

CHEESE-PRESSES IN ANGUS

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There is no doubt that cheese has figured largely in the economy of Scotland from early times. It frequently formed a large part of the rent paid both to monastic and lay landlords, and an export tax brought money into the national exchequer at the rate of two ounces of bullion per five hundredweight of cheese in the reign of Charles II (*A.P.S.* VII:252). It was also one of the staple foods when cereals were scarce before the eighteenth century introduction of the potato. The Highlands clearly produced cheese in large quantities, since it was said in 1605 that the Highlanders were able to supply the Lowlands with cheese after a bad harvest (Craig 1909:447), and it is recorded in an Icelandic saga, *Hákonar saga hins gamla*, that *Hákon* laid a tax of 300 cattle on the island of Islay which was paid partly in meal and partly in cheese (Vigfusson and Unger 1860:III, 227). This was in 1263, as Hakon was sailing back to Orkney after his defeat at Largs. There is no doubt that much of this cheese was made from ewes' milk, though cows' milk, skimmed (Donaldson 1697:88-91) and sometimes mixed with the milk of ewes or goats, was also common. One mid-seventeenth-century Midlothian writer said quite dogmatically that "kys milk is best for butter, and yows milk is best for cheiss" (Skene *a.* 1666: f. 64), and that the cows' milk cheese of Cunningham in Ayrshire was not good. This latter remark is of interest, as it shows that already by about the middle of the seventeenth century, Ayrshire was making itself known for cheese. The innovation which gave it its famous Dunlop cheese, not superseded till the introduction of the Cheddar system from Somerset in the 1850s, was the use of whole rather than skimmed milk (McMaster 1885:215). The making of cheese of the Dunlop

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type soon spread into Renfrewshire and Ayrshire, reaching the Rhinns of Galloway by the 1830s. The south-west has remained the chief dairy region of Scotland to the present day, with Ayr, Lanark, Wigtown, Dumfries and Kirkcudbright, in that order, the biggest milk-producing counties (McQueen 1961:104).

The development of cheese-making on a commercial scale forms a study in itself. So also does the part played in the country's economy by cheese-making and dairying in general as carried on in shielings in the summer hill-pastures in the Highlands, and in the Lowlands too as one goes farther back in time. Alexander Ross, M.A., schoolmaster in Lochlee, and poet, wrote in 1768 a graphic description of a shieling in the Braes of Angus, where:

On skelfs a' round the wa's the cogs were set,
Ready to ream, an' for the cheese be het;
A hake was frae the rigging hinging fu'
Of quarter kebbocks, rightly made an' new.

(Ross 1938:82)

Such shielings did not long survive the introduction of sown grasses and turnips, along with the use of lime, and the enclosing and consolidation of agricultural holdings. Better feeding on the improved pasture on the farms, and the possibility of wintering cattle on root-crops led to large increases both in the quantity and quality of farm-stock, and released more milk than the calves were able to use. The surplus came to be absorbed in milk and cheese production, and farms all over the country were beginning to make cheese for their own consumption from about the end of the eighteenth century onwards. It was at this period that the heavy stone cheese-presses with which this article is chiefly concerned made their appearance. They had, of course, been known much earlier in the south-west. The Rev. David Ure, writing in 1794, said that stone presses moved by a screw were common in the counties of Renfrew, Ayr and Lanark, but were rare in the south-east. There, the characteristic press was "made of a long plank, or beam, fastened at one end, generally to a strong plank, or block of wood: the chesset is placed under the beam, nearer the fulcrum, or farther from it, according to the pressure necessary: the power is applied to the far end of the beam, or at any intermediate distance, like as in the steel-yard" (Fullarton 1793:60; Ure 1794:65-8). In Aberdeenshire, pressing might be done without any press at all, as, for example, by

Sir Alexander Gordon of Lesmoir's dairy maids in 1759. They simply put the curd into a clean cloth in the chessel and laid a flat stone on to cover the open top. A weight of 16-20 lbs. was placed on this. It was left for about three hours before more weights were added gradually. One day was all that was allotted to pressing the cheese, as compared with three or four days now.

At least one farmer's wife in Orkney still (1961) presses her cheese in this way, using simply a wooden chessel with a wooden lid, onto which stones from the beach are laid in increasing order of weight. The method is perfectly satisfactory. Though much of Orkney's milk is channelled into the two creameries there, many farms still like to make their own cheese, sometimes using what seem to be old-fashioned methods. This is explained when one remembers that it was not until between the two World Wars that Orkney made its entry into the dairy industry, and indeed it was only about the 1920s that milk-houses began to make their appearance to any extent on farms there.

The heavy stone presses, then, first appeared in the south-west, and were adopted on farms generally for the non-commercial home production of cheese from about 1800 onwards. Their hey-day lasted throughout the nineteenth century, and their decline came about the time of the First World War, with the establishment of large creameries working on pooled milk supplies, the importation of foreign cheese, and the penetration of grocers' vans, selling the mass-produced article, to all parts of the country (see, for example, Wheeler 1961: 147-55).

