



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).

Battle of the Pass of Brander

1308

Overview

The Battle of the Pass of Brander, also known as the Battle of Brander, the Battle of Ben Cruachan or the Battle of Fanans, was an important engagement in 1308 during the First War of Independence. It took place on or near the slopes of Ben Cruachan, Argyll, between the followers of King Robert I 'the Bruce' and John MacDougall - also known as John of Lorne or John Bacach (the lame) – son of the Lord of Argyll, Alexander MacDougall. Bruce's victory led to the surrender of Dunstaffange Castle and his gaining effective control of Argyll.

Reason for exclusion

There are at least three viable locations for the battlefield: directly to the east of the Falls of Cruachan; towards the western end of the Pass of Brander near Binnein Brander and Fanans; and also to the north near Barran Dubh and the southern shore of Loch Etive. As such the action cannot be accurately located on a map with certainty and therefore the battlefield does not currently meet the criteria for inclusion in the Inventory.

Historical Background to the Battle

The exact date of the action is not recorded. However, according to the 15th century *Scotichronicon*, Bruce's expedition took place during the week of 15-22 of August; "In the same year in the week following the feast of the Assumption of our Lady King Robert defeated the men of Argyll...".

This provides a possible conflict of timelines. It is known that Bruce was ravaging Buchan during the summer of 1308 and captured Aberdeen on 1st of August. This gave the king about two weeks to move his force from Aberdeen to Argyll, a difficult but not impossible task. (MacDonald, in his *History of Argyll*, argues that the battle did not take place until August 1309, which would remove this conflict, but this is not supported by any other sources, and does appear to contradict both Barbour and Bower's timelines.)

The 14th-century poet John Barbour's narrative poem *The Bruce*, is the only primary source that describes the engagement in any detail. According to the poem, John was well aware that Bruce intended to attack after The Harrying of the North and had

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begun to extend his raids into Argyll. It is also known that a truce was in effect between the MacDougalls and Bruce at this time, but it appears that Robert wanted to deliver a decisive blow to Comyn's followers before Edward II could organise support for his Scottish allies. John intended to take advantage of the local terrain by deploying his men on the high ground of Ben Cruachan, above the route which Bruce was expected to travel. John observed the deployment of his troops and the following action from a galley, presumably in order to observe the advance of Bruce and ensure his men were out of sight.

Assuming that Barbour is correct in his description of the battle, Bruce sent half his men and all his archers under the command of James Douglas up the slopes of Ben Cruachan before the king advanced to the location that John had planned his ambush. Given that medieval battles were rare events due to the high level of risk associated with them, this presents an interesting manoeuvre by Bruce. To split his forces in such a way before taking a very dangerous route, it is almost certain that Bruce had intelligence relating to the disposition of John's forces before entering the pass. This is also alluded to by Barbour, who suggests that Bruce was 'well-advised in all [John's] enterprises'. The large number of hidden ways, valleys and gullies on the higher slopes of Ben Cruachan would have allowed scouts to traverse the mountain in twilight or the morning mist to survey the pass easily without being detected. As the territory may have come into possession of the MacDougalls as recently as 1294, it is plausible to imagine support or guides from local clans such as the Campbells of Loch Awe, who would have been familiar with the area. This demonstrates that Bruce was developing his tactics, strategies and intelligence-gathering methods; good understanding and utilisation of the terrain had given him success at the Battle of Loudon Hill the previous year. A second possibility which cannot be discounted, and one which Barbour would not have recorded, is that Bruce was taken entirely by surprise by the ambush. Given that his army would have been strung out for a considerable distance if the conditions of the pass were as described by Barbour, it is possible that the rear guard, probably under the initiative of Douglas, chose to move up the hill to relieve the pressure from the rest of the army, rather than being ordered to in advance by Bruce.

