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The Silver Ball of Rattray: a unique Scottish sporting trophy

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ABSTRACT

The only surviving Scottish trophy for a village hand-ball game is described and set in context. In its original form, c AD 1600, it is the earliest known piece of Perth silver. A replacement was presented in 1751. The winners' shields attached to it range in date from 1639 to 1766.

INTRODUCTION

Early Scottish sporting trophies – the various Silver Balls, Guns and Arrows – are largely well known and documented, having been discussed in previous papers in these *Proceedings* (Brook 1894; Dalgleish 1990).

However, a small and rather crumpled silver ball from the village of Rattray in Perthshire, now in the Perth Museum & Art Gallery (1985. 162.1–17), presents a unique and exciting addition to the above. Its details are published here for the first time, by permission of Perth Museum & Art Gallery. Along with a second silver ball and 15 assorted winners' shields it is all that survives of the only known native hand-ball trophy in Scotland: the Silver Ball of Rattray (illus 1).

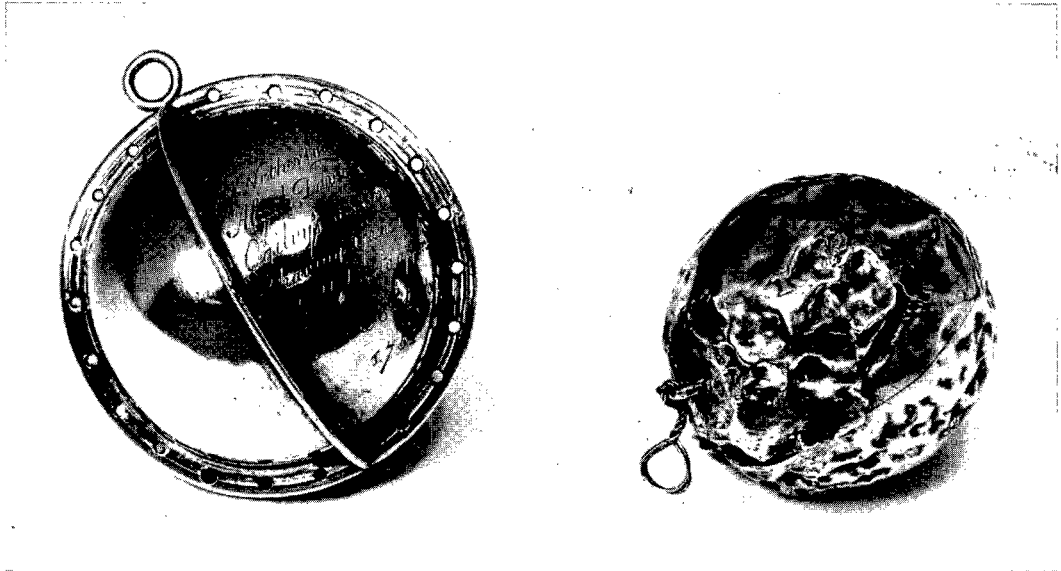
HISTORY

Perthshire's affinity with hand-ball games is known primarily through references to the game which was played annually, on Shrove Tuesday, at the village of Scone just north of Perth. *The Statistical Account of Scotland* provides a detailed account of the Scone game, which took place between opposing teams – the Bachelors and the Married Men.

a ball was thrown up, and they played from two o'clock till sunset. The game was this. He, who, at any time, got the ball into his hands, ran with it till overtaken by one of the opposite party, and then, if he could shake himself loose from those on the opposite side who seized him, he ran on: if not, he threw the ball from him, unless it was wrested from him by the other party: but no person was allowed to kick it. The object of the married men was to 'hang it', ie to put it three times into a small hole in the moor, the 'dool' or limit, on the one hand; that of the bachelors was to 'drown it', ie to dip it three times into a deep place in the river, the limit on the other. The party who could effect either of these objects won the game. But if neither party won, the ball was cut into two equal parts at sunset. In the course of the play one might always see some scene of violence between the parties; but as the proverb of this part of the country expresses it, 'all was fair at the ball of Scone'. (SAS, 18, Scone, 88–9)

By 1791 when that account was written, the Scone game had already ceased to exist, it 'being attended with certain inconveniences, [it] was abolished a few years ago' (*ibid*, 89).