During the period between the two World Wars cheese-making still continued to some extent in the country districts. In 1925, for example, 145,000 cwt. of cheese is estimated to have been made in Scotland, of which 10,000 cwt. was consumed on farms. Cheese-making tended to increase after 1939 when petrol rationing restricted the movements of vans, and cheese itself was rationed. The Government encouraged home production of cheese, and College of Agriculture leaflets were issued on the subject. In spite of this, home cheese-making is virtually dead at the present time, though judging by the eager demand for it from those who do still make it, there is no doubt that there are ready local markets, and that small-scale local production is worthwhile and might be encouraged. One may note the analogy of home-made cheese in Scandinavia, which

competes well on the market with other cheeses. Unfortunately, however, cheese-presses are now rapidly becoming museum pieces, and are beginning to be collected in the manner of objets d'art. Although the following notes provide a typology of cheese-presses in Angus, it must be emphasised

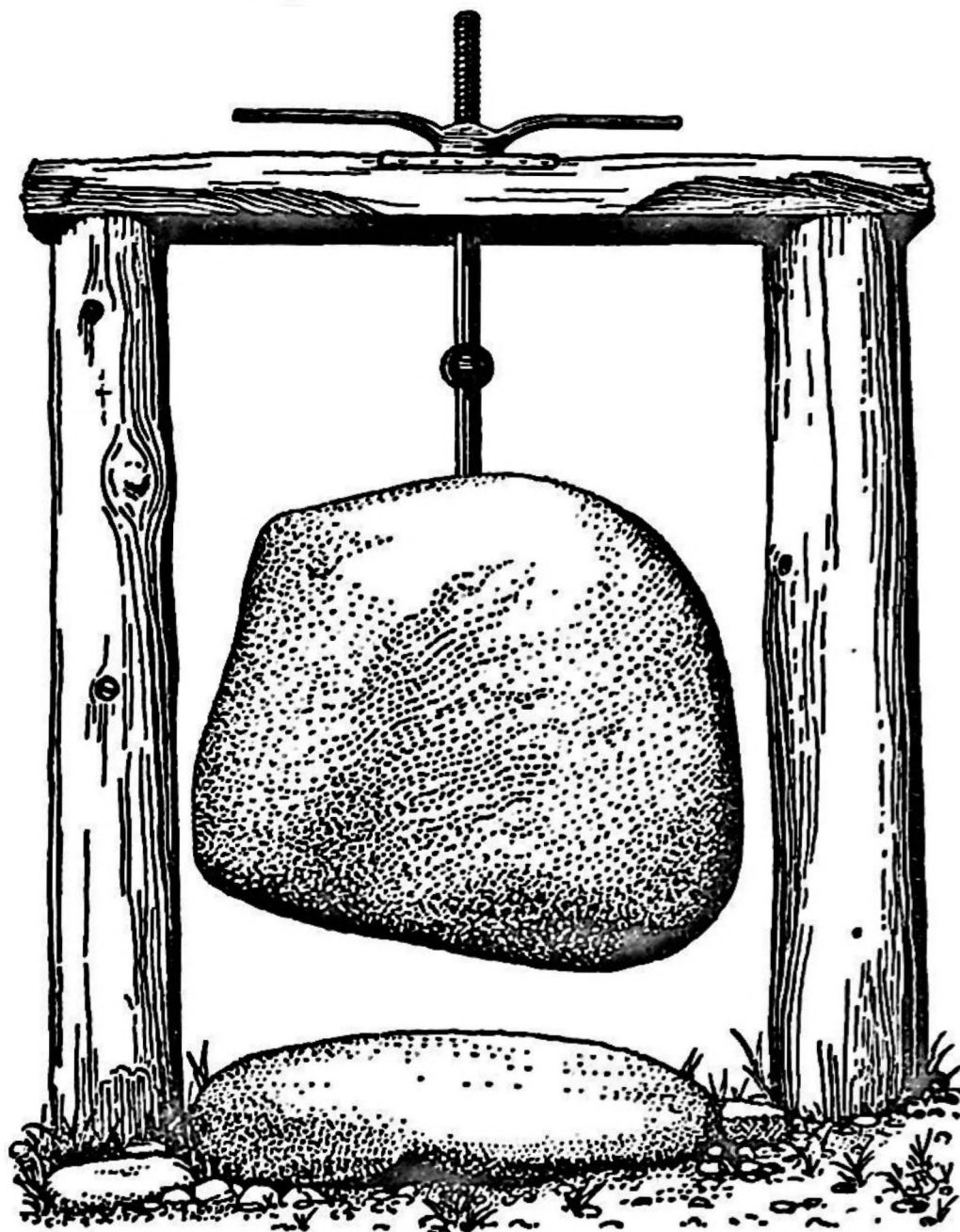


FIG. 1—An unshaped boulder in a wooden frame, from Crossbog (Glen Clova).

that their importance does not lie in variation of type, but in the fact that they represent one of the many fast disappearing means which helped towards the self-sufficiency of a rural community.