In either event, according to Barbour, Bruce advanced 'along the way' until he came into contact with his enemy. Meanwhile, Douglas had advanced undetected above and then behind John's men. Douglas moved his archers into range and let loose, and 'then with swords finally... rushed among them boldly' before the ambush could be fully carried out. Meanwhile Bruce advanced up the hill, catching the Argyll men in a vice. John was forced to watch from his galley as his men attempted to escape across and then destroy a bridge below them that crossed a 'swift-flowing, deep and wide' stream. However, Bruce's men were able to capture it easily before it could be accomplished, chasing down and killing any remaining enemies on the hillside.

The Armies

There is no record of the composition of the armies. However Barbour does state that Bruce's men were lightly armoured and well equipped, and, given the terrain and tactics adopted, it is likely that the men under MacDougall were similarly armed. Barbour notes that Bruce had a contingent of archers with him which were placed under command of James Douglas during the battle.

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Numbers

As with other battles from this period, numbers are difficult to ascertain. Only rough estimates survive in a letter by John of Lorne to Edward II and the writings of Barbour. Both estimations are provided by the opposing sides rather than from friendly sources.

AAM Duncan notes in his translation of Barbour's *'The Bruce'* (1997: 350) that a letter from John of Lorne to Edward II, which in his opinion relates to Bruce's preparations in 1308, suggests the Bruce had between 10-15,000 men preparing to invade his territory. In contrast John states he has 800, with no support from the Barons of Argyll. The figures for the Bruce are more than twice the estimated number of regular troops available to him at Bannockburn and undoubtedly inflated. In the same letter it is apparent John is concerned about rumours relating to his loyalty to Edward. He may have been motivated to inflate the numbers and make his situation appear more desperate to encourage Edward II to send some form of support and, in the event of a successful defence against Bruce, to make this victory more impressive. Similar motivations may have caused John to play down his own numbers and exaggerate the lack of support amongst his Barons. It is also possible that the letter was written after the battle to pre-empt accusations of incompetence or disloyalty without revealing the gravity of his situation.

On Line 10, Book 10 of *The Bruce*, Barbour notes that Robert had mustered a well-equipped host – notably, however, the number is not given. This suggests that the Bruce heavily outnumbered John, which is also reflected in the adoption of ambush tactics by the Argyll men to even the disparity in numbers. A significant numerical advantage would have made the tactics adopted by Bruce viable without exposing his force to unnecessary risk. On Line 14 of Book 10, Barbour notes that John knew of Bruce's preparations to invade his territory, and that in response John raised 2,000 men to oppose Bruce and ambush him at Ben Cruachan. Given the bias in the records and the limited nature of 14th-century warfare it is more likely that the numbers would have been c.3000 -5000 for Bruce (he is thought to have had around 3000 men at Inverurie) while John may have had c.800 -1500 men.

Losses

The number of losses are not recorded; however, Barbour notes that John of Lorne suffered heavy casualties while the Bruce's were light thanks to their greater mobility and light armour. John's men were apparently attacked from downhill to the front and uphill to the rear, which would have limited avenues of escape. Barbour also notes the bravery of the Lorne men, stating they put up a 'stubborn and bold defence like men' which suggests there may have been heavy fighting despite the odds. Alternatively, this may be an artistic flair provided by Barbour to make the Bruce's victory sound more impressive.

Barbour notes that Bruce killed all the enemies that he could, and that their rout was impeded by 'a stream that ran down by the hillside... swift flowing, deep and wide, so that men couldn't cross it at any point except at a bridge beneath them'. Duncan considers that 'down by the hillside' or rather 'ran doun be the hillis syd' could mean 'beside the hill' and this may be the River Awe which is described by Barbour (1997: 364).

It is also noted by Barbour that the bridge across the stream was captured by Bruce's troops soon into the rout, preventing the retreating force from breaking it down and impeding his advance. Barbour also states that John of Lorne watched his men 'killed and chased on the hill' from his galley, which suggests high casualties were inflicted.



