English Heritage Battlefield Report: Homildon Hill 1402

Homildon or Humbleton Hill (14 September 1402)

Parish: Akeld

District: Berwick-upon-Tweed

County: Northumberland

Grid Ref: NT 968294 (centred on the Bendor Stone)

Historical Context

Seeing that King Henry IV was preoccupied with the revolt of Owen Glendower in Wales, the new men of influence in Scotland, Robert, Duke of Albany and Archibald, Earl of Douglas, decided to invade England. After initial incursions during June 1402, one of which was defeated by the English at Nesbit in Berwickshire on the 22nd, the main invasion took place in August. The Earl of Douglas led 10,000 men in a raid through Northumberland as far as Newcastle.

The Scots, on their return journey home, headed in the direction of the crossing of the River Tweed at Coldstream. But they were laden with plunder and it was an easy task for the Earl of Northumberland to intercept them. Northumberland, who was accompanied by his famous son Sir Henry Percy (or, as he is better known, 'Harry Hotspur'), barred their path at Milfield, five miles north-west of Wooler.

Location and Description of the Battlefield

The Battle of Homildon Hill took place between one and two miles west of Wooler in Northumberland. Homildon Hill, now called Humbleton Hill, is a foothill of the Cheviots and rises steeply from the plain below to a height of almost a thousand feet. Harehope Hill, from which the English archers poured deadly shot upon the Scots, is of a similar height and a short distance away to the north-west, separated from Humbleton Hill by a steep-sided dale. Beneath both hills to the north is a plain created by the confluence of the River Glen and the River Till.

The upper slopes of Humbleton and Harehope Hills are covered in heather and grazed by sheep. On the lower slopes are fields of pasture and plantations of deciduous trees. There is some arable farming in the fields of the plain near Bendor Crossing.

Humbleton and Harehope Hills have on them a number of prehistoric forts and settlements. The fields to the north of Humbleton Hill known as the Red Riggs have yielded bones which are thought to result from the battle[1]. In one of these fields is the ancient Bendor Stone which serves as a monument to the Battle of Homildon Hill (National Grid Reference NT 968294).

Landscape Evolution

The evolution of the battlefield landscape can be considered in two zones - the valley floor and the hillsides. The valley above the floodplain has long been used for arable agriculture - medieval rigg and furrow is recorded south of Humbleton, though in this area pastoralism would have been more important, with cattle a frequent target for raiding. The field patterns are a mixture of old pastures in irregularly hedged enclosures, especially near Wooler, and smaller open fields near the settlements. Place names on the 1822 Estate map point to wet ground in the north-eastern part of the battlefield, e.g. How Mires, Horse Bogs, Willow Riggs. The settlements at Akeld and Humbleton appear to have been bigger in medieval times; both had chapels, whilst there was

© English Heritage 1995

another settlement at Ewart, north of Akeld, which no longer exists.

In 1402 there was perhaps a woodland block at Grid Ref. 294976 - field evidence indicates old woodland here - whilst part of the adjoining trackway running south from it also has species-rich hedgerows. The main trackways running to and from Wooler across the battlefield follow probably old lines. The track running up to Humbleton from just east of Low Humbleton has species-rich hedgerows and could have been present in 1402.

Humbleton Hill itself has been upland rough pasture since late Prehistoric times and has not changed significantly in appearance. Granted, the plantations on its flanks all appear to be post-medieval in date from field evidence. However, the woodlands of Harehope Plantation and south of Akeld are ancient woodland.

In the centuries since the battle, the local settlements of Ewart, Akeld and Humbleton have all shrunk in size and have abandoned their small open fields to enclosure without retaining any of the old common field structure. The more open, wetter floodplain lands have been enclosed and drained probably by Parliamentary Enclosure Act in the late 18th or early 19th century, certainly before 1822.

The only new road that appears in the area before 1822 is the B6351 Akeld-Kirknewton Road which has a very straight, engineered appearance. After 1860 the Coldstream and Alnwick Railway was built through the northern part of the battlefield area, with stations at Akeld and Wooler. Wooler has grown gradually, mainly in the 19th century, to cover some of its enclosed fields.

