he ordered his men to teach those who had shunned him a lesson. They beheaded 50 of the King's foes and displayed their heads atop the battlements of Eilean Donan as a grim warning.

After the battle of Glen Shiel in 1719, the castle lay in ruins for nearly 200 years until John MacRae-Gilstrap, with the help of Farquar MacRae, restored the castle to its former glory. The reconstruction between 1912-1932 followed old plans. The castle is run by the Conchra Charitable Trust, established by the MacRaes in 1983. The castle is still used by the MacRae family, who keep private accommodation within the castle. The public can tour inside, it can be a wedding venue and it can also be a backdrop for movies, as it already has, with *Highlander*, *The World is Not Enough* and *Entrapment* a notable few.

Lots of members of our Scottish SIG have already visited the castle. And if they haven't yet, it's on their list. Especially, if you have that McRae connection, which three of our members do have. We actually haven't found a direct connection with our respective families but I'm hopeful over time we might.

Our three McRae lines are all from the Highlands area. Two lines are from the Inverness-shire County, Boleskine and Strath parishes, and the other is from the county of Ross and Cromarty, Kintail parish. Each family group came to New South Wales as part of the Bounty Emigration Scheme organised by the Government between 1837 and 1840. The three family groups all came to the Hunter Region. Two families settled in Dunmore and the third at Morpeth and Berrico, Gloucester.

The three ships the families sailed on were:

1837 – *Midlothian* (August 1837–December 1837)

1839 – *Asia* (September 1838–May 1839)

1840 – *Henry Porcher* (October 1839–February 1840)

References: *Macrae – The origins of the Clan MacRae and their place in history*

Wikipedia

Trove - <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/104620691?searchTerm=Finlay%20McRae>

National Archives of Australia

## Highland Dancing

Article by Lea Harris

Have you ever sat in awe whilst watching highland dancing? Awe of the enthusiasm and energy along with the gracefulness and agility that go into the dances? I know I have. While researching for this article, I was surprised to find out that highland dancing is basically a solo dance for competition purposes. Although it is usually danced with a number of people, it is judged on each person.

Highland dancing requires the endurance and strength of an athlete as well as the artistry of a dancer. It is the traditional solo dance of Scotland and is a style of competitive dancing developed in the Scottish Highlands for competitions at public events such as the Highland games. In the past, Scottish regiments used Highland dancing as exercise to keep the troops in shape, and ready for battle. Today, Highland dancing is often performed with the accompaniment of Highland bagpipe music, and dancers wear specialised shoes called ghillies or pumps. It is now seen at nearly every modern-day Highland games event throughout the world. It is one of the premiere events at games in Scotland, England, Northern Ireland, mainland Europe, USA, Canada, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Japan. Here in our region, there are two annual events that have proven very popular – the Highland Games held in Aberdeen and the Clans on the Coast held in Raymond Terrace.



Image from Wikimedia

In order to be a successful competitive dancer, students require many hours of practice and study over a number of years. Students train mainly in four Highland dances, namely, the Highland Fling, the Sword Dance, the Seann Triubhas and the Strathspey & Reel—all of which are performed in the traditional kilt. Scottish Highland dancing is regarded as being one of the most sophisticated forms of national dancing in the world. It should not be confused with Scottish country dance, cèilidh dancing, or clog dancing.

Some think that Scottish and Irish dancing are synonymous, however they are two distinct styles and not just in their attire. In comparison to Scottish Highland dance, Irish dancers rarely use their arms which are held beside their bodies (rather than raised above the shoulders), legs and feet are frequently crossed (not turned out at 45°), and there is frequent use of the hard-soled step shoes (compared to ghillies or pumps).



Junior performance at Aberdeen -  
photo by Kerren Robards

Highland dancing is a competitive and technical dance form requiring technique, stamina, and strength, and is recognised as a sport by the Sport Council of Scotland.

In Highland dancing, the dancers dance on the balls of the feet. Highland dancing is a form of solo step dancing, from which it evolved, but while some forms of step dancing are purely percussive in nature, Highland dancing involves not only a combination of steps but also some integral upper body, arm, and hand movements.

Highland dancing should not be confused with Scottish country dancing which is both a social dance (that is, a dance which is danced with a partner or partners) like ballroom dancing, and a formation dance (that is, a dance in which an important element is the pattern of group movement about the dance floor) like square dancing.

Some Highland dances do derive from traditional social dances. An example is the Highland reel, also known as the foursome reel or strathspey, in which groups of four dancers alternate between solo steps facing one another and a figure-of-eight style with intertwining progressive movement. Even so, in competitions, the Highland reel dancers are judged individually.

The British Association of Teachers of Dancing's website gives the following overview of each of the four Highland dances.

