

For those about to rock...

by Gordon Craigie



ALL GREAT stories – even moderately interesting ones too, actually – must start somewhere. Obvious, but true. This particularly scintillating piece of investigative journalism was triggered by a rant from our glorious leader on Twitter – some of you may have seen it? Yes, Ken McDonald, heid bummer and driving force behind our estimable, award-winning publication had lost it. Again!

This time the cause of his vexation was rock or, to be more precise, his inability to source Scottish made rock. The Scottish Twitterati were on to the scandal in a flash. Sterling defences of Edinburgh rock by 'Graham' were repelled by an increasingly irate Ken as he recalled childhood experiences that have clearly shaped the man he has become: "It just reminds me of chalk Graham, and it was always tiny toatie sized and nothing like a manly dod o rosy red Helensburgh rock as I recall. I think I concussed my brother hitting him oan the napper trying to break it. Cannae day that wi Edinburgh rock, ta be honest!"

A glimmer of light was offered by esteemed linguist Ally Heather, and that, dear reader, is where this story finally gets to the point...

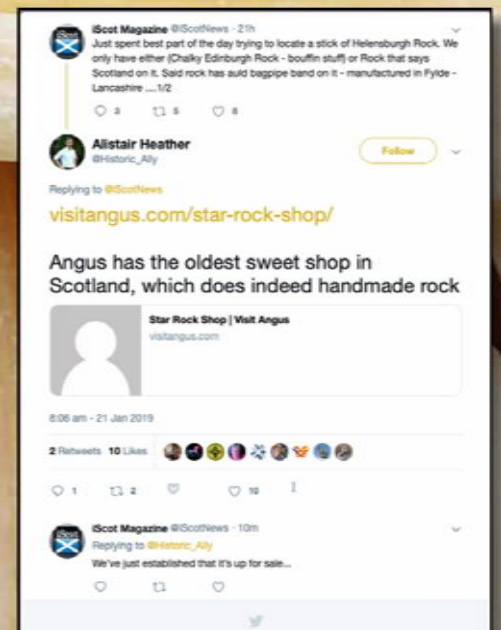
Following Ally's prompting to the letter, your trusty correspondent immediately located the relevant keys that led directly to the Visit Angus website, where they helpfully tell us, "Star Rock Shop is the oldest sweet shop in

So much for internet research! Cheers Mr Google...

Scotland, [having] continuously been producing rock for the past 185 years from the same premises". Jings! Mibbees Uncle Ken can get his rock in Kirriemuir and we can all live happily ever after... Finally, some journalistic nous sets in and, on further research, we discover the devastating news that... the Star Rock Shop is up for sale! Help ma boab! But, never fear, here at *iScot Magazine* we fact-check everything rigorously, so we were never going to just rely on some quick googling to get to the root of this confectionery conundrum. By the way, I should've mentioned that the other factor affecting this particular newsgathering extravaganza was that Ken had his rock-induced meltdown affy close to publication deadline day! But, dinnae fash, Kirrie's no that far fae Dundee...

Half an hour later I'm in Kirriemuir, doing battle with the world's most complicated car-park ticket machine. Seriously, Angus Council, get a grip! Another ten minutes and I've finally won said battle and set off to find the Star Rock Shop. A quick pitstop at the Visit Angus information centre sees me directed a couple of hundred metres to a wee pend called Roods and there, on the corner with Reform Street, is the famous sweetie shop. Obviously open for business, and definitely not currently 'up for sale', the Star Rock Shop is thriving under the custodianship of Liz Crossley-Davies, who bought the business in June last year. So much for internet research! Cheers Mr Google...

Liz happily explains the shop's history, and what attracted her to the business: "Originally the shop started in 1833. A stonemason from Brechin, David Ferguson, had an accident which partially blinded him and then he was out of a job. He needed an income so, for some peculiar reason, he started playing with sugar. You would think boiling sugar and somebody who's partially blinded don't really go together, but he started doing that and invented Star Rock. There are two stories about the name. One is that when you look at the end of the rods, potentially there could be a star shape in the end. The other explanation is that when he dropped a little bit of rock on the surface it made the shape of a star. Who knows, but when I'm making the rock I always check the ends just to see if I'll ever find a star."





