



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).

## Aberdeen II

Alternative Names: None

13 September 1644

Date published: July 2016

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### Overview

The battle of Aberdeen II took place between Royalist and Covenanter forces just outside the city of Aberdeen on 13 September 1644. The Covenanter army was ultimately routed and part of their force, the Aberdeen Militia, was relentlessly pursued into the city. According to Spalding, Manus O' Cahan's Irish soldiers, part of the Royalist army, sacked the city and slaughtered the population for nearly four days.

### Reason for exclusion

The battlefield appears to have been entirely destroyed by the expansion of the City of Aberdeen. There are some small patches of open ground in the area, but even these are likely to have been heavily disturbed, and because of surrounding development they do not preserve any sense of the location of the fighting. As the battlefield landscape has been altered almost in its entirety, we do not consider it appropriate to include the site on the Inventory of Historic Battlefields.

### Historical Background to the Battle

Following the Royalists' defeat by the Parliamentarians at Marston Moor (Yorkshire, July 1644), the King appointed James Graham, 1<sup>st</sup> Marquis of Montrose as his military commander in Scotland. Montrose began a campaign intended to present such a threat to the Covenanter government in Scotland that they would have to recall Leven's Scottish army from England, weakening the Parliamentarian forces to swing the balance of the war back in the Royalist favour. His forces soon achieved their first victory at Tippermuir,



forcing the government to recall some of the army from England (although the majority remained there), and other troops from Ireland.

Following Tippermuir the Royalists marched east towards Dundee but were rebuffed from the city, so they pressed on towards the government controlled city of Aberdeen. Various local forces had been called to Aberdeen in early September to counter the threat from Montrose. Although the Covenanter army was the larger of the two forces, its inexperience and its lack of real leadership ultimately led to a victory for the Royalists under Montrose.

### ***The Armies***

The Covenanter army under Lord Burleigh included men from Burleigh's own regiment from Fife, a militia unit raised in Aberdeen and several troops of cavalry, some armed with lances. Some of Burleigh's men were regular soldiers but many were local militia, recently raised and very inexperienced.

The Royalist army was led by Montrose. To ensure his troops could clearly identify one another Montrose ordered them to take a handful of oats from the fields and fasten it to their hat or coat. Field signs of this nature were common in the 17th century; coloured scarves, ribbons or even just a piece of white paper were used to distinguish one side from the other.

### ***Numbers***

The Covenanter infantry was primarily comprised of militia units and untrained levies drafted from the local populace. The Aberdeen Burgh's Foot, commanded by Major Arthur Forbes, and the Fife Regiment of Foot, commanded by Sir Charles Arnott were the most experienced Covenanter infantry regiments present at Aberdeen and together numbered approximately 1000 troops. The bulk of the Covenanter army, some 1400 men divided across four regiments, consisted of small defined units of levies, the largest of which was Lord Forbes's Regiment containing approximately 400 men. The rest were much smaller in scale, and may be more accurately described as 'retinues' composed of friends, servants and tenants of nobles and landowners who had responded to the call from Lord Burleigh and the Committee of Estates to muster arms in defence of the city.

The Covenanters could also draw upon 300 troopers made up of several small cavalry units, led by Forbes of Craigievar, Alexander Keith, Viscount Frendraught, Lord Fraser and the young Lewis Gordon, who commanded a troop of only 18 men. Artillery was also an important factor and the Covenanters were able to use it to great effect upon the Royalist lines in the opening stages of the battle.



The Royalist army was significantly smaller with only 1600 foot, and approximately 60 – 80 horse. According to Ruthven, the Royalist left, commanded by Colonel James Hay, was supported by a unit of 30 light cavalry troopers under Nathaniel Gordon and 100 musketeers of the Irish Brigade who were commanded by Captain Mortimer. The right wing, commanded by Sir William Rollo, also had a small troop of horse under Ogilvie and around 100 infantry. The main army took the centre under the command of Montrose and Alistair Mac Colla, and comprised of three regiments of well-trained Irish soldiers.

As well as gaining two troops of horse, the Royalists were now also in the possession of artillery which they had captured from the Covenanters at the Battle of Tippermuir earlier that month.