**Highland Fling** - Together with the Sword Dance, the Highland Fling is probably the most famous of the Scottish Highland Dances. Tullochgorm was the earliest form of Highland Fling, but towards the end of the 18th century it had undergone changes and improvements. It is thought to have evolved about 1790, when legend has it that a shepherd boy on a hillside watched stags rearing and wheeling. The boy tried to copy the stag's antics and hence we have the graceful curve of the hands and arms depicting the stag's antlers. The dance should be danced on the same spot throughout, because clansmen traditionally danced on their targes (leather covered studded shield).

**Sword Dance** - Originated in 1054 when Malcolm Canmore crossed his sword over the sword of his slain opponent, symbolising the sign of the Cross, and danced over them in exultation. After that, the dance would be performed before a battle. If the sword was touched it was deemed to be a bad omen! Before 1850, the steps were danced clockwise round the sword, not anti-clockwise as nowadays.

**Seann Triubhas** - Said to reflect the Highlanders contempt at having to wear trousers when the kilt was prohibited after the 1745 rebellion. The Act of Proscription in 1746 banned the wearing of Highland dress, the carrying of arms and the playing of bagpipes. In other words, the dance originated as a political protest. The slow tempo shows the dancers attempt to shake off the offending garment and the fast tempo shows the pleasure at the rescinding of the ban in 1782. Many of the movements are balletic and are influenced by French style of embellishments such as pirouettes.

**Strathspey & Reel** - Very little reliable information is known about the origin of Strathspeys and Reels, but they are known to have been danced towards the end of the 17th century and Jacobite days. The slow movement is thought by many to be a mourning dance following the

path of the river 'Strath' in the valley of the 'Spey'. The Highland Reel is a quicker and livelier form of the Strathspey and was known to have been taught from about 1740.

Modern Highland dancing emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries. It was 'created from the Gaelic folk dance repertoire, but formalised with the conventions of ballet'. However, it seems that forms of sword dancing were performed by warriors in many parts of Europe in the prehistoric period. Forms of sword dancing are also attested in the late Medieval period. Ritualistic and combative dances that imitated epic deeds and martial skills were a familiar feature in Scottish tradition and folklore. The earliest reference to these dances in Scotland is mentioned in the *Scotichronicon* which was compiled in Scotland by Walter Bower in the 1440s. The passage regards Alexander III and his second marriage to the French noblewoman Yolande de Dreux at Jedburgh on 14 October 1285.

At the head of this procession were the skilled musicians with many sorts of pipe music including the music of bagpipes, and behind them others splendidly performing a war-dance with intricate weaving in and out. Bringing up the rear was a figure regarding whom it was difficult to decide whether it was a man or an apparition. It seemed to glide like a ghost rather than walk on feet. When it looked as if he was disappearing from everyone's sight, the whole frenzied procession halted, the song died away, the music faded, and the dancing contingent froze suddenly and unexpectedly.

There are numerous other mentions of this dancing throughout the years before it became very popular with the modern Highland dancing.

Many if not most Highland gatherings worldwide recognise the Royal Scottish Official Board of Highland Dancing (RSOBHD), formed in 1950, as the world governing body of Highland dancing. The 'Royal' title from the Queen of the United Kingdom was approved by 16 November 2019. The RSOBHD standardised dance steps for competition purposes, established rules for competitions and attire, and certifies competitions and instructors. Today this RSOBHD World Championship is sanctioned by the RSOBHD at three levels: Juvenile, Junior and Adult.

At Highland games, the Highland dances were at first danced only by men. Women would take part in social dances, and girls did learn solo dances as part of their general dance classes. In fact, dancing masters would often encourage their most promising students (male or female) to perform solo dances at their end-of-term 'assemblies'.

In the late 19th century, a young woman named Jenny Douglas (the name of Lorna Mitchell is also suggested) decided to enter a Highland dance competition. As this was not expressly forbidden, she was allowed to enter. Since then, the number of females participating in the sport has increased until today in excess of 95% of all dancers are female.

Soft-soled dance ghillies are worn by both sexes. These are quite distinct from harder-soled ghillie brogues, though they share the same lacing-up-the-ankle method. In Scotland most dancers tie their pumps around the arches of their feet instead. They are also very unlike hard-soled Irish dance shoes. The tartans used for dance-wear items, as described below, are today most often a dance or dress tartan that features white as a prominent colour.

Men wear a traditional Scottish bonnet (cap) in either the Balmoral or less often the Glengarry style, and a doublet of black or coloured velvet or cloth. If this jacket is in the Prince Charlie style, then it is to be accompanied by a shirt and bow tie with a waistcoat (vest), cummerbund, or belt. Doublets in the Montrose style are to be worn with a white lace jabot and, optionally, sleeve ruffles. A tartan kilt and hose (of a kilt-matching colour scheme, in tartan, argyle, or dicing) are worn; or tartan trews (see photo) can be worn instead of a kilt for the seann truibhas and sometimes more generally. Whether a sporran is worn over the front of the kilts will depend upon the association or other rules-making body. A fly plaid (a narrow tartan shoulder cape of sorts) is usually no longer worn for male dancing.