Action

No further information

Aftermath and Consequences

Following the victory Bruce advanced deep into MacDougall lands and laid siege to Dunstaffnage Castle, capturing it in 1308 or 1309. As a result, Alexander of Argyll, Chief of the Macdougalls, came into the King's Peace. However Alexander and his son, John of Lorne, were to leave Scotland soon after and by 1310 were in the service of Edward II. It is likely that Bruce stayed in Argyll for the remainder of 1308 solidifying his western power base while his supporters and old enemies in Argyll paid him homage. According to local legend, a 'parliament' was held by Bruce in 1308 or 1309 at Ardchattan Priory, and may have been the final parliament to be held in Gaelic. This increase in support for Bruce in the West allowed him to focus on challenging English power in Scotland, leading to his most famous victory at Bannockburn six years later.

Bruce's victory at the Pass of Brander/Ben Cruachan has been compared to his victory at the Battle of Old Byland (1322), Yorkshire. During this action, the commander of the English forces, John of Brittany, Earl of Richmond, had deployed his forces in a formidable position on Scawton Moor. Seeing that his enemy's flanks were guarded by steep cliffs, Bruce sent a detachment of Highlanders up and behind the Earl of Richmond's forces while his main body moved up the hill, catching the English in a vice and forcing them to rout.

Events & Participants

The battle was a significant turning point in the Wars of Independence for Robert Bruce; Brander/Ben Cruachan was part of a string of victories against his rivals for the crown which would eventually lead to Bannockburn and secure his kingship.

According to *'The Bruce'* by John Barbour (Book 10), a number of historical characters present at the battle are noted by name. 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 Methven 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 south-west 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 settlement was finally signed in 1328 under the Treaty of Edinburgh-Northampton.

John MacDougall of Lorne was the son of Alexander of Argyll and Scottish magnate. John played a central role in the expansion of MacDougall power during the wars of independence in the West of Scotland, inflicting defeats on the Campbell Clan at the Battle of the Red Ford and on Bruce at Dalrigh. Following defeat at the Pass of Brander/Ben Cruachan, John went into exile, serving the King of England, Edward II. His holdings on Loch Awe and Lorne were given to the Campbell's who would become the dominant clan in Argyll for centuries.

James Douglas served as one of Robert the Bruce's most trusted knights and generals, and is a central figure in Barbour's poem *'The Bruce'*. Known to allies as 'The Good Sir James' and to his enemies as the Black Douglas, he played a major role in many of the most important engagements in the First War of Independence. After Bruce's death, Douglas took the king's heart with him on crusade, fulfilling a vow the king himself had made. Douglas was killed in battle in 1330, while part of a crusade against the Nasrid forces of Sultan Muhammed IV of Granada in southern Spain, possibly during the battle of Teba.

Sir Alexander Fraser was a prominent knight of the Kingdom of Scotland, who married the sister of Robert I, Mary Bruce. Fraser served as Lord Chamberlain of Scotland and Sherriff of Stirling. He died at the Battle of Dupplin Moor in 1332 during the Second War of Independence.

Little is known about Sir William Wiseman, but it can be surmised that this is the same William Wiseman who was appointed Sherrif of Elgin in 1305 by Edward I. This suggests he must have defected after the death of Edward I, likely during Bruce's Harrying of the North.

Sir Andrew Gray was the Third Baron of Broxmouth and close associate of Robert I. Granted lands in Argyll following the victory at the Pass of Brander/Ben Cruachan.

The battle appears to be unique during the First War of Independence because of the ambush and counter-ambush tactics adopted by both sides, as well as the coordination of a lightly armed but swift outflanking force led by Douglas. If the events occurred as described by Barbour, it demonstrates Robert I's growing tactical experience as well as the quality and discipline of the men under his command during this period.

The cairns at Fanans have long been associated with the battle and cairns or cairn fields associated with battlefields are recorded elsewhere – see for example: <https://canmore.org.uk/site/12728/blar-nam-feinne>. However, the research for this report concluded that they represent prehistoric clearance cairns interspersed with some larger prehistoric burial cairns,

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 Cinaed Mac Alpin [Kenneth Macalpine] in 843 AD, although parts of the 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

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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.

The guardians of Scotland 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 November 17, 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 had been primogeniture, and John's claim was the better one under that system.

