

Turakina Games History

The First Recorded Highland Games

The Turakina Games have been the longest running Highland Games, but the first Highland Games were probably those held in Wellington in the 1840s. The earliest account is this excerpt from Sir Donald MacLean's Diary of Christmas Day 1848.

Monday 25 December 1848 - Engaged with Highland Sports. Breakfast at Kaiwarra. Mr. McDonald's and came from there with Lieut. Governor Eyre, Mr. A. M.

McDonald and several Highlanders about that place, with bagpipes. Played to show our feat. A thirsty game! Found Bethune waiting for us with his tent pitched, and refreshments in it. The Governor-in Chief came to see us before the games. We gave three good hearty cheers, and displayed the utmost loyalty to our Majesty's representative. Throughout, the games were conducted with the greatest good humour, and displayed no strife nor enmity, but all in perfect unison played their parts with animation and cheerfulness: the bagpipers playing at the end of each game: the contending players distinguishing by white and pink ribbon. The play of throwing the hammer, wrestling, and other athletic games, being over the party marched off with Gordon to his house, bagpipes playing a march. This being over, they laid violent hands on me, marching me on their shoulders to Barrett's Hotel. Pipes playing on the left, where they also carried Bethune and Adams. At Barrett's I gave some whisky. A few words of encouragement take effect.

"Scotsmen and Highlanders - it is to a sincere pleasure to met so many people of the same land, the same descent and origin, met together top call a remembrance the sports of our parent land, and not forget them, Do not forget your country and your loyalty, Highlanders, your meeting together shows the energetic spirit that animates you and whatever you zealously undertake, ye Highlanders you will do it!"

"In the evening went to Mr. Strang's. Met the Governor-in-Chief on my way. Told him how that day had passes, He laughed rather at my being carried and remarked, - "They owe you that for settling the Land question at Wanganui" I replied" No, Sir, they are not immediately interested in that, but they do it from my old Highland connections"

Through the Years

In the 19th and early 20th century, the venue for the Turakina Caledonian Games moved regularly from the private paddocks of local farmers - Glasgow, Kronast, McDonald, Lethbridge. In the 1960s the games were established on the public domain and have held there ever since.

The 'show has gone on' in spite of the obstacles of time - floods, stormy weather, drought, depression and two world wars. The Games have been affected by such events but have never been totally abandoned.

In 1919 events included a 'returned serviceman's jump', and the end of the war was celebrated with fun events such as guessing the weight of a sheep and a prize for the best dressed lassie and laddie.

In 1920 the Turakina Games applied to be registered as a Highland Society the age of the games for some time was recalculated with the 1920 games as the first games, since the 125th. Games in 1990 the age of the games has taken into account the games prior to 1920 also. This year information has come to hand that the first games were held in 1864 so next years games will be the 142nd. Games

The men of the 1929 committee stated that they would like to see the ladies enjoying themselves instead of slaving all day. It was proposed that they should pay someone to do the catering. The records are unclear as to whether or not the ladies did!

The 1931 committee voted to go ahead in spite of 'bad times' (the great depression) and as a result the 1932 gate takings were higher than expected! In 1942 it was decided that all profits from the 1943 games should be given for patriotic purposes and in 1945 the committee stood in silence as a mark of respect for those who had paid the supreme sacrifice in the war. In 1962 fire destroyed the Society's shed and practically all the field equipment. Locals and other supporters rallied round and everything necessary was provided for successful Games in 1963.

1948 saw the differentiation of single and married men for running races for just one year. Does anyone recall why that was?

The 1950s brought demonstrations of archery and weightlifting. In 1959 the Society decorated a float for the Turakina School Centennial Parade.

The 1960s saw the introduction of a display of drum majorette and a beauty competition. A fashion show was added in 1971.

In recent times, competitions have re-focussed on more traditional Scottish events.

History of field events

As with all Caledonian Games, the field events which have remained constant are tossing the caber, tossing the sheaf and putting the shot, but other events have come and gone. Records for the 1864 [the first know games] list climbing a greasy pole, catching a shaved pig and a shinty match. In 1877 the competition included two forms of wrestling - body hold and collar and elbow. Equestrian events

flourished in the 1920s and 30s including a hunter's cup and prize for the best hack. Races for children were introduced in 1927.