* Perth Museum & Art Gallery



ILLUS 1 The Silver Ball of Rattray: the original Ball (right), made c 1600, with its replacement, presented in 1751

Other village ball-games did survive longer in Scotland, of which those at Kirkwall and Jedburgh are perhaps the best known (Robertson 1967; Banks 1937–41; McNeill, 1968). In both these cases the game takes place through the streets, with no apparent restriction on the number of players who take part. The Kirkwall game is basically football, whilst that at Jedburgh, where the small ball is smuggled under the clothing through the opposition, has closer parallels with what happened at Scone and at Rattray.

Unfortunately details of the Rattray game are virtually non-existent, and much has to be deduced from the component parts of the trophy.¹ At Rattray the competition was reputedly held in a field behind the old parish kirk by small teams picked to represent the neighbouring parishes. Judging by the inscriptions on the winners' shields, there appears to have been no regularity regarding the numbers in each team, which vary from one to six, although four appears the most common. Similarly it appears that the competition was not held at regular intervals. Several of the shields, in addition to the year, also carry details of the actual day and month on which the Ball was played for. These indicate that the competition was held in April, June, July and September.

The Silver Ball seems to have been the prize, rather than the actual playing piece, with would-be victors making a formal challenge for it. In the event of the winning team coming from outwith Rattray parish, the Silver Ball and its shields were required to be handed over to one of the local heritors for safekeeping until a fresh challenge was made. Related games in Britain are recorded in Cornwall where the sport was more akin to hurling. There the actual playing piece was a silver ball with a wood or cork core (Hamilton-Jenkin 1945, 456–65). The thick silver casing was usually made from melted down coins, and the ball was often embellished with old Cornish inscriptions. A special exhibition match played by 100 Cornish gentlemen at Hyde Park in London in 1654 is recorded as being played with a ball of silver which also doubled as the prize for the winning side (*ibid* 458–9).

The Scottish hand-ball game has affinities also with the various *jeux de paume* and similar

games which are played in Belgium, The Netherlands and Italy, and where the silver balls are often hung in the local church (Morgan 1985).

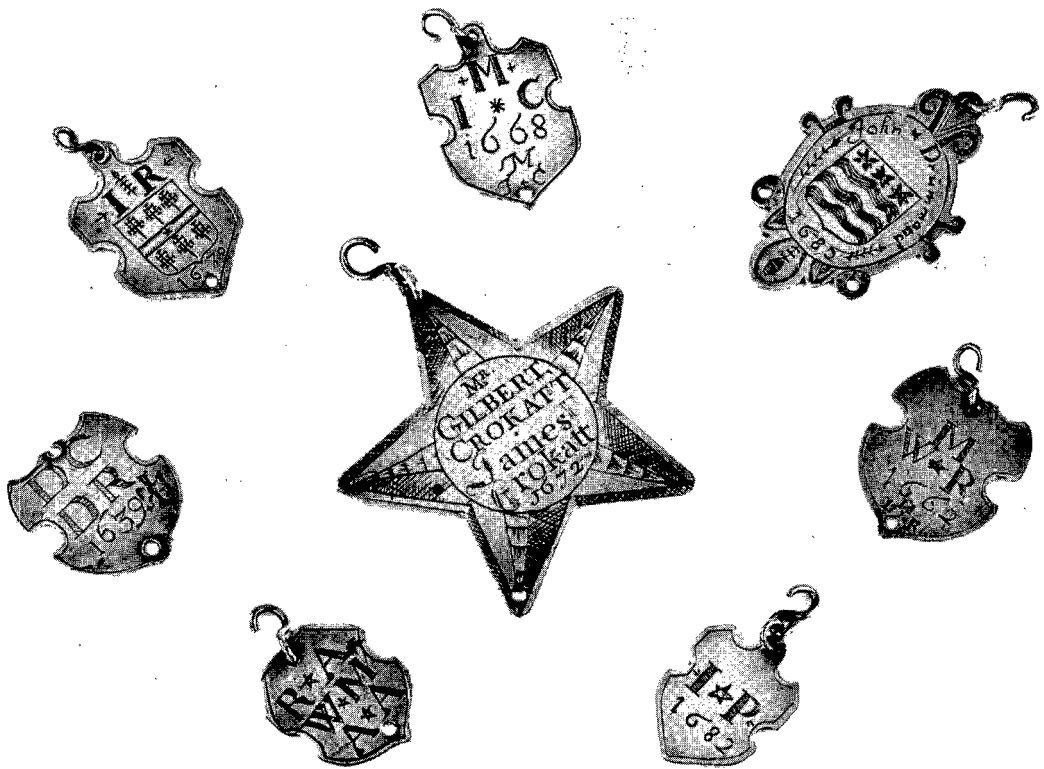
The Silver Ball of Rattray was one of three sporting trophies which were reputedly gifted to the Parish of Rattray by King James VI. These were the Silver Ball, a silver arrow and a silver curling stone.² More probably, however, the trophies were the gift of the local minister, the Revd Silvester Rattray of Nether Persie (see Note 1). Rattray, the second son of David Rattray of Craighall, a local seat of considerable antiquity perched high above the River Ericht, was born in 1556. Educated at the University of St Andrews, he graduated MA in 1582, and nine years later he was admitted to the vacancy at Rattray caused by the death of the Revd Donald Cargill, the first post-Reformation Minister there. In addition to Rattray Parish, Silvester's charge also included Blairgowrie. He married Mary Stewart, daughter of George Stewart of Cardney and Arntullie (*sic*), on 4 June 1609 and he died on 30 January 1623 (Scott 1923, 170; 1950, 353). Silvester was buried in his church and a memorial tablet to him was unveiled there in 1908 (Reid 1909, 239–40).