John's coronation as king was the start of his problems. Edward had clearly seen the election process as a route to bring Scotland under his control, and behaved towards John as his feudal overlord, 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 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. Wallace and Moray continued the fight against Edward and

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were able to resist him quite effectively, particularly with the victory of Stirling Bridge in 1297, but Philip provided no assistance and instead made 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 inaugurate 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 also returned to the mainland in early 1307 at Turnberry, and he now switched to a guerrilla campaign, 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 then mounted another invasion, but the English King died at Burgh-by-Sands in Cumbria in July before crossing 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.

By 1308 both John of Lorne and Bruce were experienced commanders and it is probable that there was a personal animosity between them. In the 1290s, during the chaotic reign of John Balliol, the MacDougalls defeated the Campbells of Loch Awe and killed their chief, close allies to the Bruce, somewhere near the String of Lorne at the Battle of the Red Ford. Following the battle, Innis Chonnel castle in the south of Loch Awe came into the possession of the MacDougalls; presumably a significant blow to Campbell influence in the area. It is likely that the MacDougalls took advantage of the power vacuum in Scotland during this period, displacing other powerful clans in Argyll and becoming important allies of Edward I. John of Lorn was a cousin of John III 'Red' Comyn of Badenoch, and the murder of the Red Comyn in a church in 1306 by Bruce was a highly condemnable act in Medieval Scotland. There was also considerable rivalry between the MacDougalls of Argyll and the MacDonalds of Islay. The MacDonalds were key allies of the Bruce; a young Robert appears on a witness list Alexander Og MacDonald, suggesting the Bruce family continued the Gaelic tradition of Carrick to send young males to live with other noble families. The MacDonalds played an important role protecting the king while he was effectively a fugitive between 1306 and 1307.

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John of Lorne played no small part placing Bruce in the dire situation the king found himself during 1307. The previous year, Bruce was defeated by a smaller English/Comyn force at the Battle of Methven after failing to take precautions against a surprise attack. Bruce fled westwards with the remnants of his forces, perhaps to seek refuge with pro-Bruce clans in the Western Highlands. Likely infuriated over the murder of his cousin and pro-Bruce sentiment amongst their rivals the MacDonalds and Campbells, John of Lorne prepared an ambush for Bruce at Dalrigh, near Tyndrum. According to legend the battle was nearly disastrous for the King; at one point during the battle he found himself cut off, with the MacDougall men close enough to Bruce to be able to tear off his studded brooch. The brooch apparently remained a MacDougall, and later a Campbell, heirloom for centuries.

After these serious setbacks Bruce retreated across Kintyre and into hiding. Bruce and his closest followers returned in 1307 to begin a guerrilla war. This would mark a turning point for Bruce with the imperious Edward I dying that year en-route to Scotland, marking the beginning of a long campaign which would see Comyn support crushed across Scotland in a brutal civil war. By 1308, with the Harrying of the North and Argyll underway, it is clear that John of Lorne was beginning to find his situation untenable. Only the support from a newly crowned and deeply distracted Edward II may have saved the MacDougalls from disaster. Unsurprisingly the support never came. Instead it appears John of Lorne took matters into his own hands, deploying his forces in an ambush position on Ben Cruachan, perhaps in an attempt to repeat his success two years previously at Dalrigh. In a letter to Edward II, a scribe explains John's situation in 1308;

“Robert de Bruce had approached [John’s] territories with 10,000 or 15,000 men, it was said, both by land and see. He had no more than 800 to oppose him, 500 of these being in his pay to keep his borders, and the barons of Argyll gave him no aid. Robert de Bruce had asked a truce from him, which he granted for a short space... until the King [Edward II] sends him succors.

“He hears that Robert, when he came, was boasting and saying that the writer had come to his peace at the report that many others would rise in his aid, which God and the writer know is not true. Should the king hear this from others, he is not to believe it, for he is and will ever be ready to serve him to the utmost of his power. He has three castles to guard and a loch 24 leagues long on which he has vessels properly manned, but is not sure of his neighbours.”

