English Heritage Battlefield Report: Halidon Hill 1333

Halidon Hill (19 July 1333)

Parish: Berwick-upon-Tweed

District: Berwick-upon-Tweed

County: Northumberland

Grid Ref: NU 969545 (centred on the battle Monument)

Historical Context

The Treaty of Northampton of 1328 is traditionally viewed as bringing to a close the Scottish wars of independence, of which the Battle of Bannockburn (1314) was the decisive event. But the interval of peace was short. In 1329 Robert the Bruce, King of Scotland, died, leaving a minor as his heir. Three years later a rival claimant to the Scottish crown, Edward Balliol, with the secret backing of King Edward III of England, invaded Scotland and seized power. Balliol however was within a few months deposed in turn by a coup and he fled to Carlisle. Edward III now prepared to give more overt support to his client, who in return affirmed an earlier promise to cede substantial tracts of Scottish territory to England. The chief concession by Balliol was the town of Berwick, which had been in Scottish hands since 1318. It was to secure this prize that in May 1333 Edward III arrived in person to conduct the siege.

The Scots attempted to draw Edward away from Berwick by conducting raids deep into England, but Edward was not to be deflected from his aim. Eventually, the Scottish authorities in Berwick appealed for a truce and after some dispute about what was to constitute a breaking of the siege it was agreed that if, by 19 July, the Scottish had not done one of three things i.e. won a pitched battle, effected a crossing of a stipulated stretch of the River Tweed or inserted 200 men-at-arms into the town, Berwick would surrender.

In reality the only option open to Sir Archibald Douglas, who led the Scottish field army, was to fight a battle and hope that, even if the English remained undefeated, at least 200 men-at-arms might be able to force their way into Berwick. To this end, on the last day possible,19 July 1333, he made his move. From Halidon Hill, the height to the north which dominates Berwick, the English commanded the approaches to the town. Only by occupying the even higher ridge now known as Witches' Knowe a mile further to the north could Douglas hope to secure equally advantageous ground. Unfortunately, under the terms of the convention governing the relief of Berwick the onus was on him to attack, so he could not remain on the defensive. This fact was to dictate both the form the Battle of Halidon Hill took and its outcome.

Location and Description of the Battlefield

Halidon Hill lies two miles to the north-west of Berwick-upon-Tweed. While a number of chroniclers such as the continuator of Walter of Hemingburgh and Adam of Murimuth simply mention that a battle took place at Berwick, sufficient refer to Halidon by name to make it clear that this is where the battle was fought (e.g. the Canon of Bridlington, Geoffrey le Baker and the *Brut*)[1]. The *Chronicon de Melsa* states explicitly that when the advance of the Scots was reported, King Edward and Edward Balliol occupied a place for battle at Halidon Hill, a mile from Berwick (*Quorum adventu cognito, rex Angliae Edwardus et Edwardus de Balliolo locum certaminis apud Halydon Hylle, ad unum milliare prope Berwicum, praeoccuperunt...*)[2]. As regards the Scots more than one account remarks that they drew up in a place called 'Bothul' or 'Bothulle' near Halidon, which Ranald Nicholson, in the most scholarly recent work on the battle, identifies as the high ground at Witches' Knowe[3].

Halidon Hill battlefield is today entirely given over to agriculture. There is a pig farm on the hill's western slope. Large bales of hay dot the fields of Witches' Knowe in the distance, even in December.

Landscape Evolution

There is little evidence of what the landscape looked like before the Parliamentary Enclosure landscape, which still exists today, was established at some time before 1849. The only significant place name - Bogend - indicates that the area between the hills on which the Scots and English drew up was boggy. The battlefield area is an natural amphitheatre surrounded by hills on three sides. The bottom of this bowl, despite opening eastwards, would still have been ill-drained. There is no evidence of any old fields, hedge lines, or woodland. It is necessary to assume that Halidon Hill in 1333 was rough upland grazing or waste for nearby agricultural communities in the Tweed Valley.

The Parliamentary Enclosure landscape is still remarkably intact. Some farms have disappeared (e.g. Stony Moor Riggs) recently. The water storage reservoir is now empty but the dam still remains. Just outside the battlefield area Home Covert still remains but Cockit Hat Plantation is derelict with only a few Scots Pines remaining.