"For about the first 120 years ownership stayed in the same family. David eventually passed the shop on to his daughter, Jean Ramsay. She was married but her husband didn't take it over, she did – quite unusual for the age. Then her daughter, Jean Morrison-Ramsay, known as Jessie, followed her and she had it up until the 1930s/40s. Since then there's been a few different owners, but I think I'm probably 10th or 11th in line at most.

"David still had it in the 1850s/60s while JM Barrie, the creator of Peter Pan, was growing up in Kirriemuir and he would shop here as a child. After he moved to London and dedicated himself to writing, he used to come up to visit friends and family and take Star Rock back with him – he would actually have it shipped back as well. The story is that he did this to placate his parrot... He didn't always take his parrot with him on his travels, but he used to feed

He didn't always take his parrot with him on his travels, but he used to feed Star Rock to his sweet-toothed bird when he returned home!



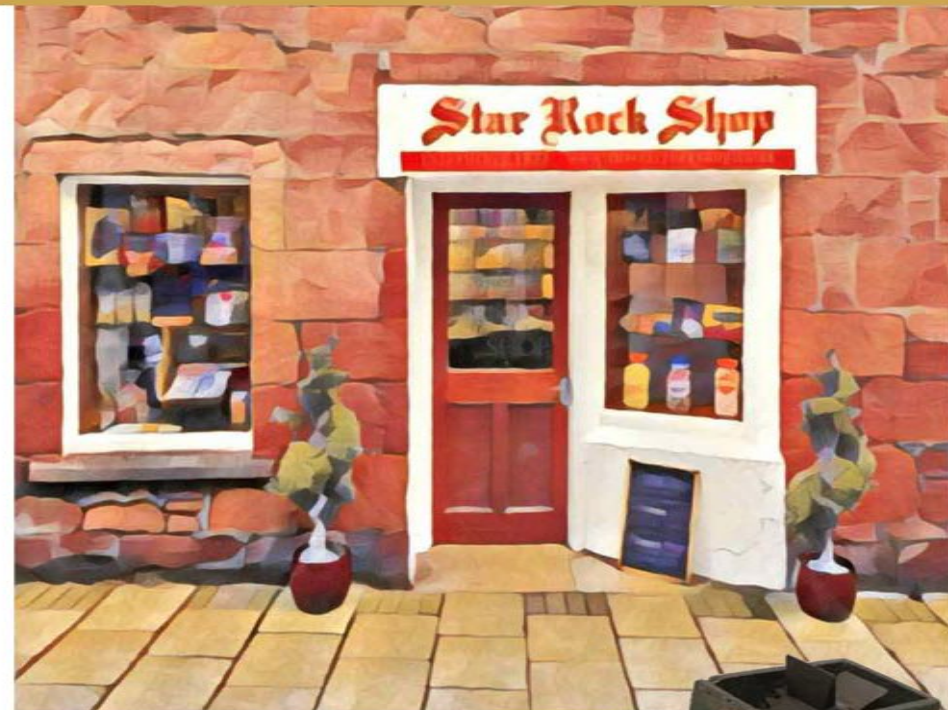
Bon Scott statue in Kirriemuir. Photo © Scott Cormie (cc-by-sa/2.0).



Liz Crossley-Davies

Star Rock to his sweet-toothed bird when he returned home! In 1919 Star Rock was presented to Princess Mary by Jessie, David's granddaughter, while she was staying at Airlie Castle. There are also many stories of Star Rock being bought and sent to soldiers during both World Wars as a reminder of home. We get visitors all the time – a man came in recently and said it was 70 years since he'd been in the shop! This place represents people's childhood, they remember the owners too. There's great connection and affection with the Star Rock Shop."

A simple YouTube search for 'Kirrie – Grampian TV' will bring up an episode of *On the Road Again* from the 1970s, where the venerable Ron Thompson visits Kirriemuir and sees behind the scenes at the Star Rock Shop. Despite his dated, somewhat twee, presentation, it's fascinating to see the rock being made using exactly the same techniques that Liz still uses today. The shop sequence is three minutes in, lasts



around two and a half minutes and Ron, tae his couthy credit, employs the local lingo in describing the phenomenon that is Starrie Rock!

Liz explains that she's keen to maintain the traditions. "I've not been a shopkeeper before but I do have a business background. I've also been a chef, so it was actually the whole package of tradition, history and age allied to the fact that I would cook that made me very interested in the shop. Star Rock is still made from the original recipe and packed traditionally in paper with seven sticks of rock in the packet. I also make humbugs on a very, very old humbug machine. I make it in Star Rock form, with lemon as the base flavour, then we have cloves, cinnamon, butterscotch, ginger, mint and horehound. Horehound is aniseed, treacle and horehound root, and is very well-known in this area. I use a horehound oil which is extortionately expensive £200-£300 per litre! It goes back to Roman times, apparently.

"I make all our rock myself, with one pot boiling then I split it and put it on a single hook. We also have a great relationship with an Edinburgh company, Jenny's Boiled Sweets. These guys have more machinery to help but are still very far from the automation typically used in North-West England for the likes of Blackpool rock. Their Saltire Rock is really popular with the kids and they also make bespoke rock for me, like Star Bonfest Iron Brew Rock. It's made exclusively for us, and only sold in this shop, in AC/DC colours with the 'zigzag' through the middle. (Bonfest is held in Kirrie each May to commemorate the life of Bon Scott, the legendary lead singer with AC/DC, who spent his formative years in the



Old humbug machine



town.) We also do a lot of community fundraising – last year I sourced some little jelly penguins for Maggie's and raised £1755.61, and I'm just about to propose making a bespoke rock for fundraising to Webster's High School, in school colours with the pupils voting on the flavours. Just like in Barrie's time, the kids come in at lunchtime and after school and they just think it's normal to have a sweet shop like this around. And it's just not – not any more! Actually, one of the first things I did was to take down the sign restricting the number of schoolkids in the shop at any one time – they are an important part of our community."

Maintaining the old traditions while reflecting new trends isn't always easy but Liz's passion for her business and connection with her customers, of all ages, is yet another excellent example of what iScot Magazine is always keen to promote – people just getting on and doing things without

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asking permission. Star Rock Shop is the oldest sweet shop in Scotland and only 6 years off being the oldest in the world. Liz wants to carry the shop forward into at least 200 years, and we wish her every success.

Check out the Star Rock Shop at: www.starrockshopkirriemuir.co.uk

But where does that leave our Helensburgh rock-deprived heid-honcho Ken? It looks like he'll hae tae thole a poke o thon Saltire rock for noo! Seriously though, a big feature of the Star Rock Shop tale is its longevity. We can empathise with that at iScot Magazine as, in this very issue, we celebrate our 50th publication. That achievement is pretty much single-handedly down to Ken McDonald whose passion drives the rest of us on every month to produce stuff that you might want to read. You won't see his photo in the magazine (except for this month, but dinnae tell him!) and, unlike many editors, you won't see his personal opinions being promoted anywhere in the magazine. But the whole thing is inspired by him – he allows all of us to 'do our own thing' as long as we keep faithful to the underpinning ethos of iScot Magazine, which is to always be pro-Scotland, and to always be o independent mind. Ken, for those about to (sook their) rock – we salute you!

And finally...



Ken McDonald and Peter Pan - one is a boy who never grew up, the other is Peter Pan!



Peter Pan statue in Kirriemuir. Photo © Nick (cc-by-sa/2.0)

Here's just a small sample of the heartfelt, firmly tongue-in-cheek, tributes for Ken pouring in from the iScot family to commemorate our 50th issue:

- "Ken is the most generous person he knows!" (Gordon Craigie)
- "Ken is that rare specimen - a true gentleman, even when foot lands in mouth!" (Fiona Nicholson)
- "Piglet: What is Kendo?, Pooh: The ancient martial skill of subscription persuasion!" (Fiona Grahame)
- "Ken is fully committed ... or he should be!" (Ken's wife)
- "Who?" (Ken's Bank Manager)
- "We all feel a bit more intelligent after reading what Ken has to say..." (Paul Kavanagh)
- "He's ruff!" (Ginger)
- "Ken's our very own Helensburgh rock!" (Vivien Martin)
- "What sets Ken apart is the fact that nobody will sit next to him!" (Peter A Bell)
- "Ken's a visionary ... but only after lunch!" (James Kelly)
- "Ken's not a procrastinator, he just prefers doing all his work in a deadline-induced panic!" (Sally Robinson)

Aye, oor writers hae spent literally minutes thinking up thae kind words! But, it's aw fine kiddin – here's tae iScot Magazine, the reigning champions of the World Cup of Magazines, and tae oor next 50 issues. Gaun yersel Ken, lang may yer lum reek, an Saor Alba Gu Brath! (Ya big sook...Ed)