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 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 the 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 re-captured castles. Edward raised a

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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 recaptured 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, gaining Bruce papal recognition as King in 1324. However, despite his defeat at Bannockburn and his ongoing 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 Pass of Brander is a key strategic route of access to Lorne and the Atlantic coast from the west. This is demonstrated by numerous fortifications and castles located on and around Loch Awe dating between prehistory to the early-modern period, including well-known medieval sites such as Kilchurn and Fraoch Eilean Castles. Prehistoric defensive sites such as duns and crannogs are also common monuments on and near the loch. An earlier battle, the Battle of the Red Ford, is recorded to have taken place in 1294 to the east of Loch Awe between the Campbells and the MacDougals who were led by John of Lorne - although the exact location is not known. A second battle at the north-western end of the Pass of Brander is also recorded by the Ordnance Survey in their 19th-century mapping of the Pass of Brander. This dates to an engagement between William Wallace and an Irish Agent of Edward I known as McFayden or McPhaidan in 1300, recorded by the 15th-century bard Blind Harry. Local legend notes that McFayden was defeated in this engagement, and was forced to flee across the river. There was a large stone in the middle of the River Brander, possibly now removed through demolition, known locally as the McFayden stone. According to legend McFayden retreated to the stone after the battle and removed his armour to swim to the opposite bank, while Wallace and his men threw insults. He then hid in a cave, known as McFayden's Cave, on the opposite shore before being hunted down and killed.

Barbour does not provide an exact location for the 1308 battle in *The Bruce*, but does describe the landscape within which the action took place, and states that it occurred on or near to the slopes of Ben Cruachan. The battlefield may be within two general locations; the northern side of Loch Awe on the southern slopes of the Ben at the Pass of Brander, or the southern side of Loch Etive on the northern slopes of the Ben near Barran Dubh.

As a result the exact location of the fighting has not been identified with certainty. Both locations noted above depend on which direction Bruce advanced to Dunstaffnage from Aberdeen; either via Loch Awe through Glen Orchy or Glen Lochy, or through Moray and Loch Etive via the Great Glen. Currently no known artefacts which may relate to the battle have been discovered, and there are no records for human remains recovered within the area that may relate to the battle.

Duncan, who published a translation of Barbour's epic poem, was of the opinion that the battle took place on the north face of Ben Cruachan between the mountain itself

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and Loch Etive. This originates from John of Lorn's description of the land he was protecting against Bruce; "I have three castles to keep as well as a loch 24 miles long..." this description appears to fit with Loch Etive, however it may also apply to Loch Awe where there are a number of medieval castles, and which is approximately 24 miles in length. This is further complicated by Barbour, who places John of Lorn's galley on the 'sea' - if taken literally this would apply to a salt water location rather than a fresh water one, which Barbour would likely have differentiated, and thus suggests the battle was fought by Loch Etive. MacDonald agrees with the location by Loch Etive, however this creates a discrepancy with his proposed route of approach for Bruce. He states that Bruce approached from the southern end of Loch Awe, through the Pass of Brander, to fight the battle on Loch Etive. However, the landscape where the Pass of Brander meets Loch Etive does not match Barbour's description, meaning Bruce would have had to turn north along Loch Etive for some distance, and away from his ultimate destination of Dunstaffnage Castle, to engage MacDougall's forces in the manner described, when Bruce would have had no real need to approach the ambush site at all in this circumstance. Brown (2008, 34) also suggests that Bruce approached Dunstaffnage via the Pass of Brander, by suggesting he travelled from Aberdeen through Breadalbane, possibly via Loch Tay or Balquhiddy, and then north along the drover routes through Glen Orchy or Glen Lochy, but placing the battle in the Pass of Brander itself, which removes the discrepancy in MacDonald.

Barbour also describes a bridge across a 'wide and fast' stream which the Lorne men retreated to during the rout. If Bruce was advancing from the east to west, it is likely this stream would be to the west of the battlefield and 'below' the location where the Lorne men had prepared their ambush. There is no shortage of rivers or streams on Ben Cruachan, but there are fewer which may be indicative of one described by Barbour. One is the Allt Cruachan, which forms the Falls of Brander at lower levels. During the site visit it was noted that the Falls formed a massive crevasse and would certainly have been impassable on the lower slopes of the ben without a bridge. A second possibility is that the Allt Brander, or the River Brander itself is the stream referred to by Barbour, and the bridge may have been located near Fanans, the traditional site associated with the battle. A third site lies between Loch Etive and the northern slopes of Ben Cruachan, with the stream being the River Noe or one of the smaller watercourses leading from the Ben into the Loch.