The Battle and the Sources

A large number of chronicles of the period contain accounts of the Battle of Halidon Hill. Some, to the detriment of their description of the course of the battle and the tactics employed, concentrate on providing details of what readers of the time wanted to know: who was at the battle and who was killed. The continuator of the 'Hemingburgh' chronicle, in particular, supplies a lengthy list of the Scottish notables present at the battle and little else[4].

There is, however, sufficient information contained in the various chronicles as a whole to enable the events of the Battle of Halidon Hill to be reconstructed. According to the Canon of Bridlington it was 9am on the morning of 19 July that the English scouts reported to Edward III the approach of the Scots. The enemy had left Duns at dawn. Edward, in expectation of the Scots attempting a relief of Berwick on the last day open to them, had already detached 500 men-at-arms, plus archers and foot-soldiers, to maintain the blockade of the town. The remainder of the army was divided into three divisions. The Canon continues:

> The first of these was commanded by the marshal [the Earl of Norfolk] and his brother John de Eltham Earl of Cornwall, Henry de Beaumont, Earl of Buchan, and Edward de Bohun acting on behalf of the Earl of Hereford. David Earl of Atholl was in command of the right wing of this division, next to the sea, and the Earl of Angus, Gilbert de Umfraville, similar command to the left wing. The King of England commanded the centre, which had wings, as described above; and he assigned the third division, also with wings as described above, to Balliol, the King of Scots. Archers were assigned to each wing; and as the chief and supposed cause of immediate battle was that 200 horsemen [i.e. men-at-arms] ... ought to enter the town that day, the king carefully chose out horsemen who would fight together and stop the sally of the enemy[5].

This description of the English dispositions is of considerable interest in the light of the development of tactics subsequently used in Edward III's French wars. The reference to the wings containing archers (a detail that the *Brut* echoes: 'and tho hade euery Englisshe bataile ii wenges of pris Archiers'[6]) suggests an early adoption of the formation which saw wedges of archers protrude from the line of battle, thus ensuring that attackers were caught in a deadly crossfire. Technically, the archers were said to be disposed *en herse*. At Crécy and Poitiers this defensive formation was strengthened by the presence of dismounted knights and men-at-arms. It was the same at Halidon Hill. The *Brut* , amongst others, noted that the English were arrayed 'forto feight on foot

ageynes her Enemys'.

The Scots too elected to dismount their men-at-arms and knights for the coming battle. Their horses were sent away to the other side of Witches' Knowe (which the Canon of Bridlington identifies incorrectly as Halidon Hill). In deciding upon this step the Scottish commander, Sir Achibald Douglas, was probably swayed by his view of the ground: the bog between the Scots and the enemy curtailed the opportunity for mounted action; it would help if his men-at-arms could act in close support of the lightly armoured Scottish spearmen.

The chroniclers are at odds about whether the Scots were drawn up in three or four divisions prior to the battle. The Lanercost Chronicle, Henry Knighton, the Canon of Bridlington, the *Polychronicon*, of Ranulph Higden and the *Chronicon de Melsa* favour three; the Anonimalle Chronicle, the Hemingburgh continuation and the *Brut* plump for four. Almost uniformly those that cite four divisions supply the longest list of names of Scottish dignitaries present at the battle. The issue has been addressed recently by Wendy R Childs and John Taylor in their introduction to the new edition of the Anonimalle Chronicle and their verdict is twofold. Either the insistence of some chronicles on four divisions is due to a misapprehension, with a sub-unit enumerated as a separate division, or alternatively, given the detailed nature of the lists which these particular chronicles provide, the Scots *did* attempt an innovative order of battle, which most chroniclers, being used to the description of three divisions, failed to record[7].

Whatever formation was adopted the problem for the Scots remained: they had to attack that day, across a bog and uphill. The battle's preliminaries were similarly inauspicious for the Scots. Geoffrey le Baker describes a single combat between a giant Scotsman called Turnbull and a Norfolk knight, Robert Benhale. Although of only average stature the Englishman won easily[8].

Since the Scots were to have more cause to remember the part played by the bog in the battle than the English it is not surprising that it should be a Scottish chronicler who gives it prominence. Andrew of Wyntoun's vernacular poem - given here shorn of its brogue - also lays emphasis on the fact that the slope (the steepness of which is exaggerated) greatly favoured the English:

On Saint Margaret the Virgin's Day
All arrayed to fight were they
But they considered not the place [plas];
For a great bog between them was,
On either side hills stand [stay]:
At that great bog assembled they,
Where they [who] wished first down to go [ga],
Afterwards on their face climb up a hill [bra - i.e. *brae*]
Where a man might discomfit three;
But [that] they could not before see.
For they all, that assembled there,
Right suddenly discomfited were[9].