Today, the enclosed agricultural landscape of the valley, with its farmsteads and hamlets, is overlooked by the bracken-covered ridge of hills with scattered woodlands along its flanks. Both landscapes date from at least 1822 and still remain intact today. The railway has now been abandoned and the area is peaceful. The hills are now a part of the Northumberland National Park. All the major areas of the battlefield landscape remain undeveloped and the course of the battle can clearly be traced.

The Battle and the Sources

It is a pity that the soldier, poet and historian John Harding, who was part of Harry Hotspur's entourage, did not leave a proper account of Homildon Hill, a battle at which he was present. Instead, his *Chronicle* contents itself with magnifying the scale of the Scots' defeat by putting their numbers at a scarcely credible 40,000[2]. Fortunately, two relatively detailed sources for the Battle of Homildon Hill - one Scottish and the other English - have come down to us. What is more they tend to agree. The *Scotichronicon* by Walter Bower, written in the 1440s, sets the scene for the battle from the Scottish point of view.

> The new earl of Douglas (the second Archibald) who had custody then of the castles of Edinburgh and Dunbar and who was the king's son-in-law wished to seek revenge on the English for the slaughter of the Scots at Nisbet. He approached the governor of Scotland, the duke of Albany, for his help in strengthening his army, because he said it was [only] with the duke's advice [and backing] that he would be willing to go to England. The duke gave him his eldest son Sir Murdoch with an augmented force of knights and brave men. He therefore assembled a large army in the same year to the number of 10,000 fighting men, including the earls of Angus and Moray as well as the master of Fife (the governor's son), and entering England they plundered it as far as Newcastle. As they returned Sir Henry Percy the younger (otherwise Hotspur) with Sir George de Dunbar earl of March and a large army reached Milfield before them. [The master of Fife and] the earl of Douglas climbed to some rising ground called Homildon where they waited for the arrival of the English. As they stood on the plain facing the Scots, the English were impatient to attack them on Percy's order; but the earl of March reined Percy back, saying that he should not move, but should send archers who could easily penetrate the Scots as targets for their arrows and defeat and capture them[3].

© English Heritage 1995

Thomas Walsingham's *Historia Anglicana* provides the English perspective on the same events - and then carries the narrative a little further.

> At that time the Scots, made restless by their usual arrogance, entered England in hostile fashion; for they thought that all the northern lords had been kept in Wales by the royal command; but the Earl of Northumberland the Lord Henry Percy, and Henry his son, and the Earl of Dunbar who had lately left the Scots and sworn fealty to the King of England, with an armed band and a force of archers, suddenly flung themselves across the path of the Scots who, after burning and plundering, wanted to return to their own country, so the Scots had no choice but to stop and choose a place of battle. They chose therefore a hill near the town of Wooler, called Homildon Hill ['Halweden Hil'], where they assembled with their men-at-arms and archers. When our men saw this, they left the road in which they had opposed the Scots and climbed a hill facing the Scots. Without delay, our archers, drawn up in the dale, shot arrows at the Scottish schiltron, to provoke them to come down. In reply the Scottish archers directed all their fire at our archers; but they felt the weight of our arrows, which fell like a storm of rain, and so they fled[4].

With the English army posted at Milfield it commanded the road to Coldstream. The Scots, emerging from Wooler, saw the English ahead of them and bore off to the left, placing themselves on the lower slopes of Homildon Hill. The hill guarded the entrance to the valley of the River Glen, hence Andrew of Wyntoun's description of the battle taking place at 'Homildoune in till Glendale'[5]. According to the *Scotichronicon* the Scots numbered 10,000; the only other authority to make an estimate stated that the Scots 'assembled atop the hill of "Hamilton", near the town of "Vallor" (Wooler), to the number of about twelve of thirteen thousand fighting men'. The same source, the *History of the Life and Reign of Richard II*, computed the English at 12,000 lances and 7,000 archers[6].