Possible sites

Three possible sites have been identified following site visits – one below the Cruachan Hydroelectric Dam near the Falls of Cruachan, a second incorporating the traditional site of the battlefield at Fanans and a third on the northern slopes of Ben Cruachan at Barran Dubh. The merits of each of these are explained below.

Falls of Cruachan

The area directly to the east of the Falls of Cruachan is one of the possible locations. There is a steep hillock directly to the east of the Falls just below the modern access track to the Cruachan Reservoir, which would have provided ideal ground for the deployment of the MacDougal Forces. It is relatively flat, easily enough to deploy a medium sized body of men, and also within easy sight of Loch Awe for communication with galleys, high enough to provide a distinct defensive advantage and close enough to roll rocks onto the old route northwest through the Pass of Brander. There are also numerous concealed natural route ways above Coille Leitire which would have provided excellent terrain for Douglas to move a large force undetected above the MacDougalls. Of particular note is a large gorge or pass up the southern slope of Beinn a' Bhuiridh which is visible as soon as the mountain comes

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into view if travelling from the east near Strath of Orchy. It would have been an obvious route to pick out in the landscape even at dusk or dawn, and terminates just above the Falls of Cruachan near the modern access path.

The old drove route, now overlain by a military road, narrows at this point. It is the first place which matches Barbour's description if travelling northwest through the Pass, and would have provided an excellent location to halt Bruce before advancing too far into MacDougall territory. Although the drop on the southern side towards the loch is not as steep as described by Barbour, the water level within the pass has risen since the installation of the hydro works, and so there may have been a steeper drop in the past. There is also a modern bridge spanning the Falls of Cruachan, at the bottom of the slope close where it meets Loch Awe, and which appears to be located overlaying an earlier bridge. From the site visit it was noted that the steep gorge of the Falls extended approximately 10m in depth at the foot of the mountain, and it would be impossible to cross in this area without some form of a bridge.

Pass of Brander/Fanans Further west into the Pass of Brander offers another potential location for the battle.

The Ordnance Survey (OS) marks the battle at the western end of the Pass, on the southern side of the River Awe. The OS also places the battle between Wallace and MacFayden, 8 years before Bruce's invasion of Argyll, approximately 0.5km to the north. Although there are issues with Blind Harry's accounts of the Wallace battle – many of his stories about Wallace, written centuries after the events, do not match contemporary historical sources – so it is plausible that the two actions have overlapped in local legend, which may indicate that a significant action did take place somewhere within the vicinity of the battles marked on 1st edition OS maps.

The old drove route, also under the military road, moves slightly higher up the slope within the pass. Although the route has been altered through the construction of the Oban-Tyndrum rail line, it would have been undoubtedly been a narrow route across the hill with a steep slope towards the water on its southern side. Above this route sits Binnein Brander, which forms a natural parapet and would have provided a suitable hiding place for a large force preparing for an ambush. Although a considerable distance higher than the old route way (2-300m) marked on modern maps as the military road, the extreme gradient of the slope would allow any ambushers to roll rocks down the hill with ease. However it would also have made it extremely difficult for Bruce to advance up the hill to engage the ambushers as described by Barbour.

The Pass of Brander provides two potential locations for the medieval bridge noted in Barbour's sources. Firstly, it is possible that there was a bridge across the Allt Brander, which runs down the hill directly to the western side of Binnein Brander, which the MacDougall men ran to following the counter-ambush. If the bridge was at the Allt Brander, it would have had to be located some distance lower down the hill, likely on the route which Bruce would have had to take. This would provide Bruce's forces enough time to capture the bridge before the Lorne men had time to destroy it.

