English Heritage Battlefield Report: Myton 1319

Myton, or 'The White Battle' (20 September 1319)

Parishes: Myton-on-Swale; Ellenthorpe; Humberton

Districts: Hambleton, Harrogate

County: North Yorkshire

Grid Ref: SE 429672

Historical Context

In the aftermath of the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314 the English had been expelled from Scotland. In 1318 the Scots followed up their success by capturing Berwick-upon-Tweed. The loss of the town was a serious blow to English prestige: Berwick had been expensively fortified by King Edward I.

To prosecute the war against Scotland King Edward II moved his court to York in October 1318 and at the end of August 1319 he laid siege to Berwick. The Scots did not relish attempting to relieve the town direct and so, to create a diversion, despatched an army to ravage the north of England. Between 10-15,000 men (20,000 according to one source) under the command of Thomas Randolph, Earl of Moray, and Lord James Douglas, crossed the Solway and proceeded south. Penetrating into Yorkshire the Scots eventually reached Boroughbridge and Myton-on-Swale.

From a captured spy the English at York discovered that it was the Scottish intention to abduct Edward II's Queen, Isabella, who was staying close to the City. Isabella was sent to Nottingham for safety. The spy also told his captors where they might find the Scots. Acting on this information William de Melton, Archbishop of York, John de Hotham, Bishop of Ely and Chancellor of England, and Nicholas Fleming, the Mayor of York, led a motley force of between 10-20,000 townsfolk, clerics and local husbandmen out of the City in the direction of Myton, 13 miles away. There they hoped to surprise the Scots and defeat them.

Location and Description of the Battlefield

Myton lies three miles to the east of Boroughbridge beside of the River Swale. The battle to which the village gives its name took place among the meadows on the west bank of the river, just above the confluence of the Swale and the River Ure.

Three main sources, the *Brut or the Chronicles of England*, the *Chronicle of Lanercost* and the *Anonimalle Chronicle*, each refer to the battle having taken place at Myton. The Scots had advanced to Boroughbridge and Myton from Carlisle (the Solway). For the purpose of establishing precisely where the Battle of Myton was fought this is important. The sources mention, in relation to the battle, Myton, the Swale and a bridge: this leaves it open to doubt whether the battle took place on the east or west bank of the river. However, having advanced into Yorkshire from the northwest it is unlikely that the Scots would have encamped on the east bank of the Swale; by doing so they would have placed the river immediately across their line of retreat.

The argument can be taken further. If the Scots had been encamped on the east bank of the Swale at Myton the English could have attacked them by travelling from York up the east bank of the River Ure: they would never have had to cross a bridge. The greater ease with which this could have been done makes it highly improbable that the English would have marched up the west bank of the Ure if the Scots had been at Myton village itself: they would then have to cross the Ure at Boroughbridge and the Swale at Myton before getting to grips with the enemy. Similarly, if the Scots had been on the west bank of the Swale and the English had advanced from York

along the west bank of the Ure and crossed the river at Boroughbridge, neither Myton nor the Swale would have had anything to do with the resulting battle.

This leaves only one of four options as remotely probable, that the English travelled north from York along the east bank of the Ure, crossed the Swale at Myton Bridge and came to grief in the fields to the west. If it is objected that Myton, which gave its name to the battle, is on the other side of the river, it is sufficient to point out that Myton Pasture, which is situated on the west bank, historically belonged to the village. Why else would the parish (and district) boundary be diverted to take in this one meadow on the far bank?

Landscape Evolution

In 1319 the village of Myton with its timber and stone houses lay within a Medieval open field rigg-and-furrow landscape with some furlongs lying beside the south bank of the River Swale. Documentary evidence indicates a timber bridge 200 yards south of the present bridge, though there is little evidence of this on the ground.

To the west, north of Ellenthorpe Lodge (not in existence in 1319), lay the medieval settlement of Humberton with its own associated open fields, some running down to the present Coney Hill, which the name suggests is likely at some time to have featured a rabbit warren. East of this area to Myton Stell there is no evidence of medieval open fields. The land here was probably prone to flooding and was down to pasture and meadowland. The references in the chronicles the *Brut*[1] and the *Life of Edward the Second*[2] to the Scots setting fire to haystacks during the battle suggest strongly that the battlefield was then, much as today, pastureland.