The Scots waited until after midday before attacking. The Anonimalle Chronicle explains the reason for the delay.

> And the Scots stood quietly and did not wish to fight against the King of England and his forces and this was because they did not want to move from there until the River Tweed was at full flood tide, because they then well imagined that they might drive the King of England and his men into the River Tweed or into the sea to drown them[10].

The period of waiting gave King Edward the opportunity to address his men and boost morale. While the Canon of Bridlington contents himself with putting a speech in the King's mouth, the Anonimalle Chronicle

puts Edward's actions in context. The numerical superiority of the Scots was such that the English soldiers required reassurance.

> But the Scots had so great an army and such a great force that when the English saw them they were very cast down. This was because the army of their Scottish enemies was so great and so strong compared with the English army which was then only small, but King Edward of England rode about everywhere among his army and encouraged his men well and nobly, and generously promised them good reward provided that they conducted themselves well against the great multitude of their Scottish enemies.

The Anonimalle Chronicle puts the Scottish numbers at 80,000. While the *Chronicon de Melsa* inflates the total to 90,000 (on which basis the Scots are held to have outnumbered the English three to one) the majority of sources reckon the Scots at 60,000[11]. For example, the Lanercost Chronicle informs us that King Edward brought 30,000 picked men to Berwick, but they were outnumbered two to one by their opponents: the Scots therefore fielded 60,000 men[12]. Generally, however, these totals have been regarded as gross exaggerations. Indeed, Sir Charles Oman cites with approval 'the very moderate and probable figures of twelve hundred men-at-arms and thirteen thousand five hundred pikemen' given as the Scottish strength by the Hemingburgh continuator, who proves very much a lone voice[13].

Eventually the Scottish troops marched down to the bog and began to ascend Halidon Hill. They saw that Edward Balliol's division was on the left of the English line 'so the Scots diverted their course in order that they might first meet and attack the division of him who, not without right, laid claim to the kingdom'. But the Scottish division on that flank, under the Earl of Moray, 'were so grievously wounded in the face and blinded by the host of English archery ... that they were helpless, and quickly began to turn away their faces from the arrow flights and to fall'. Indeed, Balliol's men had broken the first Scottish division 'before the others came into action at all'[14].

In the centre King Edward's division dealt with its immediate opponents in like fashion. It was on the right of the English line, nearest the sea, that the heaviest fighting occurred. Here, under Sir Archibald Douglas's own hand, were the men intended to fight their way through to Berwick. The Canon of Bridlington provides the details.

> The troop of Scots in which the best soldiers were placed, who were to enter the town, rushed with the ferocity of a lion against the foremost English line. A bloody battle developed there; for the Scots struggled to reach the town, and wanted to fulfil their oath; on the other hand the English resisted manfully. So most of the day was spent, until the English, by Divine favour, finally prevailed, and obtained the victory. In this prolonged struggle there perished 500 of the strongest and the choicest of all the people of Scotland, in the spot called by the local inhabitants "Hevyside"[15].

Defeat was complete. Efforts to stem the rout were fruitless: 'meny a tyme the Scottes were gadrede in companyes, but evermore thai were descomfitede'. Andrew of Wyntoun supplies the name of one who continued his resistance longer than most:

> But Hugh the Earl of Ross, they say,
> That assembled in the way,
> Made stalwart and right long fighting,
> That served but of little thing;
> For he was dead, and all his men
> Were near-hand slain about him then[16].

The bloodletting was rendered the greater because the heavily armoured Scottish knights and men-at-arms were

unable to remount their horses. Their steeds, it will be recalled, had been left behind at Witches' Knowe. Unfortunately, the grooms had witnessed the full extent of the defeat from an unrivalled vantage point. The testimony of the *Brut* is here rendered in modern English.