No doubt one of the earliest types of press was simply a wooden tub—known as a “chessard” in Angus—onto whose lid weights were placed as described above. It is not practicable to apply as much pressure as is desirable in this way, and the

invention of a mechanical device for doing this is a logical development.

One of the simplest types of mechanical press is a hillside boulder suspended within a wooden frame, and moved up and down by a threaded iron screw. A number of such boulders are still to be found, sometimes serving to fill a gap in a dyke. Examples survive at Aucharroch Pendicle (Kingoldrum) and Gella (Glen Clova) and two from Kinclune (Kingoldrum) are now in the Glenesk Folk Museum. There is a complete wooden-sided press, used as recently as 1939, at Crossbog (Glen Clova) (Fig. 1).

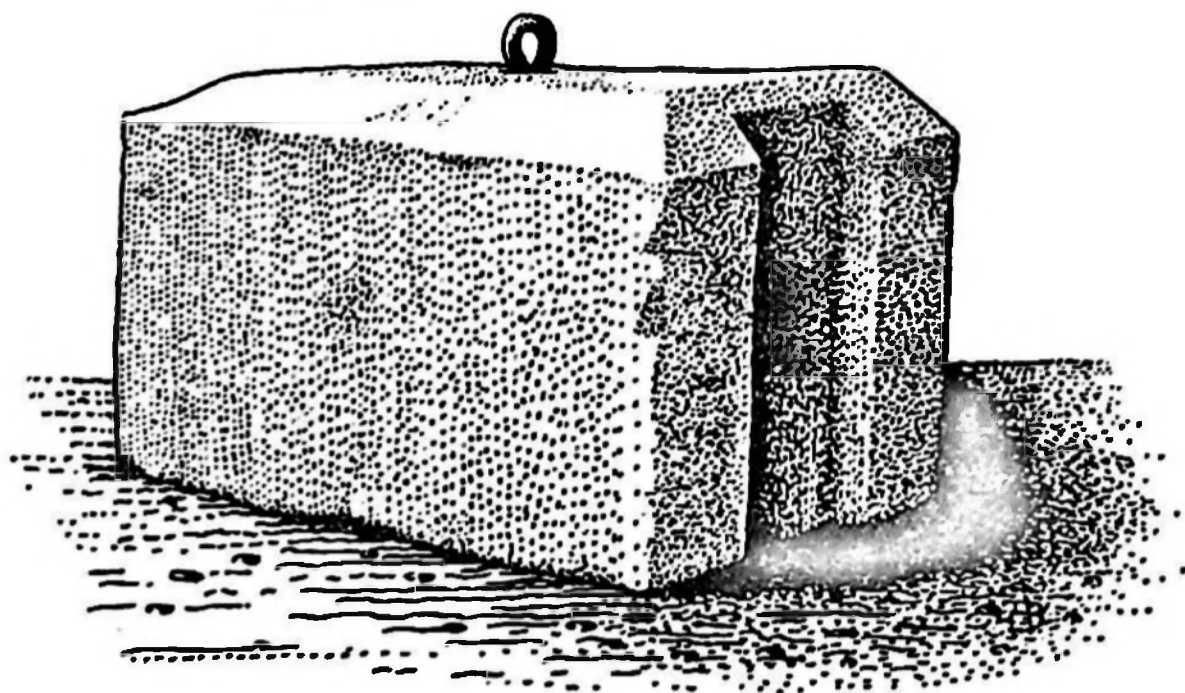


FIG. 2—A chiselled block from Kinclune (Glen Clova) with broad grooves at the sides to contain the uprights of a wooden frame. Now at the Glenesk Folk Museum.

A squared stone block in a wooden frame at Blackcraigs, Glenesk, has the rudely carved initials I.E. for Isobel Edwards who lived here. Another at Braco (Glen Lethnot) has three-inch wide grooves cut in the sides to let it run on the wooden uprights with increased stability. Two blocks from Kinclune, and Cullow (in Glen Clova) have six-inch and four-inch grooves respectively (Fig. 2).

Wooden uprights, subject to decay where they were in contact with the ground, were not entirely satisfactory, and sometimes presses were made with stone uprights and a wooden cross-piece. An early example at Tarabuckle (Glen Clova) has the initials C.H. and A.O., and the date 1829. It was a wedding present to Charles Henry and Anne Ogilvie (Pl. I,

fig. 1). The screw is single-handed, like one at Forneth, near Cluny Loch, and not double-handed as is usual.

