200 Years On, Efforts Underway to Bring Highland Games Back to Edinburgh

Friday 27 November, 2026

Many people believe Highland Games began as gatherings of Scottish clans competing for strength, honour and prestige.

However, visitors attending a recent history talk in Edinburgh discovered that the true origins of Highland Games are far more complex and fascinating.

Hosted by Ceangail CIC at The Melting Pot on Monday afternoon, the event welcomed renowned RSHGA Highland Games historian Alasdair MacDonald, who challenged some of the most commonly repeated assumptions about Scotland's most iconic cultural tradition.

Drawing on decades of research, Alasdair explained that while clan culture undoubtedly influenced the development of Highland Games, many events were originally established as part of wider community celebrations, local festivals, agricultural gatherings and even funeral commemorations.

The presentation explored evidence showing that Highland Games have deeper Celtic roots than many realise. Attendees learned about the Tailteann Games, believed to have first taken place around 1829 BC at Teltown in County Meath, Ireland. Dating back almost 4,000 years, these ancient games are considered by some historians to be among the earliest predecessors of the modern Highland Games movement.

It appears one of the biggest misconceptions is that Highland Games were simply clan gatherings, when the historical evidence shows a much broader story involving communities coming together to celebrate, compete, mourn and connect through shared traditions.

The audience was also presented with detailed research examining the establishment of Highland Games across Scotland. The findings revealed that while a small number of Games can trace their origins back several centuries, many of today's events were formed during the nineteenth century.

Data presented during the talk showed a dramatic growth in new Highland Games between the mid-1800s and the early 1900s, reflecting a period when communities across Scotland increasingly embraced organised sporting and cultural events as expressions of local identity and civic pride.

The event attracted history enthusiasts, cultural organisations and members of the public with an interest in Scotland's heritage.

Matt McGrandles, Executive Director of Ceangail CIC, said the session demonstrated the continuing public appetite for exploring Scotland's history through evidence-based discussion.

"Highland Games are one of Scotland's most recognisable cultural traditions, yet many people were surprised by what they learned. Alasdair's presentation challenged accepted wisdom and revealed a much richer story about how communities have come together for thousands of years through competition, culture and celebration."

Discussion following the presentation centred on the future of Highland Games and their role in modern society. Participants reflected on how events continue to support community development, volunteering, tourism and cultural preservation throughout Scotland and beyond.

One of the most significant revelations for the audience was that Edinburgh Highland Games will mark its bicentenary in 2027. As Edinburgh prepares to celebrate 200 years since the Games were first staged, Ceangail CIC is leading plans to re-establish the event in the capital, creating a modern community celebration inspired by nearly two centuries of heritage. Organisers believe the anniversary presents a unique opportunity to reconnect Edinburgh with an important but largely forgotten part of its sporting and cultural history and they have been reaching out to landowners and venues since March, looking to find a location in the city that can accommodate the event.

The talk forms part of Ceangail CIC's ongoing programme of events designed to strengthen connections between people, communities and heritage. Organisers say further public events exploring Scotland's cultural history are planned for the coming year.

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As Highland Games continue to attract audiences around the world, the afternoon session served as a reminder that one of Scotland's most enduring traditions still has many stories left to tell. For Edinburgh, the prospect of seeing Highland Games return during their bicentenary year offers a compelling opportunity to celebrate the city's historic place within Scotland's sporting and cultural story.

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