Image from WordPress

Females wear a tartan kilt (without a sporran) with a velvet jacket, worn with a lace insert, or a similar but sleeveless velvet vest worn over a white blouse. The jacket or vest may be black or coloured, with a gold or silver braid and buttons down the front. Matching hose are also worn. Aboyne dresses (see photo) have become more common in the recent years as general female dancewear (especially in North America), though this again varies by association or other rules-making body. The hair (if not very short already) is usually bound into a bun. Early 20th century photographs also show that there was once a wider array of dress or skirt styles (sometimes fairly long), as well as use of the full plaid, decorative bonnets, and other accessories that are no longer typically in dance use.



Image from Wikipedia

Most judges today evaluate a dancer on three major criteria: timing, technique and interpretation/ overall deportment.

Timing concerns the ability of the dancer to follow the rhythm of the music.

Technique has to do with the correct execution of the steps in coordination with the movements of the rest of the body, including head, arm and hand movements.

Artistic interpretation covers that essential element of all dance and artistry in general which cannot be quantified or reduced to any set of rules or specific points, but which does concern the ability of the dancer or performer to convey a sense of feeling, understanding, and appreciation of the art form. The ability of the dancer including the jumping height and the confidence. While these may affect the final placings per dance, they are not a particularly large contributing factor to most results.

So next time you are watching some Highland dancing, hopefully this article will help you understand the amount of energy, enthusiasm, time and dedication that goes in to becoming a successful Highland dancer.

References:

<https://batd.co.uk/genre/highland-dance/>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Highland\\_dance](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Highland_dance)

## Spurtling

The following was found on the *Travel Scotland Goals* Facebook page on 10 December 2023.

A fine example of a traditional Scottish 'Spurtle'. Spurtles were used in a traditional Scottish sport called 'Spurtling', where the young men of remote Scottish villages would be split in two teams - normally on a geographical basis. Examples would be 'Uppies and Doonies', which denoted that one team was from the upper part of the village - you get the picture.

Both teams would line up facing each other at a previously agreed central point in the village where the referee or 'Heidsman' would call for order. Once the teams had fallen silent, the Heidsman would then read the Auld Spurtling Declaration, which would be followed by loud cheering, swearing and threats. The Heidsman would once again call for quiet. Only when total silence reigned would he reach into his large leather sack, haul out a live haggis and then throw it into the exact centre of the open space between the two teams.

The opposing team members, all armed with large, heavy spurtles, would then launch into a frenzied assault on the other team whilst nominated 'Getters and Ooters' made a grab for the now terrified haggis.

Once they had the haggis in their possession, the Ooters would make a run back to their team's 'Hame' whilst the opposite team's Getters attempted to wrest the haggis away. Both sides would be defending and attacking with spurtles to gain the upper hand.

Once the Haggis was 'Hame' the game was at an end, but these were fiercely contested games which could go on for days - or until the entire male population had been beaten senseless - which usually resulted in the haggis escaping back up onto the Muir.

The earliest recorded Spurtling was in 1486 between the villages of Perth and Thurso - a game which went on for four weeks and was eventually declared a draw as the surviving participants all got lost somewhere between the Bridge of Cally and Helmsdale.

### Explanation of the spurtle from Wikipedia:

The spurtle (or 'spurtel', 'spurtil', 'spirtle', or 'spartle') is a wooden Scottish kitchen tool, dating from the 15th century, that is used to stir porridge, soups, stews, and broths.

The rod-like shape means that porridge can be stirred without congealing and forming lumps, unlike a spoon, which would have a dragging effect during stirring. The low surface area reduces the chances of porridge sticking to the instrument. Spurtles are made from wood, typically beech, cherry wood, or maple. They come in a range of sizes. Traditional spurtles have stylised thistles at the top, while modern ones often have a smooth taper.

The custom is that a spurtle should be used to stir in a clockwise direction with the right hand.



Image from Wikipedia

**Merry Christmas and a Happy Hogmanay  
From the members of the NFHS Scottish SIG**



The next meeting of the Newcastle Family History Society Scottish SIG will be held on Tuesday 11 February 2025 at 1pm in the Society's rooms.

Newcomers are always welcome.

If you would like to submit an article or pictures for a future issue of the *Caledonian* please send them to [nfhsresident@gmail.com](mailto:nfhspresident@gmail.com)

Our next *Caledonian* will be the  
Candlemas issue on  
28 February 2025

A 'Munro' is the name for a Scottish mountain above which height?

**Answer**

The correct answer is 3,000 feet

Munros are named after Sir Hugh T. Munro who in 1891 surveyed all the country's mountains above 3,000 feet. Currently, there are 283 Munros in Scotland.