DESCRIPTION

The Silver Ball consists of two hemispheres of silver soldered together and capped by a plain silver ring. Each of the hemispheres bears the maker's mark, a monogram TR, and the early Perth town mark of a kneeling lamb holding a cross over its shoulder (illus 2). It also bears three sets of initials: AH, GD and IC.



ILLUS 2 Thomas Ramsay's mark and the Perth town mark on the original Ball



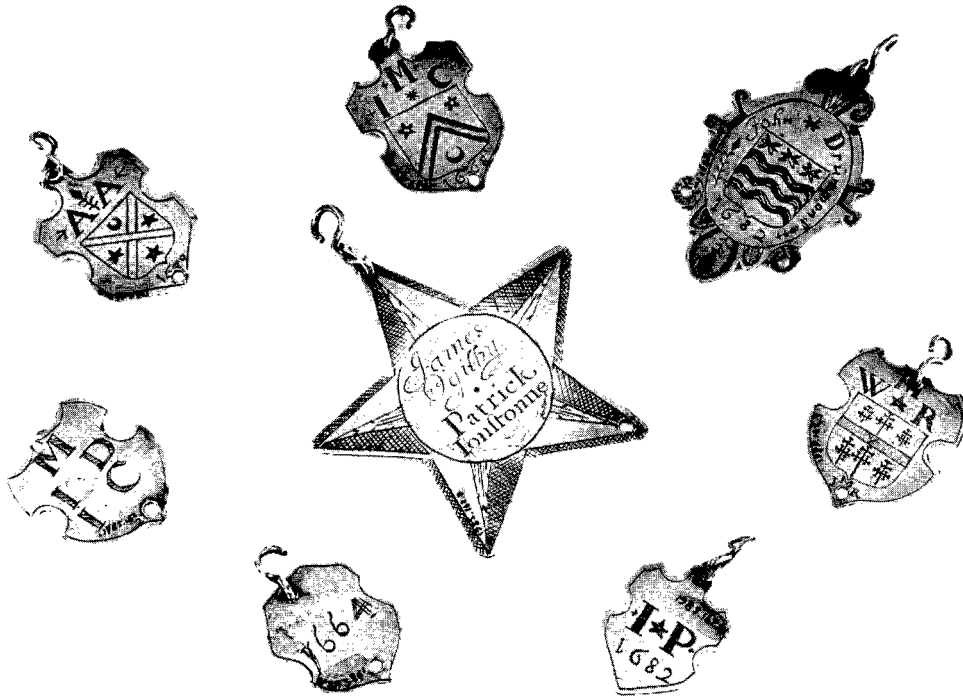
ILLUS 3 Winners' shields, 1639-82 (recto)