The English army was in the plain below Homildon Hill ready to attack, but, at the instigation of the Earl of March, a force of archers was sent forward to engage the enemy. Walsingham tells us that this advance party, having 'left the road [i.e. to Coldstream] in which they had opposed the Scots ... climbed a hill facing the Scots'. With the Scots on Homildon the only hill that this could be is Harehope Hill, a few hundred yards to the north-west. From here, across a ravine separating the two hills (which Walsingham refers to as a 'dale') the English archers loosed their arrows, 'which fell like a storm of rain'. Although the *Scotichronicon* does not mention them Walsingham informs us that Scottish archers attempted to answer the shafts of their enemy, but they were overborne. How does one account for the Scots archers' lack of success? Apart from the fact that the Scots lacked the tradition of archery cultivated in England, which meant that their bowmen were not usually as proficient, the Scotch bow was less powerful than the English. Whereas the English bow was drawn back to the ear the Scotch bow pulled back only to the chest. The Scottish archers could not compete in a long-range duel[7].

After the retreat of the Scottish archers Walsingham's account continues:

> The Earl of Douglas, who was the leader of the Scots, saw their flight, and did not want to seem to desert the battlefield; so he seized a lance and rode down the hill with a troop of his horse, trusting too much in his equipment and that of his men, who had been improving their armour for three years, and strove to rush on the archers. When the archers saw this, they retreated, but still firing, so vigorously, so resolutely, so effectively, that they pierced the armour, perforated the helmets, pitted the swords, split the lances, and pierced all the equipment with ease. The Earl of Douglas was pierced with five wounds, notwithstanding his elaborate armour. The rest of the Scots who had not descended the hill turned tail, and fled from the flight of arrows. But flight did not avail them, for the archers followed them, so that the Scots were forced to give themselves up, for fear of the death-dealing arrows. The Earl of Douglas was captured; many of those who fled were captured, but many were drowned in the river Tweed, so that the waters devoured, so it was said, 500 men. In this fight no lord or knight

© English Heritage 1995

> received a blow from the enemy; but God Almighty gave the victory miraculously to the English archers alone, and the magnates and men-at-arms remained idle spectators of the battle.

The *Scotichronicon* agrees with Walsingham that the English archers severely galled the Scots:

> The English bowmen, advancing towards the Scots, smothered them with arrows and made them bristly like a hedgehog, transfixing the hands and arms of the Scots to their own lances. By means of this very harsh rain of arrows they made some duck, they wounded others, and killed many.

There is further agreement among the two sources about the reaction provoked by the 'rain of arrows'. Both represent small bodies of Scottish horse making sorties in an effort to come to grips with the enemy. Walsingham has the Earl of Douglas attempt to disperse the English archers. The futility of Douglas's endeavours is underscored by Walsingham's description of the ineffectiveness of the Scots' armour. Douglas's failure reflects further credit on the English archers who are declared to have won the battle all by themselves. The *Scotichronicon*, however, paints a more heroic picture of the charge of the Scots down the hill. In this account the Scots at least get to exchange blows; the tale even includes an affecting instance of chivalric reconciliation. Sir John Swinton, a hero of the Battle of Otterburn fourteen years earlier, seeing the men about him decimated by the English archers,

> ... shouted out in a harsh voice as if he were a crier saying: 'Illustrious comrades! Who has bewitched you today that you do not behave in your usual worthy manner? Why do you not join in hand-to-hand battle nor as men take heart to attack enemies who are in a hurry to destroy you with their flying arrows as if you were little fallow-deer or young mules in pens? Those who are willing should go down with me and we shall move among our enemies in the Lord's name, either to save our lives in so doing or at least to fall as knights with honour.' On hearing this the most famous and valiant Adam de Gordon of that Ilk who indeed for a long time had cultivated mortal enmity against the said lord of Swinton following the death of stalwart men-at-arms from both sides in various fights, knelt down before him to ask pardon from him in particular (as the most worthy knight in arms in the whole of Britain, as he claimed) so that he might be girded as a knight by the hands of the same Sir John. This was done, and a band of a hundred respected knights followed these leaders who had thus been reconciled. They contended intrepidly with a thousand Englishmen; and that whole Scottish group fell dead, though not without a great slaughter of English. It was assuredly believed and it was sworn on oath by some Englishmen, as I have heard, that if the other Scots who had stood on Humbleton Hill had fallen on them with like vigour, either the English would have fled, or the Scots would have achieved victory over them.