### **Losses**

The figures relating to the numbers of men killed during the battle vary depending on the source. Ruthven estimates that 1000 Covenanters are killed, but only 7 are lost on the Royalist side, which is of course very unlikely considering the proposed duration of the fighting. *True Rehearsall* gives a figure of 520 Covenanters slain, however, as with Ruthven's account it is unclear whether these figures focus on those killed during the battle, or if he has included those killed during the sacking of the city. As a local man serving in the militia, Spalding provides a list of 118 Aberdeen men killed and the Records of the Burgh as many as 160 townspeople.

### **Action**

As the Royalists crossed the River Dee and made their way along the north bank towards the city, the Covenanters made preparations to defend the city. In his account of the battle Spalding reports the flurry of activity which overtook the city as soldiers and levies arrived from the surrounding area. The Bridge of Dee was also anxiously watched for the approaching Royalists and an attempt was made to fortify the bridge, denying the Royalists a direct approach to Aberdeen and forcing them to cross the Dee further upstream at Mills of Drum, which bought the city further time to prepare.

The Covenanters initially positioned their army at Two Mile Cross on the 12<sup>th</sup> September, but that evening the order was given by Lord Burleigh to fall back to the city where they spent the night. The Royalist forces soon occupied this position and set up camp. On the morning of the 13<sup>th</sup> Montrose sent a commissioner and a drummer to demand the surrender of the city and its garrison, but Montrose's terms were quickly rejected outright by the town council on the advice of the military commanders present, including Lord Burleigh. The city was therefore 'ready to oppose and resist the enemies' incoming'. Before Montrose's retinue could leave the city his drummer was shot dead by a trooper. The death of his drummer greatly angered Montrose who declared that no quarter should be given. This may also have been

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further compounded by the Covenanters decision to move their troops into position before the terms of battle had been concluded. It was clear from this action that Burleigh had never considered surrender of the city to the Royalists as a viable option.

The Covenanters selected a southward facing ridge of high ground on which they placed the main body of their forces. The right wing, composed mainly of cavalry and some levy units, was positioned to overlook the buildings of the Justice Mills; the centre, also comprised of levees and Forbes militia, was positioned to cross the Hardgate, the main road heading westwards from Aberdeen. The left wing was perhaps the most vulnerable, as not only did it have less protection from the ridge, the city of Aberdeen lay directly behind it. Here the Covenanters positioned the Aberdeen Militia and the Fife Regiment, the latter of which was the only regular unit of soldiers within the Covenanter ranks.

Meanwhile, the Royalists assembled on the lower ground and turned to face the Covenanters in the north. Colonel Hay commanded the left wing, which, similar to the right wing commanded by Rollo, consisted of a small body of horse and foot. This left Montrose and Mac Colla who commanded the Irish infantry in the centre.

According to Spalding the Covenanter cannon opened the battle. However Monteith, in his histories of Montrose's campaigns, criticises the Covenanters for not using their artillery more effectively, as although it 'annoyed the Royalists' had they,

*'continued to fire briskly with their cannon, without quitting their post, they would have very much thinned Montrose's ranks and made the event of the battle doubtful'.*

Whilst the cannon may not have been used to great effect by the Covenanters, movements had been made on their right wing as a party of skirmishers occupied the buildings of Justice Mills. Ruthven also describes the ground that lay between the armies, which, as well as the Howburn, consisted of 'some gairdens and houses', that the Covenanters 'had once made good', i.e. potentially using them as cover to harry the Royalist front lines. Colonel Hay therefore sent out a detachment to drive out the Covenanter foot from the Justice Mills buildings and gardens. This is countered by a troop of Lancers, possibly Keith's, which in turn is driven back by heavy fire from the Irish musketeers of Mortimer's regiment, as described by Ruthven:

*'the Irishes, at a neere distance gaue such a continuall fyre as they fand that sevice too hote for them, and therefore makes a retreat'*

As Keith's lancers retreated, Forbes of Craigievar prepared to launch a larger more sustained attack on the Royalist left and centre. Forbes' Regiment, initially situated at the rear, were brought forward into action. By moving behind the ridge of high ground, Forbes' Regiment were able to position



themselves just north of the Royalist left wing without being detected. However, rather than capitalising on their advantageous position, Forbes, possibly due to lack of experience, did not advance his men forward. If they had done so, as Ruthven explains, they may not only have taken the enemy's artillery but could have, 'carried that dayes victorie to overthrow Montrose [sic] whole army'.