Next in the series comes presses made entirely of stone, with the weight hanging free, as at Gallowfauld (Fotheringham), Presnerb (Glenisla) and Blackcraigs (Glenesk). This type is most common in Aberdeenshire and Banffshire. In some instances, as at Mill of Aucheen and Dalforth, both in Glenesk, there are metal guides protruding one from each upright so

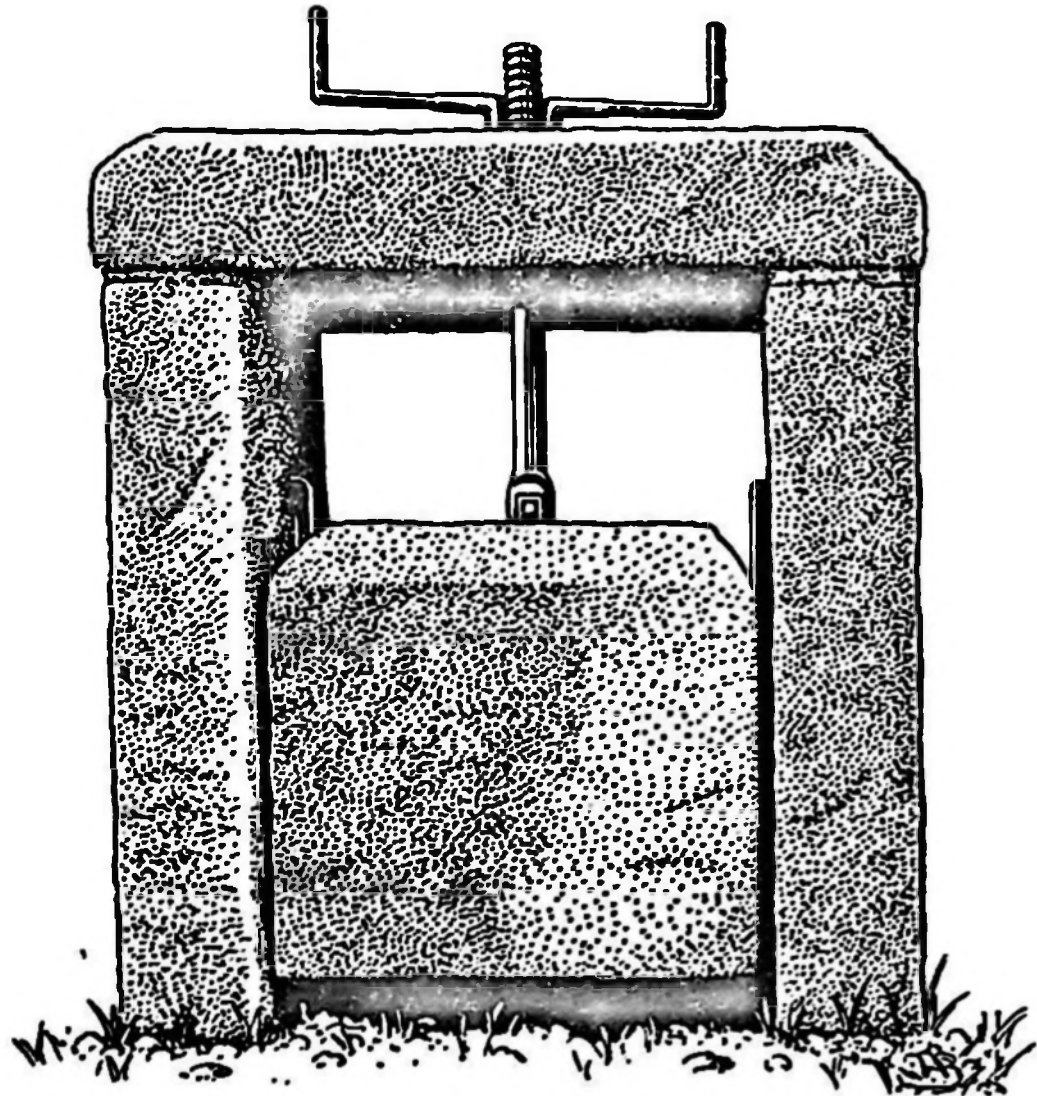


FIG. 3—A stone-framed press from Mill of Aucheen, Glenesk, with metal guides to stabilise the weight.

as to engage in a narrow groove in each side of the weight (Fig. 3). There was evidently a need to have the weight moving as steadily as possible. There would then be less danger of the press toppling over; and that this was a real danger is suggested by the numerous instances where presses are fixed to a wall by a peg of wood or iron—e.g. Turnabrane (Glenesk), Blackcraigs (Glenesk) (Plate I, fig. 2), Tarabuckle (Glen Clova)—or to a post or wall by means of an iron strut—e.g. Brewlands Cottages (Glenisla), this being a stone dated 1884, and