> And when the Scottish knaves saw the discomfiture, and the Scots fall fast to the ground, they pricked their masters' horses with the[ir] spurs to keep them[selves] from peril ... And when the Englishmen saw that, they leapt on their horses, and fast pursued the Scots; and all that abided, they quelled right down. There might men see the doughtiness of the noble King Edward and of his men, how manly [sic] they pursued the Scots, that fled for dread. And there might men see many a Scotsman cast down onto the earth dead, and their banners displayed, and hacked into pieces, and many a good halberd of steel bathed in their blood...[17]

The pursuit continued until nightfall a distance of seven leagues. In keeping with the enormous number of men the Scots were believed to have brought to the battle their casualties were calculated to have been correspondingly large. The *Brut* gave them as 35,712; the Anonimalle Chronicle claimed over 40,000 were killed in battle and flight. Geoffrey le Baker settled for 60,000 slaughtered. The English, in contrast, were said to have lost no more than one knight, one esquire and twelve footman; although, as Ranald Nicholson observed, 'some chroniclers thought these English casualties excessively large and pruned them to seven footmen'[18].

Indication of Importance

Halidon Hill was Edward III's first battle and the only one that he fought in England. At Halidon Hill he witnessed the strength of the defensive combination of archers and dismounted men-at-arms already used to great effect by Edward Balliol the previous year at the Battle of Dupplin Moor in Scotland. In terms of the development of English tactics Halidon Hill is therefore of the greatest importance: Edward would later use the same defensive combination to confound the mounted chivalry of France at the Battles of Crécy and Poitiers.

For a fourteenth-century battle the sources for Halidon Hill are as full as can reasonably be expected. The course of the battle can be reconstructed with a measure of confidence.

Battlefield Area

The battlefield area boundary defines the outer reasonable limit of the battle, taking into account the positions of the combatants at the outset of fighting and the focal area of the battle itself. It does not include areas over which fighting took place subsequent to the main battle. Wherever possible, the boundary has been drawn so that it is easily appreciated on the ground.

From the fields below Witches' Knowe the battlefield boundary (here represented as a dashed line because it falls outside the scope of English Heritage) passes round Crockit Hat Plantation and past the fields above Woodhills before skirting the grounds of Mordington House. Once over the border, the line is routed via New West Farm to the A6105 south-east of Cumberland Bower and continues along the road past Brow of the Hill to the field boundary just short of the next mile post. Having passed round the back of Halidon Hill the battlefield boundary continues between Scuddylaw and west of New East Farm to return to Crockit Hat Plantation. By this means, the battlefield area encompasses the minimum necessary area to allow for the deployment and fighting.

Notes

1. *English Historical Documents 1327-1485* ed. A R Myers (London 1969) p60; *Chronicon Galfridi Le Baker de Swynebroke* ed. Edward Maude Thompson (Oxford 1889) p51; *The Brut or the Chronicles of England* ed. Friedrich W D Brie (Early English Text Society, London 1906-8) i 286.

2. *Chronica Monasterii de Melsa* ed. Edward A Bond, Rolls Series 43 (London 1867) ii 369.

3. *Chronicles, Edward I and Edward II* ed. W Stubbs, Rolls Series 76 (London 1883) ii 291; *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden* ed. J R Lumby, Rolls Series 41 (London 1882) viii 330-1; Nicholson, Ranald *Edward III and the Scots: The Formative Years of a Military Career 1327-35* (Oxford 1965) p132.

4. *Chronicon Domini Walteri de Hemingburgh* English Historical Society (London 1848) i 308-9.

5. *English Historical Documents* op. cit.

6. *Brut* op. cit. p285.

7. *The Anonimalle Chronicle 1307 to 1334* eds. Wendy R Childs and John Taylor *Yorkshire Archaeological Society* no. 147 for 1987 (1991) pp58-9.

8. *Baker* op. cit.

9. *The Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland by Andrew of Wyntoun* ed. David Laing (Edinburgh 1872) ii 401.

10. *Anominalle Chronicle op. cit.* p167.

11. *Chronica Monasterii de Melsa* p370.

12. *Chronicle of Lanercost* translated by Sir Herbert Maxwell Bt. *Scottish Historical Review* ix (1912) pp288-90.

13. Oman, C W C *A History of the Art of War in the Middle Ages* vol. 2 (London 1924) p107.

14. *Lanercost Chronicle* op. cit. p289.

15. *English Historical Documents* op. cit.

16. *Wyntoun* op. cit.

17. *Brut* op. cit.

18. Nicholson op. cit. p137.