

This battle was researched and assessed against the criteria for inclusion on the Inventory of Historic Battlefields set out in Historic Environment Scotland Policy Statement June 2016 https://www.historicenvironment.scot/advice-and-support/planning-and-guidance/legislation-and-guidance/historic-environment-scotland-policy-statement/.

The results of this research are presented in this report.

The site does not meet the criteria at the current time as outlined below (see reason for exclusion).

METHVEN

Alternative Names: None

19 June 1306

Date published: July 2016

Date of last update to report: N/a

Overview

In 1306, Robert Bruce had himself crowned King of Scots, beginning a new phase of the First Scottish War of Independence. After Bruce took the crown, there followed a series of Anglo-Scottish battles, including the Battle of Methven, where Bruce's Scottish army were routed by Aymer de Valence, Earl of Pembroke, on behalf of the English king. Details of the battle are sparse, though John Barbour, a contemporary Scottish poet, provides some information on the main elements of the battle.

Reason for exclusion

The Battle of Methven is significant as the first defeat of Bruce's army following his inauguration, and ultimately led to his fleeing mainland Scotland for a time. De Valence attacked Bruce at the Wood of Methven, but the medieval location of this landscape feature is not known and cannot be located on a map, and as a consequence, the battlefield cannot be defined with any degree of certainty. In the event that new evidence is found that would allow the events to be located with confidence, the battle is of sufficient significance to be included in the Inventory.

Historical Background to the Battle

In 1298, after the Scots defeat at Falkirk, Bruce and John Comyn replaced Wallace as Guardians of Scotland. However, they soon quarrelled, Comyn being a supporter of Balliol's claim to the throne, and Bruce was 'replaced' a year later.

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He continued to fight on until it seemed Balliol was about to return, then, once again, he submitted to the English king, hoping for recognition of his claim to the throne.

1304 was a crucial year for Bruce. His father's death made him the legitimate Bruce claimant to the throne, and the capitulation of the Scots in the face of English attacks ended hopes of a Balliol restoration. Edward I had conquered Scotland, but he wasn't expected to live much longer. Bruce started to seek allies.

On 11 February 1306 Robert Bruce met John 'The Red' Comyn at Greyfriars Kirk in Dumfries. An argument flared, swords were drawn, and Bruce stabbed Comyn before the high altar. Comyn's murder is not believed to have been premeditated; however Bruce was excommunicated and outlawed, whilst Scotland was plunged into civil war.

The death of Comyn forced Bruce to act, and to claim the throne earlier than he had anticipated. There was no way back, Bruce realised that force would now take precedence over diplomacy. A hastily arranged coronation was followed by attempts to gather support and King Robert was able to recruit a modest army.

The town of Perth had been taken by Aymer de Valence, and on 18 June King Robert made his camp in a wood to the south of the River Almond near Methven. The English refused to engage the Scots in battle when they arrived and an agreement was made that battle would take place on the 20 June.

As a result, Bruce's men thought they were safe until the morning and were unarmed and in camp when de Valence made his way to Methven and routed the unprotected Scots on the 19 June. The Scots were taken by surprise, and were ill equipped to defend themselves against the English infantry. Despite this, the most valiant of the Scots did, however, plunge themselves into the thick of the battle.

Bruce was personally hounded in the battle by Sir Philip de Mowbray and his army was rapidly defeated. Indeed, the grass is reported by Barbour as turning red with blood, while Bruce is said to have fought bravely before watching his men begin to flounder, whereupon he charged forward fiercely and attempted to rally his troops.

The Armies

The English army was under the command of Aymer de Valence, the Earl of Pembroke, while the Scots were led by Robert Bruce, the newly inaugurated King of Scotland.

Numbers

<u>English:</u> The muster roll of the English army totalled 2,171 men, including 50 knights, 21 squires, 140 crossbowmen and 1960 archers, and they were reinforced by members of the Scottish nobility who owed Edward I of England fealty. Whether the entire available force was taken out of Perth for the attack



is unclear, and it is plausible that de Valence would have left a garrison behind.

<u>Scots</u>: the Scots army numbered around 2500, but there is no confirmed break-down of the Scottish armies. However, Bruce is known to have received support from Perth, Angus, Aberdeen, Banff and Moray.

Losses

No figures are given for casualties on either side even as estimates, but they do not appear to have been substantial. Barbour's account states only that:

"And fe[...]I men dead and wounded saire, The blood out of the beirnes brast".

While the English chronicler Peter Langtoft, who covers the battle only in brief, suggests that:

"the foresaid king [Robert the Bruce] did not lose many of his men in this struggle"

A low figure for casualties is supported by the fact that the English force did not pursue the fleeing Scots. It is during such pursuits when the majority of battlefield casualties tend to occur.

Action

Having secured the recruitment of supporters from the north, King Robert approached Perth on 18 June 1306 where his army outnumbered the gathered English forces. Bruce's army attempted to trick their enemy by wearing surplices over their coat armour, but the English refused to engage. Edward had ordered Aymer de Valence, whom the contemporary poet John Barbour described as "A worthy knycht", to make haste to Scotland to "byrn and slay and rais dragoun".

Now outnumbered by the English by around 1500, Bruce did not risk attacking the fortifications of Perth. Instead he withdrew to a hill just to the north of the village of Methven and sent a challenge to de Valence which was accepted.

The date of the battle was set for 20 June. As a result, the Scots believed themselves safe until the morning, so made camp and removed their equipment. Meanwhile, de Valence made his way to Methven in secret to ambush the unprotected Scots on the 19 June. As they approached they were spotted by Bruce, who cried out to his men:

"Till armys swythe, and makys war Her at our hand, our fayis ar!"

Thereafter, de Valence routed the Scottish camp with over 300 men-at-arms and some infantry. The Scots were less well equipped and were unprepared to defend themselves against the English infantry. The most valiant of the Scots did, however, plunge themselves into the thick of the battle:

"and feyle men dede, and woundyt sar:

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The blud owt at thar byrnys brest".

The grass is reported by Barbour as turning red with blood and Bruce is proposed as having fought bravely before watching his men begin to flounder, whereupon he charged forward fiercely and attempted to rally his troops:

"Oh thaim! Oh thaim! Thai feble fast! This bargane neuir may langar last!".

All of this effort and bravery was to no avail, as the Scots began to break and flee, whereupon de Valence charged after them and took several prisoners including Sir Thomas Randolph. Bruce himself was hounded by Sir Philip de Mowbray who was even able to get close enough to him to grab the harness of his horse, crying out:

"Help! Help! I have the new maide King!".

Bruce was rescued by Seton and then rallied his men and retreated, calling on them to follow suit. Having killed de Valence's horse, Bruce fled the battlefield, an action that earned the disdain of the English chronicler, Peter of Langtoft:

"Robyn le dos luy tourney, s'en fuist aliours"

Barbour advises that the English were too weary to give chase and retired to Perth then reported their victory to Edward I. Aymer de Valence ultimately spared some of his prisoners and some, including Randolph, submitted to him.

Aftermath and Consequences

Defeated, Robert the Bruce retreated and the hostile account by Peter Langtoft notes that:

"then, all the wives who had followed the king were ordered to be outlawed by the voice of a herald, so that they might follow their husbands; by reason whereof, many women, both single and married, lurked with their people in the woods, and cleaved to the king, abiding with him, under shelter".

Bruce's forces had retreated west through the Breadalbane mountains then north through Strathfillan when they were blockaded by the barons of Argyll's forces at Dalry, or Dail Righ, on 11 August at the River Cononish where they suffered yet another defeat at the hands of John of Lorn, a relative of the slain John of Comyn. On foot and with axes, the Argyll men disabled Bruce's horses and forced the king to retreat to avoid the slaughter of his men. His wife and daughter fled to Saint Duthac in Ross in the northeast of Scotland to seek protection but were betrayed by the Earl of Ross who gave them over as prisoners to Edward I and they remained in English custody until after the Battle of Bannockburn. The king's brother, Sir Nigel Bruce, took guard of numerous noblewomen connected to Bruce in the Castle of Kildrummy where they resided until later in the year. They were later sent northward to Orkney but were captured en route in Tain and were also imprisoned in England until after the Battle of Bannockburn. Nigel Bruce himself was captured following the betrayal of one of the castle's occupants, and he was tried and executed.

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Two more of the king's brothers, Thomas and Alexander, were intercepted at Loch Ryan on their way back to Carrick then taken to Carlisle where they were both beheaded:

"and thus, all who had gone away and left the king, were, in the same year, either bereft of life, or taken and thrown in prison" (Langtoft cxx).

It is at this point that Bruce made his way to either Arran or Rathlin Island (the site of the infamous 'spider' story). He endured numerous troubles and was left completely alone for the next year:

"an outcast among the nobles, for he was forsaken, and the English bade him sought for through the churches like a lost or stolen thing" (Langtoft cxxi).

Eventually a powerful noble lady, Christiana of the Isles, offered him help and he finally managed to return to his home lands in Carrick where he made his way to one of his castles, slaughtered the occupants and summoned his men to share in the resulting spoils. He subsequently embarked upon a campaign to destroy the English garrisons within Scotland and secure his position by defeating his internal enemies, eventually culminating in his victory at Bannockburn.

Events & Participants

Robert Bruce, king of Scotland, led the army. Robert the Bruce is one of Scotland's most famous historical figures. His grandfather was one of the claimants to the Scottish throne in the dispute following the death of Alexander III. Bruce was crowned King of Scots on 25 March 1306 at Perth, after murdering his rival John Comyn, Lord of Badenoch, also known as the Red Comyn, at Greyfriars Kirk in Dumfries. Although Bruce had authored his own coronation, he would become the focus of Scottish resistance to the English occupation. However, his initial efforts were less impressive than his later accomplishments. He suffered defeat to an English army under Aymer de Valence at Methyen in June 1306 and again by the forces of John of Lorn, a relative of John Comyn, at Dail Righ in August. Bruce was forced to flee mainland Scotland, while many of his family were killed or imprisoned. While in hiding that winter, the legend of the spider spinning a web is said to have inspired him to return in 1307, where he met with more success. He won an important victory against de Valence at Loudoun Hill in May, and gained further advantage when Edward I died at Burgh-by-Sands, near the Scottish border, in July 1307. With the English threat now drastically reduced, Bruce turned to deal with his internal enemies. All of Comyn's supporters opposed Bruce, at least initially, and he faced a long struggle against them in the southwest and in the north-east. The Battle of Barra two years after his coronation was the critical victory of this campaign, leaving him a relatively free hand to deal with his last few Scottish enemies and then to pick off English garrisons one by one, destroying the captured castles in his wake to prevent the English returning to them. After his overwhelming victory in 1314 at Bannockburn, Bruce was able to turn onto the offensive, raiding into England until a

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settlement was finally signed in 1328 under the Treaty of Edinburgh-Northampton.

The English army was commanded by Sir Aymer de Valence, the Earl of Pembroke. De Valence was a Frenchman by birth but owed his allegiance to the Kings of England for the Earldom of Pembroke. He was a loyal supporter of Edward I and of his son Edward II, fighting for both kings. He was present at Bannockburn in 1314 and helped Edward II escape the field. He was also involved in the arrest of Edward's favourite, Gaveston; the seizure of Gaveston from his custody by the Earl of Lancaster and his subsequent murder in 1312 had the effect of confirming de Valence as an Edward loyalist. His attitude towards Bruce may also be explained by the fact that as well as a loyal servant of the English King, he was also the brother-in-law of John Comyn, murdered by Bruce in 1306.

In addition to the two commanders, the contemporary Scottish poet John Barbour mentions the names of several other combatants, including the Earls of Lennox and Athole and others of note:

"Sir Thomas Randell there was tane,
That then was a young batcheler,
And Sir Alexander the Fraser,
And Sir Dauid the Barclay,
Inchemertine and Hew de la Hay,
And Somerwell, and other ma,
And the King himselfe alswa" (Barbour 1395, 32).

Barbour also mentions other nobles that assisted the Bruce, including Sir Christopher Seton and Sir Robert Boyd as well as Robert Bruce's brother:

"Sir Edward, that was so worthie And with him was a bold Baroun Sir William, the Halyburtoun" (Barbour 1395, 34).

Other individuals with de Valence in the English force were Sir Philip de Mowbray and Sir Ingram de Umfraville.

Context

Scotland had a chequered history in the Medieval period, emerging from the early Historic period as a united kingdom of Scots and Picts under Cínaed Mac Alpin [Kenneth Macalpine] in 843 AD, although some parts of the modern geographical territory remained beyond the control of the kings of the Scots. It was really with the Battle of Largs in 1236 when the Norwegians were defeated that the Kingdom of Scotland came into existence. England had long been a source of pressure from the south, and there had been cross-border raids on both sides. However, the pattern changed somewhat with the succession crisis following the death of Alexander III in 1286. The agreed heir to the throne was Margaret the Maid of Norway (Alexander's granddaughter). Margaret died in 1290 on her way to be crowned, leaving Scotland without an undisputed successor to the throne.

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The Guardians of Scotland then asked Edward I of England to decide on a successor from the numerous competitors for the Scottish throne. This process was known as the Great Cause which resulted in a total of 14 claimants, including Robert Bruce the Contender and John Balliol, battling it out for the Scottish crown.

This competition provided Edward I an opportunity to reduce Scotland. When he was brought in as the president of the court of inquiry to the dispute he insisted on recognition of his overlordship before agreeing to lead the court. The Scottish nobility would not agree to this, but were prepared to accept him as overlord on a personal basis. This was sufficient for Edward, along with control of several royal castles, and he led the court that decided on 17 November 1292, in favour of John Balliol.

This was accepted by most of the nobility; John's claim was based on primogeniture in that his link to the throne was one generation closer to the throne, while Robert's claim was through being closer in blood link than John. However, the guiding principle for succession to the throne in Scotland was primogeniture, and John's claim was the better one under that system.

Unfortunately for John, his coronation as king was not the success he would have hoped for. Edward had clearly seen the selection process as a route to bring Scotland under his control, and he treated Balliol as his feudal underling, repeatedly humiliating him and refusing to treat him as a fellow-monarch. It is worth noting that there was another element to the relationship between Edward and Balliol: as a young man. Edward was caught up in the events of the Second Barons' War. This was where the English nobility tried to maintain the provisions of the Magna Carta on Edward's father, Henry III; as a part of the events leading up to the fighting in 1263-4, Edward had a group of councillors imposed upon him, amongst whom was John Balliol the elder, father of the John Balliol that Edward was now humiliating. While the elder John does not appear to have had a great impact on the conduct of the young Edward, it is possible that the events of the Great Cause gave Edward the opportunity to get revenge for a period when the nobility were able to dictate to him. It also indicates that much of his attitude to the situation was complicated by the cross-border nature of many of the nobility. The Balliols were Anglo-Normans and had no connection with Scotland until the marriage of John the Elder to Dervorguilla of Galloway. The family of Robert the Bruce also consisted of Anglo-Norman lords that had moved into Scotland but who also held considerable lands in England as vassals of the English Crown. In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that Edward refused to accept either man as an equal and brother-monarch.

The breaking point for the Scots came in 1294 when Edward summoned John and the Scottish lords to join his army in France as his feudal vassals. This was a rejection of the sovereignty of the Scottish nation, and was unacceptable to the king and nobility alike. In 1295, the Scottish nobility had concluded that John was totally compromised, and they elected a council of twelve to run the affairs of the kingdom. In an attempt to gain a counter to the power of Edward, the council made an alliance with Philip the Fair of France, the start of the Auld Alliance. However, this was a declaration of war against

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Edward, and a rejection of his claim to overlordship, which Edward could claim as an act of rebellion.

Edward invaded in 1296, razing Berwick and massacring the inhabitants; his army under the Earl of March went on to win a victory at Dunbar after which John Balliol was forced to abdicate. William Wallace and Andrew Moray continued the fight against Edward and were able to resist him quite effectively, particularly with the victory of Stirling Bridge in 1297, but Philip provided no assistance from France, and in the end agreed a settlement with Edward, leaving him free to concentrate on suppressing Scotland. Edward's attitude was that the Scots were rebels against his authority; this was the terminology he used throughout, and it was the justification for the treatment of Wallace upon his capture in 1305.

Edward's control of Scotland seemed assured at this point, but in 1306, Robert the Bruce, grandson of the Competitor and previously a supporter of Edward against the Balliol loyalists, came out in open rebellion against him through the murder of John Comyn and having himself inaugurated as King of Scots at Scone in March 1306. Edward was enraged by this, again treating it as a rebellion, and declared that there would be no quarter for Bruce or his supporters. He despatched Aymer de Valence with an army to deal with Bruce; Valence, who was a brother-in-law of Comyn, inflicted a heavy defeat on Bruce at Methven in June 1306. Bruce was then defeated a second time at Dail Righ by a force of Macdougalls, losing most of his men, and following this the remainder of Bruce's army was dispersed and he was forced to flee the mainland, going into hiding, possibly on Rathlin Island or in the Western Isles. At this point the legend of the spider spinning a web is said to have inspired him to continue his efforts.

Two of the King's brothers returned to the mainland at Loch Ryan but were swiftly captured and executed. However, Bruce himself returned to the mainland in early 1307 at Turnberry, and he has changed his tactics to ficus on guerrilla warfare, engaging English forces at Glen Trool and culminating in the Battle of Loudoun Hill where he put Valence's army to flight in April 1307. Edward I then travelled north to personally lead another invasion against Bruce, but the English King died at Burgh-by-Sands in Cumbria in July, before he could cross the border. Although his son, Edward II, continued the campaign briefly, it soon came to an end. Edward was soon too distracted by internal difficulties in England to effectively deal with Bruce, being preoccupied with problems at home caused by the hostility of the English barons to Edward's favourite Piers Gaveston.

Edward's problems in England provided Bruce an opportunity to solidify his position in Scotland. He began a campaign to remove his internal enemies, taking control of castles at Inverlochy, Urquhart, Inverness and Nairn and defeating the forces of the Comyns at the Battle of Barra and the MacDougalls at the Pass of Brander, at the same time as he was building his own support and strength. Once he had secured his own position among the Scots, he turned his attention once more to the English. Most Scottish castles remained in English hands and Bruce began to seize these one by one, before destroying them to prevent their reoccupation by his enemies. By the end of

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1309, Bruce was in control of much of Scotland, and was finally able to hold his first parliament at St Andrews.

By 1313, only a few Scottish castles remained in English hands. This included Stirling, which was besieged by Bruce's brother Edward in June 1313. Edward then made an agreement with the English governor of Stirling Castle, Philip de Mowbray. Under this, Mowbray agreed to surrender the castle if not relieved before 24 June 1314.

Meanwhile, Edward II's political problems had been partially resolved by the killing of Gaveston in 1312 and the submission of the Earls of Lancaster, Arundel, Warwick and Hereford in September 1312. The agreement made by de Mowbray made it politically unacceptable for Edward to leave the castle to its fate, while Bruce had also added Roxburgh and Edinburgh to the recaptured castles. Edward raised a large army and marched north to relieve the siege, although many of those present in the army had recently been his enemies.

Edward's army met Bruce's just outside Stirling at Bannockburn. The Scottish victory there effectively gave Bruce complete control of Scotland while crippling Edward's authority in England. This in turn allowed Bruce to begin raiding into England to attempt to force Edward to accept Scotland's status as a nation, and he reclaimed Berwick in 1318. He also continued the war by opening a new front in Ireland, where Edward Bruce was killed in 1318, and appealing to the Pope for support with the Declaration of Arbroath in 1320. Bruce was finally granted papal recognition as King of Scotland in 1324. However, despite his defeat at Bannockburn and his on-going struggles in England, the English King would not relinquish his claim to Scotland. Edward II was deposed by his Queen in 1327 and replaced by his 14 year old son Edward III. Finally in 1328, with the Treaty of Edinburgh—Northampton, which recognised Scotland as an independent nation and relinquished any English claim to the throne, finally bringing the First Scottish War of Independence to a close.

Battlefield Landscape and Location

The battle took place in the 'park of Methven' (Guthrie 1768, 177) which was likely to the north of the modern village of Methven and, around 6 miles west of Perth. A combination of historical, primary sources and map sources, such as the First Edition and subsequent Ordnance Survey maps, place the battle location in this area, but do not record the precise limits of the battle, or the location of military units. In the absence of any clear evidence for the precise location of the events, we cannot at this time determine the extent of the battlefield.

Location

No further information.

Place, Edinburgh, EH9 1SH



Terrain

Methven translates from the Gaelic word 'Meodhan' meaning 'middle' in reference to the village's location in the centre of a deep valley bounded by the Great Strath, or Strathmore, which extends from Dumbarton in the west to Stonehaven in the east, the Grampians to the north and the ridge of the Ochil hills to the south (Clarke 1845, 142). The river Almond runs through the parish and the terrain is relatively even within the context of the village's mountainous boundaries, the geology comprising predominantly of red sandstone which has been extensively quarried for building. Interestingly, there is no mention of the battle of Methven in the New Statistical Accounts of Scotland (Clarke 1845), though the Old Statistical Account does make mention of it (Dowe 1799, 620-1) using the account of Guthrie in his History of Scotland (1768).

Condition

No further information.

Archaeological and Physical Remains and Potential

Because of the scale of this battle and the lack of development in the vicinity of the battlefield, it is likely that archaeological evidence will remain. Hand-to-hand fighting in a defined battlefield area would result in the deposition of a variety of physical remains. Spent and dropped ammunition, damaged weapons and personal accourrements like buckles and buttons as well as equipment for horses would have been lost or abandoned during the action and subsequent flight. Due to the nature of the battle, items from the Scottish camp may also exist, having been abandoned by their owners.

Cultural Association

No specific examples of commemoration of the battle of Methven survive.

Commemoration & Interpretation

No further information.

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Full Bibliography

Information on Sources and Publications

The battle of Methven is not widely documented in either primary or secondary sources and no rigorous modern assessment of the battlefield has been attempted, other than this research for the Inventory of Historic Battlefields. The background to the conflict is illustrated by some contemporary sources, particularly the Scottish poet, John Barbour and the hostile English chronicler, Peter Langtoft. As to reports of the battle action, the sources provide very little detail on specific actions taken by either side during the course of the fighting.

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