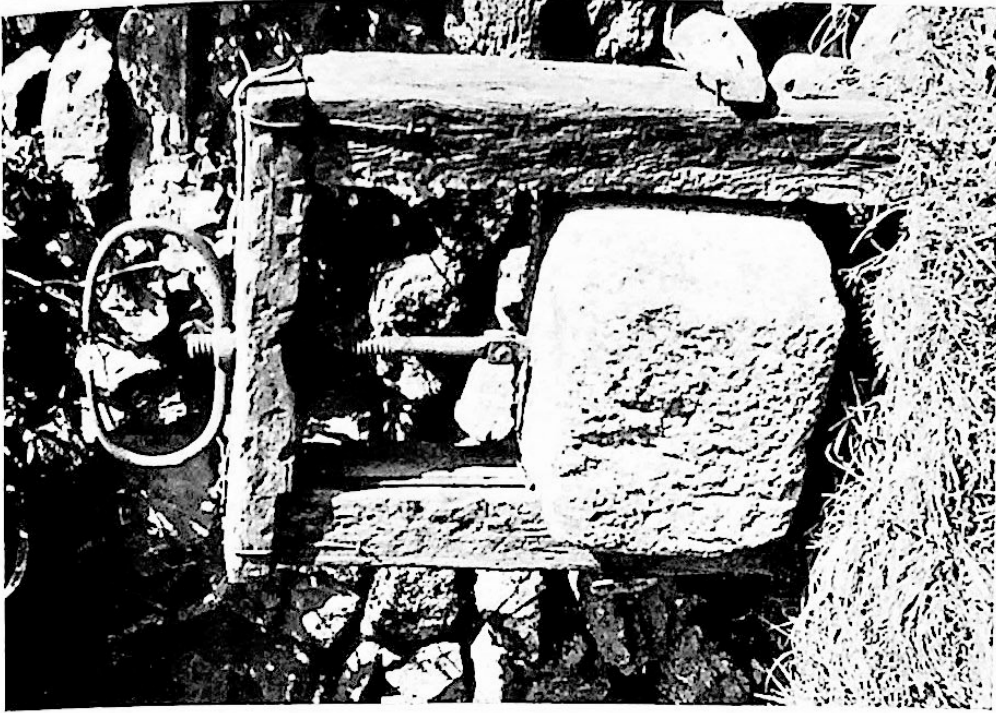


FIG. 2—A wood-framed press from Blackraigs, Glensesk, dooked into a stone wall for extra stability.

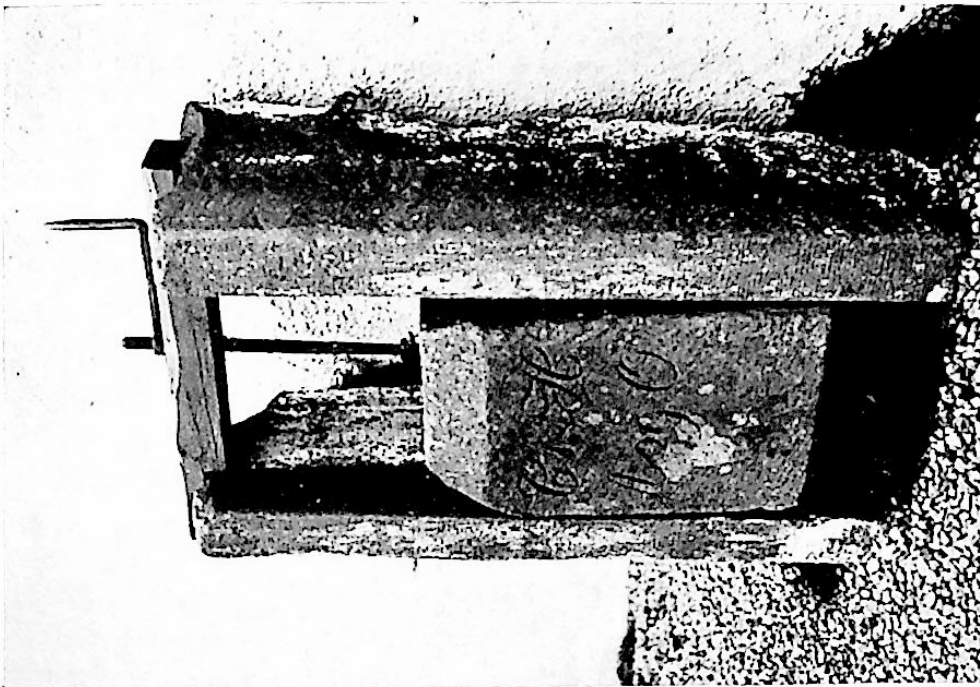


FIG. 1—A stone-sided press from Tarabuckle, Glen Clova.

(See pp. 51-52).

a good example of the art of the maker of churchyard monuments.