The Covenanter's main attack is not able to maintain any momentum and rather than overrunning the Royalist foot to victory they engage in a long range fire fight with Mortimer's Irish musketeers. Nathaniel Gordon drives off what is left of Forbes' Regiment, which receives severe losses. The Royalist left, however, is unable to force the rest of the Covenanter army away without reinforcement. Although contemporary accounts of what happened between this event and the general advance are mixed, it is possible that Rollo is sent from the right wing to the left to support Mortimer's musketeers.

Montrose then gave the order for a general advance up the slope towards the main body of the Covenanters. Ruthven and Spalding's account of the action suggests a long and arduous encounter, 'The fight contynewis hotlie during the space of two hours'. The Irish advance was checked by a cavalry attack by Forbes of Craigievar, who sent Lewis Gordon with his 18 troopers to attack O'Cahan's Regiment. However, as they approached, the well trained Irish bunched together, creating openings in the ranks which the cavalry passed through. The Irish were then able to turn about and fire into the backs of Gordon's troopers. Craigievar's cavalry were also, 'quickly swallowed up within the bodie of the enemies maine battell' and Craigievar himself was taken prisoner.

The Covenanter army were ultimately routed, although many of the Aberdeen levees were able to leave the field and reach the city unscathed. The Fife Regiment received the full force of the action, but were able to hold their ground throughout the battle before finally retiring in good order. However, Montrose's promise of no quarter was followed to the letter and they were later caught by McDonnell's Regiment under the command of Mac Colla. This fate also holds true for the Aberdeen Militia who, after being routed by O'Cahan's Regiment, were relentlessly pursued into the city, as Spalding describes,

*'Thair was litill slauchter in the fight, bot horribill wes the slauchter in the flight fleing bak to the toune, which wes oure toune's menis destruction'.*

O' Cahan's Irish soldiers sacked the city and surrounding burgh, committing a number of atrocities against the local populace. Both Spalding and the Records of the Burgh of Aberdeen provide an account of the slaughter which lasted for nearly four days. Only one regiment of Irish appear to be involved in the massacre and looting, as Montrose retained the rest in the field and sent Mac Colla northwards to track the movements of Argyll's army.



### ***Aftermath and Consequences***

As with his earlier victory at Tippermuir, Montrose manages to achieve very little from his military success in the field. The subsequent sacking of Aberdeen and murder of the local populace at the hands of one of his Irish regiments ensures a significant lack of willing recruits from the region to join the ranks of the Royalists.

After spending several days in Aberdeen, Montrose leaves the city to re-join Mac Colla, who he had sent after the battle to shadow the approach of Argyll's army. Continuing to play a cat and mouse game across the Highlands and failing to win the support of the Gordons, Montrose arrives at Fyvie on the 24<sup>th</sup> October, where he engages Argyll in battle.

### **Events & Participants**

Commanding the Royalist army was James Graham, Marquis of Montrose, together with Alastair Mac Colla. James Graham was the fifth Earl of Montrose and the first Marquis of Montrose and the chief of Clan Graham. Montrose had been a supporter and signatory of the National Covenant in 1638, but had then become a Royalist, although he was driven by motives other than a desire to impose the Divine Right of Kings upon Scotland. He and Archibald Campbell, the eighth Earl of Argyll, were bitter rivals, and Montrose believed that the Covenant had become nothing more than a vehicle for Argyll's ambition. Always a moderate among the Covenanters, Montrose considered that the agreement in 1641 with Charles that had removed episcopacy from Scotland had fulfilled the demands of the Covenant and that to continue in opposition to him would be breaking that agreement. Following the signing of the Solemn League and Covenant in September 1643, Montrose presented himself to Charles I service at his headquarters in Oxford. On behalf of the King, he then fought a campaign intended to draw Covenanter forces away from supporting the Parliamentarians in England, and in this it was a success. Montrose fought a series of seven battles against Covenanter armies across the Highlands in 1644 and 1645, beginning with Tippermuir and ending at Philiphaugh, where he suffered his only defeat. He attempted to do the same on behalf of Charles II in 1650, but on this occasion fought only a single battle at Carbisdale. After his defeat there, he was captured and brought to Edinburgh for trial. On 21 May 1650, he was hanged and then beheaded. His head was fixed to a spike on Edinburgh's Tollbooth, his body quartered, and his limbs were displayed in Stirling, Glasgow, Perth and Aberdeen. Following the Restoration of Charles II as king in 1660, Montrose's remains were collected together once more and were interred in the High Kirk of St Giles in Edinburgh in May 1661.