The now established Wanganui Harriers race was introduced in the 1960s. Originally run from Wanganui to Turakina it now covers a circular course around the Turakina area. Tossing the gumbot first appeared in 1984. 1996 saw a renaissance of traditional events such as gird and cleek, carrying the stones and the farmers walk and in 2003 the Ben Nevis Children's Hill Race became an instant attraction.

Some individuals have shown outstanding achievement over the years - more recently members of the Wigglesworth family and especially Gregor MacGregor.

They came from far and near

Early records show competitors coming from Taranaki and Wellington, and one of the priorities in changing the venue of the games was the proximity to the railway. Visitors who undertook long journeys to compete at the games were well fed and billeted as required.

In 1920 there was a "meeting of delegates from 'this coast' to arrange suitable dates so that a circuit of meetings could be arranged to enable competitors to go from one gathering to another" Over the decades competitors have come from all over the North Island and from the far south.

In 1968 world champion piper, Pipe Major Donald McLeod, considered his visit to the Games the highlight of his NZ trip and on return told leading Scottish competitors that if any of them should visit NZ they must include the Turakina Games.

In 2003 the games was visited by Ian Kirk. Born in Wanganui, Mr Kirk now runs a Scottish hotel and is active on the Abernathy Clan Grant Rally Highland Games organising committee. He proposed a twin games affiliation between Turakina and Grantown-on-Spey which is being established via the World Wide Web.

History of prizes

In the earlier decades of the games, entrance fees were very expensive and prizes well worth having. In 1877 the first prize for the tossing the caber was one pound (nearly a week's wages!), and for the half mile hurdles was three pounds (more than a week's wages!) In 1919 the prize for the best dressed laddie and lassie was a guinea - a small fortune for a young person.

In 1920 the first prize for pibroch of ten pounds again exceeded the average weekly wage and the entry fee of ten shillings would have needed saving for by many of the entrants. In 1958 the first prize for pibroch was five pounds - the average juvenile weekly wage, but the cost of entry had reduced to two shillings.

In the 1980s a prize of \$50 was offered to the first person to toss the Edenmore caber and this was raised to \$100 in 2003. It remains unclaimed.

The Games now offers about 50 cups and trophies. While the origins of many of them is known, the history of some of the cups, shields and medals is still being researched, leaving another story to be told in the next souvenir programme!

History of the Piping & Dancing Association

Highland Games in New Zealand developed as part of the cultural legacy of Gaelic Highlanders and other Scots who settled throughout New Zealand. Music, song, sport and dance were part of the every day life of the Gaels. In time Caledonian Societies formed and began running competitive music, dance and sporting events. The first New Zealand champs for Piping and Dancing were held in 1900 in Invercargill and Kenneth Cameron won the Piobaireachd and Marches and from 1918 to 1941 he was President of Piping and Dancing Association.

The Piping and Dancing Association [P&D] was formed in 1908 with Otago the only branch, previous Piping and Dancing was under the control of the New Zealand Athletic Union since 1903. Pipe Bands were also under the control of the P&D. with the first contest held in Dunedin in 1910, Dunedin won the Selection and Quickstep. In 1913 J. Center won the Piobaireachd and the Marches. J. Center also came second in the Jig and Sword Dance from A. S. Bellamy of Victoria.

The first Dominion Pipe Band Contest was held in Dunedin in 1926. In 1928 the NZ Pipe Bands Association became independent of P & D. Kenneth Cameron fostered links with Scotland and eminent pipers and dancers emigrated to N. Z.

1945 saw the establishment of the Academy of Piping & Dancing as a training and testing organisation for teachers and judges of Highland and National Dance.

In 1958 Lewis Turrell became the first over-seas piper to win the Highland Society Gold Medal for Piobaireachd in 1958. Murray Henderson & Greg Wilson have kept New Zealand Pipers at the forefront of solo piping internationally in more recent times.

The early 1960s saw the formation of an independent Piobaireachd Society formed with its competition for the London Piobaireachd Society Medal and later the Clasp competition run in conjunction with Hastings Highland Games

From 2001 Scottish Official Board style dancing has been held independent of P. & D.

The Piping and Dancing Association have added much to the cultural diversity of New Zealand, long may this continue.

Main reference, "Piping & Dancing Association of New Zealand (INC) 1908-1983
compiled by Mr J.C. Nicholson.