Metal-framed presses follow the same pattern—some, as at Ghenty and Balintore (East Gate), have free-hanging weights, and others, as at Clintlaw and Middle Coull (Lintrathan), Auchinleish (in use in 1958) and Delnamer (Glenisla) (Fig. 4) have grooves averaging $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches wide within which the metal

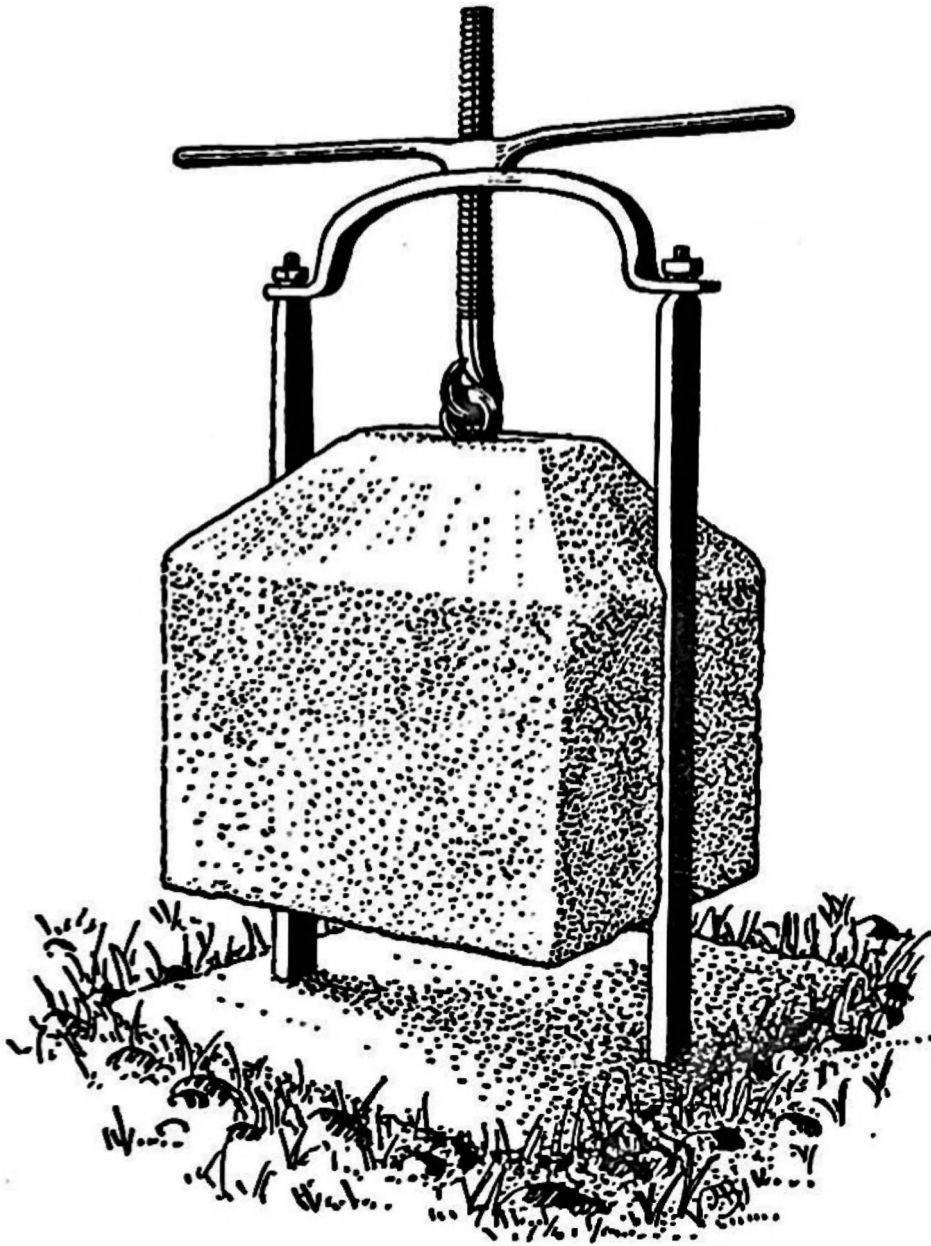


FIG. 4—A metal-framed press from Delnamer (Glenisla).

uprights lie. In each case, the lower ends of the uprights are sunk into a heavy stone sole. This is easily the commonest Angus type.

The arrangement at Cairnleith (Kingoldrum) where the press is set sideways on to a wall, and has one end of the crossbar actually in the wall, is not often found. It also occurs in stone at the smithy at Belts, in the parish of Auchterless, Aberdeenshire.

So far the presses under discussion have been worked on the threaded screw principle, but there are some in which pressure is applied on the steelyard principle, using weights on the end of a bar or lever. Such presses were manufactured by firms such as Wallace of Castle Douglas. There is one at Cortachy Castle.

Besides these large, fixed presses, numerous smaller, portable presses are to be found. The one from Braeminzion (Glen Clova) (Fig. 5) is known to have been made before 1890, when