The main body of the English army is traditionally held to have been drawn up among the fields to the north of Humbleton Hill. This area, to the east of Bendor Crossing, is known as the Red Riggs. Certainly, the Earl of Northumberland and Harry Hotspur could not have been deployed too far away otherwise their archers on Harehope Hill would have been unsupported and in danger of being cut off. Accordingly, it can be assumed that it was against part of this force that Sir John Swinton made his charge: only by defeating Northumberland and Hotspur could the Scots have won the victory which the *Scotichronicon* insists was within their grasp if Swinton's effort had been supported. As it was the battle was over in an hour[8]. The pursuit continued as far as the River Tweed.

Indication of Importance

The Battle of Homildon Hill is chiefly significant as the apotheosis of the English archer. His domination of the battlefield was such that the victory was, or very nearly was - depending on the source consulted - his alone.

© English Heritage 1995

In terms of its importance to our national history the Battle of Homildon Hill is of unexpected significance. A large number of Scottish prisoners fell into English hands during the battle. Many of the prisoners were high born and their ransomable value to the Percy family was immense. King Henry IV's high-handed demand that the prisoners be transferred to his keeping contributed towards the Percys' disenchantment with his rule. Their revolt the following year was the most serious uprising of Henry IV's troubled reign.

Even in his own lifetime Sir Henry Percy was a legendary figure. The sobriquet 'Harry Hotspur' attests to his zeal for the fight. Today his fame lives on in the pages of Shakespeare: both he and his erstwhile opponent of Homildon Hill, the Earl of Douglas, who ten months later was fighting by Hotspur's side at the Battle of Shrewsbury, figure prominently in the play *Henry IV Part 1*.

The value of the written sources relating to the battle stems not from their diversity or length but from the ease with which they allow the precise location of the fighting to be identified. That the main drama was played out on the slopes of Humbleton and Harehope Hills is indisputable.

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.

On the eastern side of the battlefield the boundary begins at the junction of the A697 with the road from Gallowlaw. The battlefield boundary proceeds south along the road from Low Humbleton to Humbleton and beyond, following the unmade road that skirts the edge of the Northumberland National Park as far as a series of enclosures on the right hand side. From here the boundary line follows a path to the summit of Humbleton Hill and then down the other side until it meets the public footpath that runs between Humbleton and Harehope Hills. The boundary line continues in a westerly direction, runs along the escarpment to the south of Harehope Hill summit and then heads due north until it reaches the public footpath on Harehope Hill's northern slope. Such a boundary circumscribes the position of the Scots on Humbleton Hill and the English archers on Harehope Hill.

Following a field divide past the reservoir the battlefield boundary skirts the eastern edge of Akeld, crosses the A697 and from spot height 56 heads north to the dismantled railway running nearly east-west. The boundary line then follows the railway to a copse north of Bowchester where it turns southwards to return to the road junction in Low Humbleton, so completing the battlefield area. This northern half of the boundary accommodates the body of the English army.

© English Heritage 1995

Notes

1. Kinross, John *The Battlefields of Britain* (London 1979) p29.

2. *The Chronicle of John Hardyng* (London 1812) p359.

3. *Scotichronicon by Walter Bower* vol. 8 ed. D.E.R.Watt (Aberdeen University Press 1987) pp45-47.

4. *English Historical Documents 1327-1486* ed. A.R.Myers (London 1969) pp191-192.

5. *The Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland by Andrew of Wyntoun* ed. David Laing (Edinburgh 1879) iii 85.

6. *Historia Vitae et Regni Ricardi Secundo* introduced and edited by G.B.Stow (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977) p174.

7. Barrett, C.R.B. *Battles and Battlefields in England* (London 1896) p99.

8. Stow *op. cit*..

© English Heritage 1995