Alasdair Mac Colla was the son of Coll "Colkitto" MacDonald. He is widely credited with the creation of the "Highland Charge", a tactic used with such

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devastating effect by Highlanders throughout the subsequent century, although some of the credit should likely also go to his compatriot Manus O' Cahan. He had fled to Ireland in 1638 to escape Campbell depredations in MacDonald territory within Scotland, and he fought for the MacDonnell Earl of Antrim in the Irish Rebellion of 1641. In 1644, he was dispatched to Scotland with between 1500 and 2000 Ulster and MacDonald troops to support Royalist efforts there, and to attempt to draw Covenanter forces out of Ireland and relieve pressure on the Irish Confederacy. Mac Colla gladly accepted the task, as Archibald Campbell, the Earl of Argyll, was not only the leading Covenanter in Scotland, he was also the clan chief of the Campbells, giving Mac Colla a chance to strike back against his hated foe. He landed in Argyll lands in July, immediately seizing the castle at Mingary. He continued to build his support in the north-west until he finally moved to Blair Atholl, where he joined his forces with Montrose at the end of August. This was the beginning of an immensely successful partnership, with Mac Colla present at the Royalist victories at Tippermuir, Aberdeen, Inverlochy, Auldearn and Kilsyth. However, Mac Colla's focus remained in his homelands in the north-west, so when Montrose moved south towards England, Mac Colla dispatched Manus O' Cahan with 700 of the Irish troops to go with Montrose while he returned to the north-west. After Montrose's defeat at Philiphaugh, Mac Colla continued to fight against the Campbells and the Covenanters in Scotland, with particular brutality displayed to any Campbells he encountered, until a concerted effort to defeat him in 1647 forced him to withdraw back to Ireland in May 1647. Later that year Mac Colla was serving in the Confederate Army of Munster when he was captured and shot at the Battle of Knocknanuss on 13 November.

As President of the Committee of the North, Lord Burleigh assumed military control of the city of Aberdeen, along with the burgh council, and took command of the Covenanter army during the battle. Burleigh was a prominent Covenanter, and had , been appointed President of the Committee of Estates in 1640, as well as serving on a number of committees responsible for standing regiments, supply and levying. He also played a key role in brokering peace with England and Parliament in 1640-1641. His political prowess however, did not match his military ability, and he has been heavily criticised for his poor decision making. Burleigh was joint Colonel, alongside Lord Elcho, of the Regiment of Fife Foot.

### **Context**

In 1638 the National Covenant was signed by many in Scotland, pledging opposition to the reforms proposed by Charles I, the King of the two separate nations of England and Scotland. Amongst other proposals Charles wanted to replace the democratic Presbyterian system with a hierarchy of bishops and create a church modelled on High Anglican lines, and to finance his reforms by re-possessing the former land holdings of the Catholic Church which had been sold on at the Reformation and now formed the basis of many landowners' status and wealth. In 1639 and 1640 Charles was defeated in the two Bishop's Wars. Desperately short of finance, Charles was forced to recall the English Parliament, the so-called Long Parliament, and they



reached a peace with the Covenanters in the Treaty of London in 1641. However, Charles and the English Parliament remained at odds over who should control the army, and the first English Civil War began in 1642. Initially the Royalists and the Parliamentarians were relatively evenly matched, and the Parliamentarians opened negotiations with the Covenanters for their assistance in breaking the deadlock. In 1643, under the terms of the Solemn League and Covenant, the Covenanter government of Scotland allied itself with the English Parliament and entered the war in England in early 1644, marking a major turning point in the war. Charles attempted unsuccessfully to foment rebellion in Scotland and the Scottish army went on to make a major impact in the campaign for the north of England. Following crushing defeat at Marston Moor on 2 July 1644 the King tried again, appointing James Graham, the 5th Earl of Montrose, as his military commander in Scotland. Montrose had been part of the abortive rebellion and was a former Covenanter himself who had joined the King in 1643. On 28 August 1644, Montrose raised the royal standard and embarked on a campaign against the Covenanter forces in the Highlands.

Over the next two years, Montrose, with forces which changed constantly in size and composition, won a series of victories over the Covenanters under a number of different commanders, including: Tippermuir (1 September 1644), Aberdeen (13 September 1644), Inverlochy (2 February 1645), Auldearn (9 May 1645), Alford (2 July 1645) and Kilsyth (16 August 1645) and was elevated to 1st Marquis of Montrose by Charles as reward. However, he was defeated at Philiphaugh near Selkirk on 13 September 1645 by much superior Covenanter forces commanded by Lieutenant-General David Leslie. He endeavoured to carry on his campaign in the North-East, and also tried to threaten Glasgow, but lack of co-operation and poor relations between the leading Royalist commanders meant that they achieved little success and Montrose's campaign petered out in early May when his forces besieging Inverness were taken by surprise by Major-General Middleton's advance and fled without a fight. Although Huntly, another Royalist commander, stormed Aberdeen on 14 May, a few weeks later Charles, who had surrendered at Newark on 5 May, ordered his forces in Scotland to lay down their arms. Although Montrose was reluctant to do so, he finally disbanded his forces at Rattray on 30 July after agreeing terms with Middleton and then fled abroad.

### **Battlefield Landscape and Location**

As the battle was fought in very close proximity to the city of Aberdeen, the ability to trace the location of the engagement is aided not only by official documentary source material, such as the Records of the Burgh Council and city maps, but also the increased potential for fixed features in the landscape such as roads, buildings and other types of structures or monuments. The records of the Burgh Council of Aberdeen state that the battle was fought, 'betwixt the Crabestane and the Justice Mynes', two features that may be traced in the present landscape. Although no longer surviving in the present landscape, the position of Justice Mills may be accurately traced through map regression to an area lying between Justice Mills Lane, Wellington Place to the west and the Hardgate to the east. The Crab Stane may be found today





incorporated into a wall at the junction of the Hardgate and Langstane Place. In reality, this is a very small area within which to fight a battle, however as well-known features in the 17th-century landscape, particularly with the Crab Stane's added significance as a boundary marker, it is not surprising they are made reference to within the Burgh Council's account.

The Hardgate, once the main road west out of Aberdeen, forms the central spine of the battlefield with both armies positioned at either end of it. The Covenanters positioned themselves on the southward facing ridge of high ground, now situated where the Hardgate meets Justice Mills Lane and Langstane Place. The Royalists were positioned on the lower ground south of Justice Mills and on the modern map possibly between the Nuffield Cemetery in the west and the area known as Ferryhill to the east. After much skirmishing activity around the vicinity of Justice Mills, the Royalists advanced up the slope towards the Covenanters and after a long engagement they were eventually routed and pursued into the city. In the modern landscape this would likely have encompassed the area surrounding the Hardgate, Bon Accord Terrace, and moving towards Union Street and the Cathedral.

### **LOCATION**

No further information.

### **TERRAIN**

The urban expansion of Aberdeen and almost complete development of the ground surface since the battle has had a significant impact on the ability to read the topography of the present landscape. It is therefore necessary to refer to modern contour maps and historic maps in order to gain an impression of the 17th-century terrain. In terms of topography, using the Hardgate as a central reference point, an area of low-lying ground is encircled to the north and west by a ridge of high ground and to the south-east by the high ground of Ferry Hill. This creates a basin probably formed by tributaries making their way to the River Dee situated in the east. The Hardgate skirts the western edge of this basin, which Roy's Map clearly illustrates. In reference to the battle, the Covenanter army positioned themselves on the crest of this south-facing ridge above the Justice Mills buildings and where the Hardgate curves slightly to the east to follow the contour towards the city. The difference in height is relatively small at only 18m, with the highest point measuring 25m at Ferry Hill to the south and at the Crab Stane to the north, and the lowest at 7m in between these areas.

Historic maps provide the only indication to the nature of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century terrain. The earliest maps to depict the pre-industrial area in any detail include Gordon's map c. 1661 and Roy's Military Map c. 1757, which show the area to be mostly open agricultural ground illustrated by lines of rig and furrow. Later maps of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century show the gradual expansion of the city, with the formation of nursery gardens from 1780s onwards and the building of new roads and terraced buildings from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.



### **CONDITION**

The battlefield has now been almost entirely subsumed by the expansion of the city, a process which began in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Terraced houses, shopping centres, dual carriageways and car parks now not only dominate this landscape, but also serve to conceal the subtleties of the underlying topography, an important factor in understanding the course of this battle. Key features such as the Hardgate still exist, remaining as important reference points within the landscape with which to locate the battlefield. Excavations in 2000 as part of a developer-led evaluation in the area of Justice Mills located the original water course what was probably Justice Mills Burn, but no remains of the mill buildings were uncovered.

Despite this there are several key landscape features which do survive, the most important of which is the Hardgate. The Hardgate was once the main road heading west from the city and formed the axis on which both armies positioned themselves. The road features prominently on early maps, including Gordon's c. 1660s map of the city, which also depicts the Crabestone and the buildings of Justice Mills. The Crabestone has been incorporated into a wall and may still be seen today.

### **Archaeological and Physical Remains and Potential**

The archaeological potential of the battlefield is likely to be poor due to the level of landscape disturbance over the last 250 years, with little possibility of recovering meaningful archaeological material in the form of artefact assemblages. A small pocket of ground does exist between Bon Accord Crescent and Willowbank Road. This small open area appears to have been spared significant development, instead being primarily used as garden plots first shown on Wood's 1828 map of the city.

### **Cultural Association**

The battle is currently commemorated by two bronze plaques located above two 17th-century features recognised as being present at the time of the battle, namely the Crabe Stone and the Hardgate Well. As a boundary stone mentioned in contemporary sources recounting the battle, the Crabe Stone acts as an important marker to locate the position of the battle.

The inscription on each of the plaque's reads as follows:

The Hardgate Well –

*'This spring figured in the Battle of Justice Mills fought on the 13th September 1644 between the Royalist Forces under the Marquis of*



*Montrose and the citizens of Aberdeen. Erected by the Corporation of the City of Aberdeen, 1870.'*

The Crabe Stone –

*'The Crabstane. Boundary stone on lands belonging to John Crab, Baillie of the Burgh in 1314. The stone also marks the site of the skirmish in 1571 between the rival families of Gordon and Forbes and of an engagement in 1644 between the citizens of Aberdeen and the Royalist forces of the Marquis of Montrose.'*

The location of the battle, together with the positions of the Crabe Stone and the Hardgate Well is also noted on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map of 1867.

### **Commemoration & Interpretation**

No further information

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#### **Information on Sources and Publications**

Much of what is known about the battle is contained within the texts written by George Wishart and Patrick Gordon of Ruthven.

George Wishart, Bishop of Edinburgh was the private chaplain and biographer to Montrose. His history of Montrose's campaign in Scotland is ultimately biased and lacking detail in areas, particularly in relation to military events. However, owing to his close relationship with Montrose and his presence throughout the campaign, he is regarded as an important source.



Patrick Gordon of Ruthven was motivated to write his history after the publication of Wishart's in 1647. However, rather than producing a biased version of the campaign, Ruthven succeeded in writing a balanced and informative history, gathering information from veterans of the battle, including the commanders Montrose and Mac Colla. There appears to be no recognisable contemporary sources relating to the Covenanters.

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