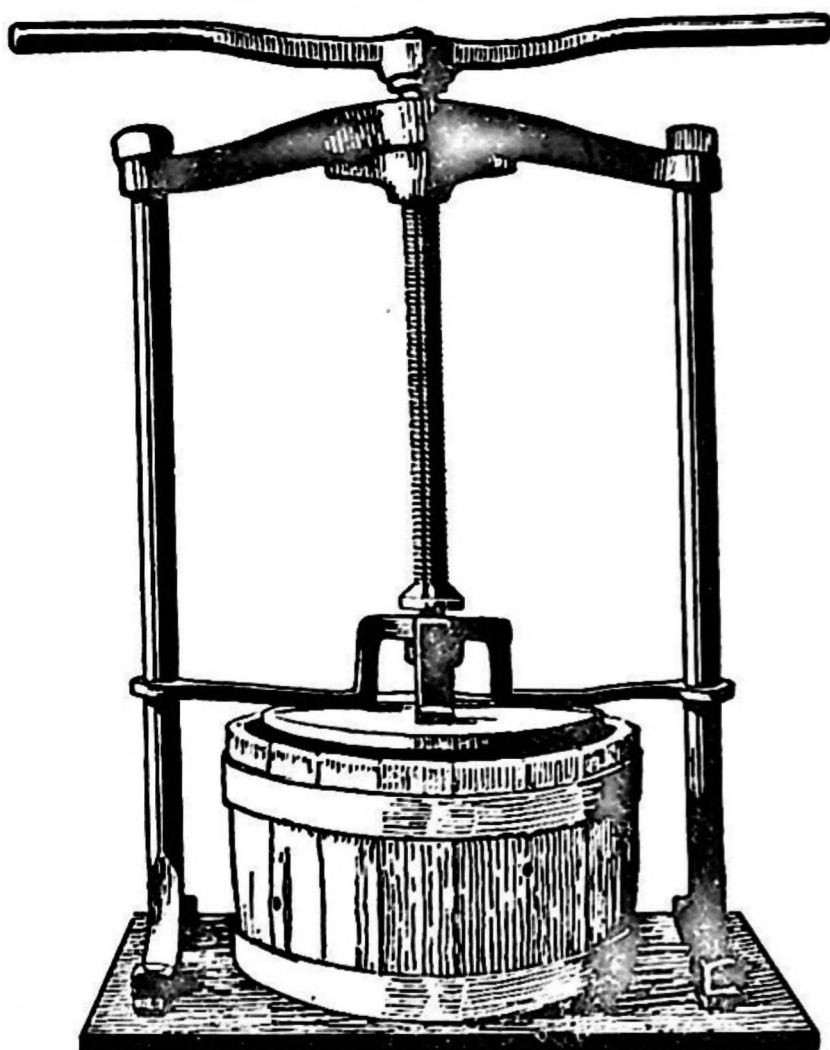


FIG. 5—A portable press from Braeminzion (Glen Clova).

an older stone press was not working properly, and its shape suggests that it was inspired by the larger stone or iron-framed presses. This is also true of one from Gella (Glen Clova) (Fig. 6).

A lighter type made of two threaded screws acting as uprights and two wooden cross-bars, the upper one of which can be made to press on the lid of the chessel, is preserved at the Glensk Folk Museum. It probably came originally from Braeminzion (Fig. 7). This kind is very common throughout the North-East of Scotland.