The manufacture of the ball has been ascribed to Thomas Ramsay who was admitted to the Perth Trades Guild in 1597, in which body he remained active until at least 1614. Ramsay also attained the office of Deacon of the Perth Hammermen's Incorporation during this period (Hunt 1889). This makes the Silver Ball of Rattray the earliest known surviving example of Perth silver, along with the Rattray Silver Arrow which is similarly marked.

Within six weeks of their victory, the winners of the Rattray Ball were required to attach to it a silver shield, suitably dated and inscribed. Presumably the shields hung snakelike from the ring on the Ball, each shield being attached to the one before. This concept assumes credence by the presence of two drilled holes on many of the earlier shields, one at the top and one at the foot.

The 15 extant shields are relatively small and plain (and certainly bear no comparison with, for example, those of the Silver Arrow of the University of St Andrews); unfortunately, none presents any visual depiction of players engaged in the Hand Ba' game (illus 3-6).

The 15 Rattray Shields, described in the Appendix, span the period 1639-1766. Only two shields date from the first half of the 18th century, those of 1700 and 1736, and these provide the longest gap in the sequence, followed closely by the non-appearance of any medals between 1639 and 1662. The greatest concentration are the 10 for the period 1662-1700, which includes two for the year 1682. The presence of three pairs of initials on the Ball itself, around the attached ring, may indicate the first victors of the trophy.

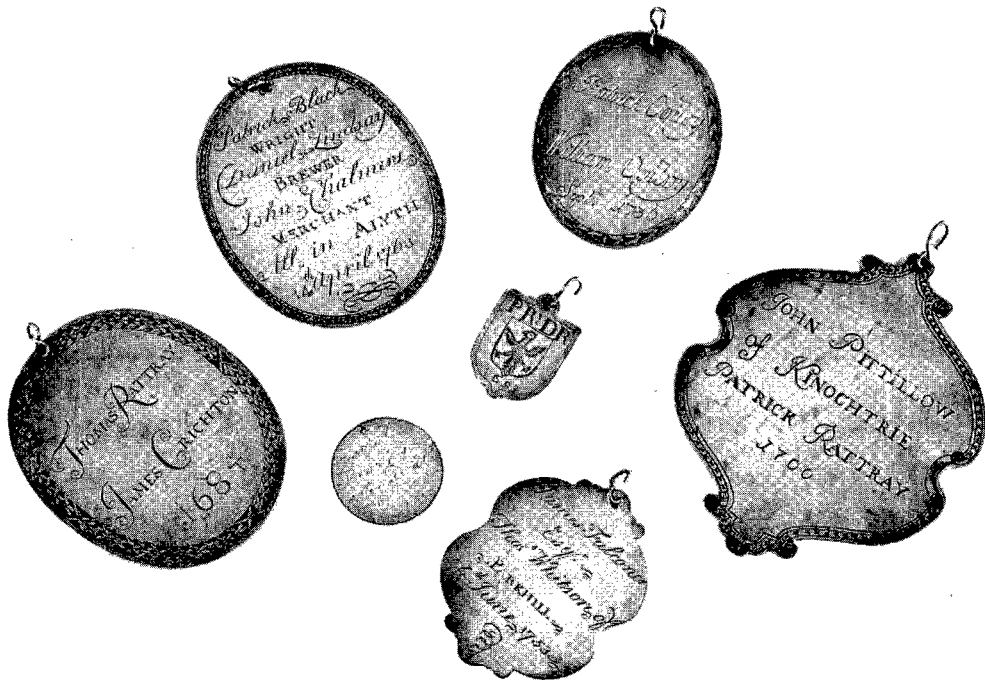


ILLUS 4 Winners' shields, 1639–82 (verso)

The later shields tend to provide the full name and residence of the victor, suggesting that for the most part the competition was restricted to the wealthier element of local society. Moreover, the occurrence of the letter 'M' or the prefix 'Mr' on some of the shields suggests a continued link with the Church, as this mode of address at this date not infrequently refers to Ministers. So far, however, only the Revd James Crockett has been tentatively identified, with the 1684 shield. Crockett was the incumbent of Caputh parish, to the south-west of Rattray, from 1683 until 1701. Another Crockett, Bailie John, who was one of the four recorded winners of the Ball in 1766, is also recorded as victor of a curling medal dated 14 February 1772, the second oldest known Scottish curling medal in existence.

