

## FIREBALLS

### HISTORY

- Could go back to pagan times.
- However, reputed to go back for 100-150 years.
- Only documented from 1908.
- Every year since then except 1917 and 1918, 1940-45.

### HISTORY

- Many fire ceremonies throughout the world stretching back to pre-Christian times. In Scotland there were Mid-Winter bonfires at Dingwall, Cambeltown, Invergordon, Biggar and Newton Stewart. The burning of the Clavie at Burghead is similar in that it is a procession.
- Thought that there may possibly be other fireball ceremonies up and down the coast and if was 'imported' into Stonehaven by the fishermen as they followed the fish. There are reports of such ceremonies in Skateraw (Newtonhill) in the 1800s.
- *The Stonehaven Journal*, the local newspaper has the earliest written record of the Fireballs in 1908. It infers that the Fireball Ceremony was already established as it speaks of 'In the Old Town much rejoicing took place in the High Street, fireballs and coloured lights making an effective display.'
- Records suggest it was mainly young men who swung the fireballs – often trying to take one another's! It was thought too, that the ceremony could last 1 hour or more as the swingers would stop to 'first foot' at various houses along the way leaving their fireball at the kerbside until they were ready to move!
- Hogmanay 1917 was different. *The Stonehaven Journal* tells us 'This year the ceremony was shorn of much of its picturesqueness. The blazing fireballs, which used to be the most conspicuous element of the scene, were banned under the Lighting Restrictions Orders, and the Police put a stop to an attempt on the part of one or two lads to get a fireball going.'
- In 1935 there is the first report of a female 'swinger' and a photo appeared in the newspaper for the first time.
- 1982 was the only year there were 2 ceremonies! The second took place on September 10<sup>th</sup> at the request of Channel Four programme makers.
- In 1990 there was a record turn-out of 'swingers' and spectators due to the good weather and the pre-event publicity regarding Grampian Television televising the ceremony for the first time.
- As a result, several safety issues became apparent. Consequently, barriers and marshals were instituted amongst other less obvious restrictions.
- The Millennium saw 50 swingers, was covered by 7 BBC cameras and broadcast worldwide! At least 6000 spectators watched and there were 4 digital clocks for the countdown to midnight!
- Now usually restricted to about 40 swingers, all local or with local connections. Crowds are bigger and there are calls for these too, to be restricted.

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## MEANING

- If pagan, it is to banish any evil spirits before the New Year.
- OR to welcome back the sun.

## THE CEREMONY

- Approximately 40 mainly local people of both sexes, young and older.
- Parade up and down the Old Town High Street between the Mercat Cross under the Clock Tower and The Cannon.
- From midnight for approximately 20 minutes.
- Swing lighted fireballs around their heads.
- Put them out by throwing them into the harbour.

## THE FIREBALLS

- A wire netting cage filled with combustible material is fixed to wire handle 2-3 ft long.

## MEANING

- Incidentally, it provides a meeting point for locals and visitors alike to celebrate Hogmanay.

## THE CEREMONY

- The throwing of the fireballs into the harbour was instituted latterly although no-one seems to know exactly when. Previously, the fireballs were swung until they burnt out – or, if still burning when the swinger had had enough, were left to burn out in the street. Other, less sober folk picked them up and were ‘a danger to everybody’.

## THE FIREBALLS

- The burnt-out fireballs are retrieved from the Harbour on New Year’s Day and cleaned. The handles may be used again the following year.
- The new fireballs are constructed at workshops early in December, checked to see that they seem safe and are given a metal tag and a number. This is recorded against the swingers name.

Further information can be found on *The Fireballs Association* website ([stonehavenfireballs.co.uk](http://stonehavenfireballs.co.uk)).