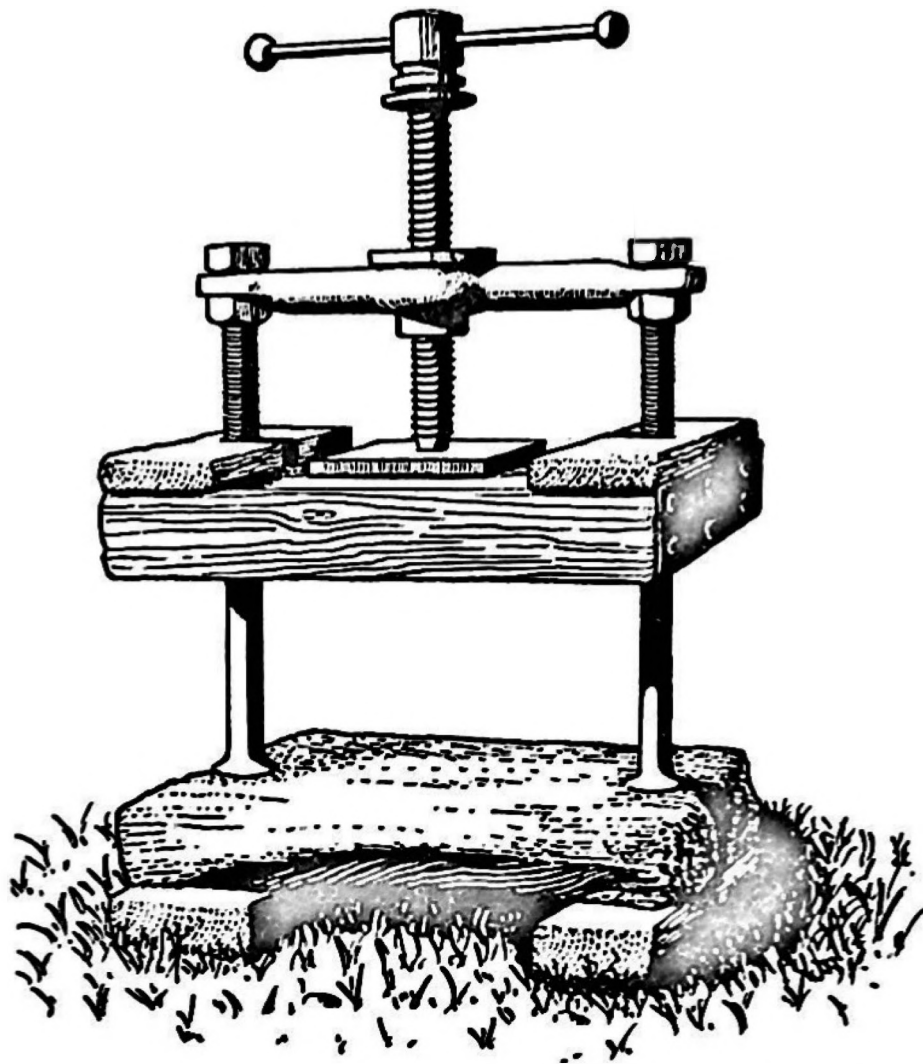


FIG. 6—An elaborate type of portable press from Gella (Glen Clova).

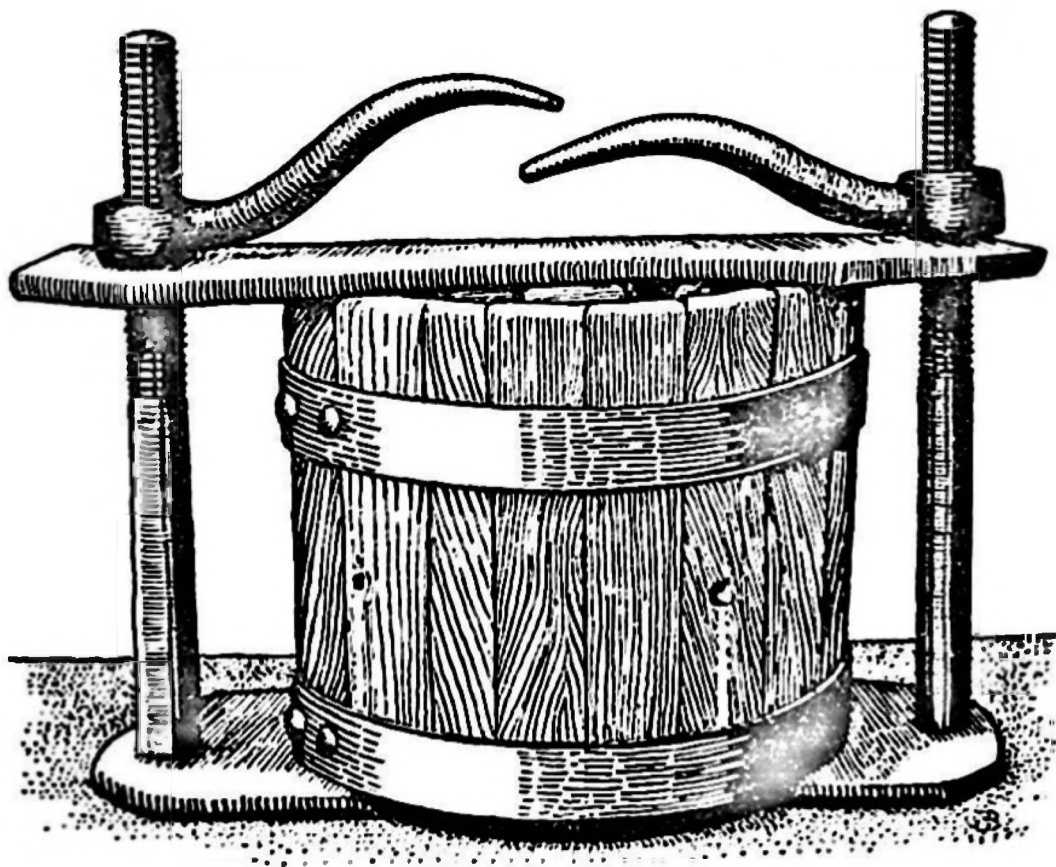


FIG. 7—A small, portable press from Braeminzion (Glen Clova). Now at the Glensk Folk Museum.

Dated presses

Date, etc.	Place	Type, etc.
1814.	Cortachy Castle	A squared stone weight, with broad grooves in the sides suggesting use in a wooden frame.
1829. CH; A.O.	Tarabuckle, Glen Clova	Stone sided, with a wooden cross-bar. Charles Henry; Anne Ogilvy.
1831. J.R.	Auchavan, Glenisla	Iron-framed.
1842. J.R.	Crossmiln, Glen Clova	Stone-framed. Jane Robbie.
1861.	Crossbog, Glen Clova	Stone-framed. Brought from Gella. Illustrated in C. Gibson, <i>Folk-lore of Tayside</i> (Dundee 1959?).
1874. W.R.	Altnavournoch, Glenisla	Iron-framed.
1884.	Browlands Cottages	Iron-framed.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

The sketches are by John Brown of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland.