

JOCK YOUNG'S LOUP

POTARCH, DEESIDE

Rich travellers on Deeside in the later decades of the 17th century often ran the risk of highway robbery. There was no more celebrated a gang than the sons of James 'Caird' Young. The eldest, Peter, built a fearsome reputation as the Houdini of his day, able to escape any prison in the country. His youngest brother, John or Jock Young, although perhaps not as skilled in prison-breaking, certainly shared Peter's bravado. Jock had been imprisoned at Aboyne and was being taken to Aberdeen for trial on a charge of illegal whisky distilling. He broke free of his guards near Potarch and dashed down to the riverbank. Very likely he and his brothers had fished in the Dee for salmon, caring nothing for licences or landowners, thus Jock would have known where the rocks in the river formed a crossing, albeit with a large gap in-between.



Potarch Bridge

In those days the only way for the ordinary public to cross the Dee was by ferry, the Telford-designed bridge not being constructed until 1813. There was a legendary kelpie or water-horse which often terrorised the ferryman and his customers by leaping onto the boat after dark and threatening to drown them all. Jock had no fear of such entities, especially in daylight. He careered down into the shallows, perhaps with his wrists still manacled, and made the jump to the rocks at the far side, leaving his pursuers screaming their threats after him.

Yet was this the same Jock Young, who years later, after his celebrated brother

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had finally been brought to justice and hanged at Aberdeen, quailed before the face of civic executioner, Robbie Welsh? Jock's gang, which included some of his cousins, were hiding out at Chapel of Garioch when a furious row began. Jock stabbed his cousin Hugh Graham several times until he was lying dead at Jock's feet. Horrified at having killed his kinsman, he fled. The murder was reported, and Jock soon arrested, tried and sentenced to death.

He was to be hanged on 11 December 1801 on the gallows in Castlegate, an attempt by his allies to free him having failed. Jock walked onto the scaffold, wrists bound behind him, accompanied by a local priest who had sat up with him the night before the execution. He saw Welsh, grinning like a skull, holding the white shroud to dress him for his death. Whether it was the executioner's malicious smile, or the thought that his body would be sent for dissection afterwards, Jock exclaimed 'I dinna like tae hae that creature Robbie Welsh's hands about me!' The kindly priest intervened and lifted the shroud over Jock's head.

Yet it is for his extraordinary jump at Potarch that he is remembered; the half-submerged line of rocks is still known as 'Jock Young's Loup'.