The second possibility is that the bridge was in fact across the River Awe at Fanans, close to the modern barrage and the recorded location of the MacFayden stone. Local tradition, as well as the National Monument Records of Scotland and the local Historic Environment Record, link a large number of prehistoric clearance and burial cairns on the southern bank of the river, just west of the barrage, to the battle. The general assumption is that the cairns mark the graves of those killed in the battle, however the cairns were visited during the assessment and almost certainly relate to field clearance. There were also larger cairns located within the vicinity of the clearance cairns which appear likely to be prehistoric burials. Many walkways are

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visible down to the river bank to the north of the cairns, and an obvious route appears to travel east-west through the cairns towards the modern barrage. According to the landowner, the river in this area would likely have been fordable before the water levels were altered by the hydro works. It is possible that the stories relating to the soldiers graves, a fording point connected to the possible Wallace/MacFayden battle and a possible historic crossing point suggest that the bridge noted by Barbour was across the River Awe near Fanans, and that the rout carried on across the fields on the other side towards Dunstaffnage. If the Bruce did capture a bridge across the River Awe he would control final natural barrier to the heart of MacDougall territory.

Loch Etive/Barran Dubh

The final site identified during the assessment is to the north of Ben Cruachan at Barran Dubh, and has been proposed as the location of the battle by historians due to a number of factors;

Loch Etive also fits the description of the land guarded by John of Lorne in his letter to Edward II; it is 24 miles long, has three castles which may have been in MacDougall hands and it has access to the Atlantic, which would make it an ideal location to construct galleys and to use them to support military action. In Barbour's description of the battle, he notes that John had deployed his galley 'on the sea'. AAM Duncan notes in his translation (p361) that Barbour was being literal in his description, and was differentiating between a fresh water loch, such as Loch Awe, and the sea, such as Loch Etive. MacDonald agrees with this proposal on the location of the battle, but as noted above, there is an issue combining this with the proposed route of approach through the Pass of Brander that MacDonald also argues for the modern track connecting Glencoe with Inverawe may overlie an older route, at least partly, as there are few alternatives routes it could follow. It was noted during the site visit that this road travels close to the northern base of Barran Dubh, a steep rocky crag on the northern slopes of Ben Cruachan. At this location the route narrows considerably, with a dramatic drop on the northern side of the mountain down towards Loch Etive. If it does follow an older route it would fit very well with the description of the place of the ambush provided by Barbour.

For the engagement to have taken place to the north of Ben Cruachan, Bruce would almost certainly have advanced from the north, possibly along the shore of Loch Etive or along Glencoe itself, in contrast to the route through the Pass of Brander. In order to have reached Lorne from Aberdeen with his army within two weeks, Bruce would have had to travel through Moray and down the Great Glen, both areas that had been ravaged the previous year, causing supply problems. It would also have required Bruce to move his army unsupported down Glen Etive, a centre of MacDougall power, and along the shore of Loch Etive, presumably flanked along the way by MacDougall galleys.

Although no major streams were identified which would have impeded an advance to the southwest from Barran Dubh during the site visit, it is possible that, as Barbour doesn't ascribe distances or other geographical details, the Lorn men retreated some distance to a bridge over the River Awe, presumably near Taynuilt – where a crossing point over the Awe is recorded on 18th-century mapping by John Ainslie (1789). In this case, the battle would have extended far along the southern shore of Loch Etive as the Bruce's forces chased down fleeing MacDougalls, who may have rallied in groups to fight delaying actions, to help the attempt to demolish the bridge before Bruce's force reached it.. Such extensive routs are not unknown; notably the rout of the Scottish forces at Pinkie Cleugh, which extended from the outskirts of modern Musselburgh to Edinburgh.

Location

www.historicenvironment.scot

Historic Environment Scotland, Longmore House, Salisbury
Place, Edinburgh, EH9 1SH

Historic Environment Scotland
Scottish Charity **No. SC045925**
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No further information

Terrain

No further information

Condition

No further information

Archaeological and Physical Remains and Potential

Material from 14th-century battles primarily consist of steel or iron equipment in addition to organic materials such as leather, wool and wood. There is some potential for non-ferrous metal artefacts such as decorative elements of high status armour, religious icons or coins. However, no finds relating to the action have been recorded by the Treasure Trove Unit (TTU) or the West of Scotland Archaeology Service (WoSAS).

