

**The Brandystone**  
Lake Falconer, Oban.

“But that’s another story...” was a good punch line to end my little piece on Frank Lockwood’s Island – the reference was to the nearby Lord Lovat’s Cave – but I should have realised that it would bring an immediate demand from your editor for that other story. Actually, there isn’t much to tell. It seems likely that Lord Lovat did seek refuge there in the aftermath of Culloden, when he was trying to escape the clutches of the vengeful Hanoverian troops, but it was to no avail. He was captured, taken to London, and after a mockery of a trial, found guilty of treason. This seems a bit hard, as he wasn’t actually “out” in the ’45. He was ill in bed when the call came from the Prince, but he had permitted the clansmen to join the rebels, and indeed encouraged them to rally to the cause. That was enough. His is reputed to have been the last public beheading performed for the entertainment of the bloodthirsty Londoners. And that’s all there is to tell.

So, let me fill the empty page with the story behind another local landmark, the Brandystone. You may think that there is not a lot that can be said about it and you would be quite right. There isn't. It is just a big rock at the south end of Dungallan Park in Oban, and that's all there is to it. But if you widen your vision a little, you can find quite a lot more of interest,

First, the stone itself. It is a lump of conglomerate which stands on the beach at the south end of the park, just beyond the grass, overlooking a sheltered anchorage, at NM 84904,29575. It stands about 18/20 feet high, has a circumference of about 80 to 90 feet and weighs between 100 and 150 tons. Almost certainly it is a piece of rock which fell from the cliff above at some time in the distant past. That is something that still happens - about a mile further south a smaller piece fell, a few years ago. It was smaller, about the size of a lock-up garage, but it fell on to the road and completely blocked it for 3 months, cutting off Kerrera Ferry. Access to Oban had to be taken via Glenshellach, entering the town by the back door, as it were.

There are various theories as to its name. It may be an Anglicisation of a Gaelic name, and it has been suggested that it should correctly be Bran's Stone, though quite why the legendary Fingal should need another "mooring" post for his dog is a puzzle, when he had a perfectly good one just a couple of strides away at the north entrance to Oban Bay. There is another theory: it is thought by many to have been known as St Brendan's Stone, Brendan being a missionary contemporaneous with Columba, and an intrepid sailor.

It seems more likely that the name owes its origin to smuggling. Apparently the good folk of the village, who then numbered about 600, acquired a taste for brandy about the early to middle part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and were loath to pay duty on it, so they smuggled it, and that part of the coast was a favoured landing spot. Sometime in the late 1750s the Revenue, ever the spoilsports, decided to do something about this flagrant misbehaviour, and sent the Revenue cutter from Fort William. One of the local luggers was nearly caught in the act, and he abandoned his cargo and fled southwards down the Sound of Kerrera, hotly pursued by the cutter. Sensing that he was being overhauled, the smuggler took his boat across the top of a sunken rock, relying on his shallow draft to get him clear. Sure enough, he did, and the pursuing cutter hit the rock and was brought to a standstill. Whether there is any truth in this story I do not know, but there is indeed a submerged rock, just south of the rock with the little beacon on it, which is known to this day as the Cutter Rock.

In 1760 the Revenue moved the customs house from Fort William to Oban, erecting a building just south of where the present Baptist Church stands, a building which was demolished 100 year later to make way for the railway. The first Collector of Excise to operate from this building was Duncan MacVicar, whose niece, a frequent holiday visitor, was the lady who became Mrs Grant of Laggan, the famous author.

The Brandystone is the name which is applied to the area around the stone. Every visiting yachtsman speaks about anchoring at the Brandystone, although to locals that anchorage is known as Cardingmill Bay. And that leads me on to the origin of *that* name. Where or what was the carding mill? It was, in fact, the building which is now a dwelling house just opposite the landing jetty at the anchorage. The mill was established in the

late 1700s or early 1800s. Curiously little is known of its origin, or the reason for its existence. It certainly existed as an old and interesting building in 1841, for in that year it was the subject of one of a number of sketches of views around Oban made by J.M.W. Turner, he of Fighting Temeraire fame. He prepared these sketches in the hope that they would be used as illustrations to Walter Scott's *Lord of the Isles*, but in this he was to be disappointed.

The sketches are now in the Tate Gallery in London, part of what is called the Staffa sketchbook. If you would like to see it, you will have to write in advance to seek permission, give a reason and make an appointment, and when you get there you will be asked to wash your hands.

The sketch shows a low white building, with a weaving shed and water wheel at the north end, and the weaver's two-roomed cottage at the other end. I call it the weaving shed advisedly, because in fact the whole process was carried out there, not just the carding. Power for the wheel came from a pond up the hill, now known as Dick's pond. The last tenant was a man called John Hunter, who had been a weaver in Kilbarchan, and who came there in 1870. He would spend the winter weaving, and in the summer he would row round the big yachts, selling his tweeds. He remained there until his death in 1910, and his descendants still live in Oban. One of his sons, William, was a Provost of Oban. His grandson, another William, became convener of Argyll and Bute District Council.

After John Hunter, the mill ceased to function as such, and was taken over by a man called MacDonald, who was a boat builder; many boats were built in the old weaving shed, even small yachts up to 25 feet. They were launched by being taken across the old mill lade by a sleeper bridge, and along the road to a point where there was a ramp leading down to the beach. MacDonald later moved his business along the road to the disused stable and coach house of the Manor House, and eventually into Port Beg. Boat building also took place at the other end of Dungallan Park. Boats of up to 80 tons were built there by the Stevenson brothers, who used them to trade widely, even as far as the continent. But that's another.... Oops! . No. I won't make that mistake again.

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The mill is the building shown in the illustration on page 60 of the 2010 edition of Historic Argyll (reproduced below). It was demolished some years ago and replaced by a modern house. (This information was kindly provided by Lake Falconer, Ed.)