None of the shields is hallmarked nor is there any clue as to their makers. One of the most interesting is that dated 1672, which is in the form of a five-pointed star. Traces of an earlier inscription are evident below the present engraving which indicates a possible re-use or a change of victor, perhaps as the result of an appeal following on from foul-play.

The sequence of medals may suggest that the Rattray game was in decline in the 18th century; nevertheless the survival of a second replacement ball, dated 1751, would indicate the contrary. James Smyth WS and his co-victors presented a new ball to commemorate their success which is inscribed: Given by Jas Smyth Writer to the Signet, Da Ogilvy of Nethertownhead of Alyth, David and Thos Ogilvy's his sons. They having Gained the old ball here to appended on the 6th September 1751.



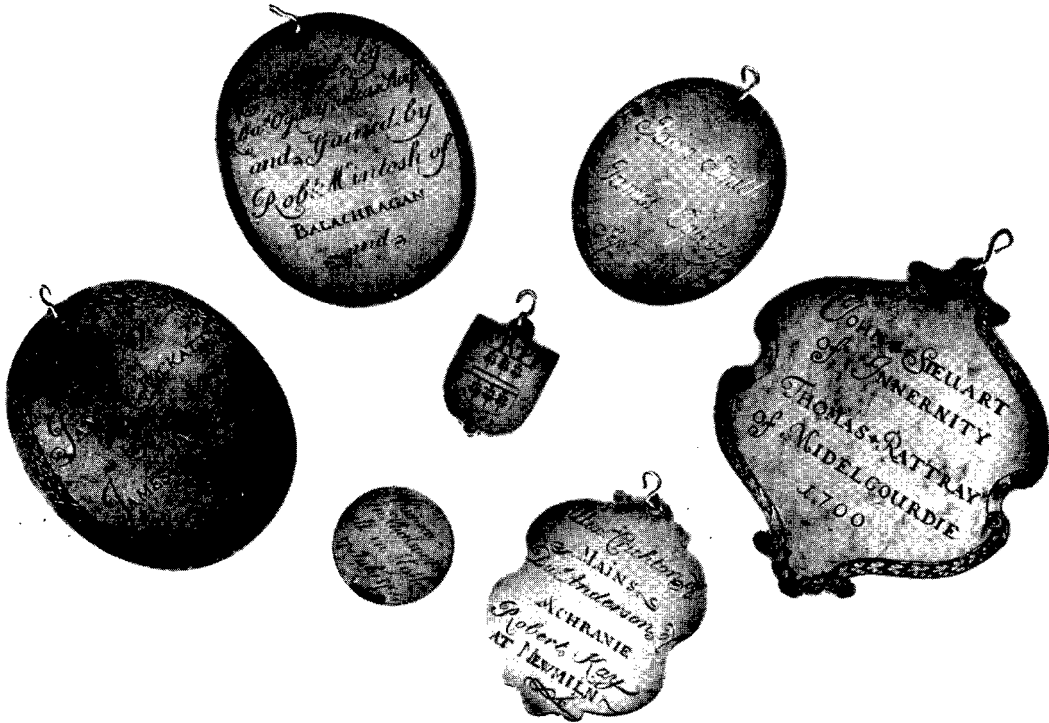
ILLUS 5 Winners' shields, 1684–1766 (recto)

This second ball is of silver though unmarked. It is larger than the original, measuring 68 x 60 mm, as opposed to 55 mm. The ball is encircled by two applied rings which divide the ball longitudinally into four segments. Each ring has 20 drilled holes, presumably intended to take the victors' shields, and they are capped by a plain ring-finial.

Within 15 years of this presentation, however, the last surviving victor's shield was engraved, and the Silver Ball of Rattray remained little more than a memory referred to, in passing, in various histories of Perthshire.³ Only on its transfer to Perth Museum & Art Gallery in 1985 was its true significance and importance re-established.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ILLUS 6 Winners' shields, 1684–1766 (verso)

APPENDIX

Details of the victors' shields, in chronological order, are as follows:

	M		D C
(1) shield, 34 x 30 mm, two holes; engraved (recto)	I D	(verso)	D R
	I C		1639(engraved eagle)
	M		M
(2) shield, 34 x 30 mm, two holes; engraved (recto)	W R	(verso)	W R
	1662		(heraldic device)
	M		M
	I R		I R
(3) shield, 30 x 25 mm, two holes; engraved (recto)	R A	(verso)	1664
	W M		
	A A		
(4) shield, 40 x 28 mm, two holes; engraved (recto)	M	(verso)	M
	I C		I C
	(heraldic device)		1668
	1668		M
			I C
(5) shield, 41 x 29 mm, two holes; engraved (recto)	I R	(verso)	A A
	(heraldic device as no 2)		(heraldic device)
	1670		1670

- (6) 5-point star, 71 x 66 mm, two holes and ring; engraved (recto MR/GILBERT CROKATT/James/Crokatt/1672 (verso) James/Ogilby/Patrick/Iohn;tonne
M
The original inscription (recto) is G T (verso) (heraldic device)
(I) T
1672
- (7) shield, 33 x 24 mm, one hole; engraved (recto & verso) I P
1682
- (8) medal, 60 x 40 mm, three holes; engraved (recto & verso) John Drummond/
(heraldic device)
1682
- (9) oval medal 110 x 90 mm, one hole; engraved (recto) Mr/ JAMES CROCKATT/Mr/JAMES ROBERTSON (verso) THOMAS RATTRAY/JAMES CRICHTON/1684
- (10) shield, 46 x 34 mm, one hole; engraved (recto) P R D R (verso) W R
(engraved eagle P R
in shield) (heraldic device
1693 similar to no 2 above)
1693
- (11) medal, 137 x 114 mm, one hole; engraved (recto) JOHN PITTILLOW/of KINCHTRIE/PATRICK RATTRAY/1700 (verso) JOHN STEUART/of INNERNITY/THOMAS RATTRAY/of MIDELGOURDIE 1700
- (12) oval medal, 87 x 72 mm, one hole; engraved (recto) Patrick Ogilvy/William Ogilvy/Sepr 1736 (verso) John Smith/James Ogilvy/Sepr 1736
- (13) shield, 88 x 69 mm, one hole; engraved (recto) Alexr Crichton of/MAINS/Da'd Anderson of/ACHRANIE/Robert Kay/AT NEWMILN (verso) James Falconer/Esq/Thos Wilson of/PARKHILL/6th JUNE 1753
- (14) medal, 108 x 89 mm, two holes; engraved (recto) Chalanged by/Da^d Ogilvy, alias Swiss/and Gained by /Robt MacIntosh of/BALACHRAGAN and (verso) Patrick Black/WRIGHT/Daniel Lindsay/BREWER/John Chalmers/MERCHANT/all in Alyth/14th April 1763
- (15) circular medal, 42 mm diam., one hole; engraved (recto) Regain'd By/Bailie Jn Croc/Kat and Robt/MacIntosh/Adam (verso) Warden &/Jn Chalmers/all in Alyth/17 July 1766

NOTES

- 1 Some information is provided by a printed label of c 1938 received when the trophy was transferred to Perth Museum & Art Gallery in 1985. The *Statistical Account of Scotland* (1791) makes no reference to the Rattray game, which suggests that it had not been played for many years. The last surviving medal is dated 1766.
- 2 The Silver Arrow survives in a private collection. The curling stone was reputedly won by a team from Fife who carried it off. It is presumed lost.
- 3 The Rattray trophies are mentioned by Marshall (1880) and by Baxter (1899). An account of the Ball Game written by the Revd William Herdman, Minister of Rattray and father of Robert Herdman RSA (1829–88), has not been traced.

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