According to Barbour, the flanking force under Douglas included a large number of archers. He also notes that they attacked the ambushers from above with arrows before closing in with hand weapons to complete the rout. As a result there is some potential for arrowheads or other projectiles, the patterning of which may provide an indicator of numbers and possible tactics utilised in the action. Additionally, the presence of a bridge recorded by Barbour may help identify the site, but archaeological evidence for medieval crossing points along the Pass or further north over the River Awe are currently unknown.

The Soil PH is low to moderate acidic, with blanket peat above 300-450m. This would suggest poor potential for preservation of ferrous artefacts such as weaponry/armour fragments or arrowheads (Morris & Foard, 2012, 147-154). However, above 300-400m the low oxygen content within the blanket peat would provide suitable preservation for organic materials. These would only be identified through targeted excavation and geophysical or geochemical survey, which would be difficult in such conditions. Currently there is no known archaeological evidence which may relate to the battlefield. A review of artefacts held by local museums or local history groups may identify previously unknown artefacts which may relate to the action. The steepness of the southern slopes of Ben Cruachan suggests that hill wash since the 14th century has the potential to move stratified artefacts a considerable distance, thus removing the potential for artefact patterning and making it difficult to determine locations with certainty.

As the Argyll men were attacked from two sides this would suggest high numbers of casualties were inflicted during the rout. This in turn suggests a higher potential for artefacts. No surveys have been undertaken focusing on the battle. However, some potential locations for the action have been covered by archaeological assessment, primarily in relation to the Cruachan renewable energy schemes and associated infrastructure.

The Pass of Brander is covered by Phase 1 LiDAR survey data held by the Scottish Government. In some cases LiDAR can assist location archaeological features within areas of peat. However a study of 1m resolution Digital Terrain Model and Digital Surface Model data processed through Hillshade Relief Models, Local Relief Models

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and Slope models did not reveal anything which may indicate battlefield-related features, such as burial pits or mounds.

The construction of the 18th-century Dalmally to Bonawe Military Road, the A85, the Glasgow-Oban railway line and the Cruachan Hydro Station may have disturbed or removed archaeological remains below 200 m OD. An examination of 1940s aerial photographs was carried out to gauge the extent of change. It was noted from staff working in the hydro works (pers. comms) that the construction of the barrage had raised the water level within the Pass considerably, which is why sections of the A85 are now raised. It is possible that this change in water level has significantly altered the battlefield and the hydrology of the surrounding landscape.

Cultural Association

There is a memorial to Robert the Bruce in St Conan's beside the Falls of Cruachan (LB4700), a 19th-century A-Listed Kirk, which commemorates his victory in the battle. The memorial also contains a fragment of bone from Bruce, taken from his grave in Dunfermline Abbey.

Commemoration and Interpretation

An interpretation board for the battle is located within the car park of the Cruachan Hydro Station visitor centre. However, at least some of the information on the board is inaccurate, particularly a suggestion that Brander translates from the Gaelic word for place of ambush, *brannraidh*, which in fact is the word for a trivet. (There are multiple Gaelic words for ambush / ambushing, but none are feasible as the origin of the name Pass of Brander.)

Full Bibliography

Information on Sources and Publications

The Battle of the Pass of Brander is not widely documented in either primary or secondary sources and no rigorous modern assessment of the battlefield has been attempted other than this report. The background to the conflict is illustrated by the Scottish poet, John Barbour, in his work *The Bruce*. With regards to the battle action, neither the primary nor secondary sources provide much detail of the fighting. There are also multiple discrepancies between some of the different accounts. Other than this research for the Inventory of Historic Battlefields, there does not appear to have been any recent academic work focussed specifically on the battle, although a number of secondary sources include some mention of it as part of the wider context of Bruce and the Wars of Independence.

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