The central part of the battle area is now called Myton Pasture and parts were also probably floodable in the past. The area was obviously of economic importance to Myton as the parish boundary crosses the Swale to enclose the area. However the SMR records Medieval rigg-and-furrow here which may have existed in 1319. If so, grain was grown here in Medieval times.

In the centuries after the battle, Humberstone medieval village and Ellenthorpe have declined to farmsteads. Field observation shows no ancient hedgerows or old woodland blocks in the battlefield area. All hedges in this central area, from field evidence, appear to be no more than 200 years old and are probably of Parliamentary Enclosure date. The Medieval open fields around Myton, however, were enclosed earlier. Some were put down to pasture, thus preserving the rigg-and-furrow in places. Shortly before 1848 Myton Pasture Plantation was planted, followed by the tree belt at Myton Pasture Stell after 1855.

The original bridge at Myton has long since disappeared. In subsequent years the crossing of the Swale at Myton has been served by either a bridge or a ferry. In 1831 there had been a ferry[3]. By 1884 the village possessed its current, now rather dilapidated, iron girder bridge[4]. For an earlier period the Register of St. Mary's Abbey at York makes reference to both the repair of bridges and the substitution of a ferry[5].

The Battle and the Sources

The most detailed description of the Battle of Myton is contained in the *Brut or the Chronicles of England*. The *Brut*, compiled during the reign of Edward I, originally concluded in 1307 but was then extended to 1333 and translated from the French later in the fourteenth century. The Chaucerian English has been modernized.

The Scots went over the water of Solway ... and privily they steal away by night, and come into England, and robbed and destroyed all that they might, and spared no manner [of] thing until they come to York. And when the Englishmen at last heard of this thing, all that might travel - as well monks and priests and friars and canons and seculars - come and meet with the Scots at Myton upon Swale, the 12th day of October. Alas! What sorrow for the English husbandmen that knew nothing of war, they were quelled and drenched in the River of Swale. And their holinesses, Sir William of Melton, Archbishop of York, and the Abbot of Selby

> with their steeds, fled, and come into York. And that was their own folly that they had that mischance, for they passed the water of Swale; and the Scots set on fire three stacks of hay; and the smoke thereof was so huge that [the] Englishmen might not see the Scots. And when the Englishmen were gone over the water, so come the Scots with their wings in manner of a shield, and come toward the Englishmen in a rush; and the Englishmen fled, for they lacked any men of Arms; for the King had them all almost lost at the siege of Berwick; and the Scots hobilers [mounted infantry] went between the bridge and the Englishmen. And when the great host had them met, the Englishmen almost all were there slain. And he that might wend over the water was saved; but many were drenched, Alas, for sorrow! for there was slain many men of religion, and seculars, and also priests and clerks; and with much sorrow the Archbishop escaped; and therefore the Scots called it 'the White Battle'[6].

The *Life of Edward the Second*, by the 'so-called Monk of Malmesbury' (*d*. ?1326), has a similar tale to tell. Having recounted how the captured Scots spy enabled the citizens of York to save Queen Isabella, he continues:

> On the second day, on which according to the spy the Scots would be found in their lairs, the laymen, clerks, and men of religion issued forth again from the city of York. They went stealthily and without noise, to take the enemy by surprise, because if they were warned they might perhaps take flight. Nevertheless they were well enough warned, yet they did not flee. For when they perceived our men advancing in disorder, they said: 'These are not soldiers but huntsmen; they will not achieve much.' So the Scots set fire to a large amount of hay that had been gathered there, and the rising smoke spread far and wide. The smoke made it difficult for our men to see, so that they found prepared for battle those whom they thought had fled. They were indeed men picked from the whole of Scotland for their fighting ability, fit for every task. Many of our men on the other hand were untrained in the art of war, and were readier to flee than to fight. When battle was joined many of our men were killed and many more taken prisoner; but the Scots returned unharmed to Scotland with their captives[7].

The accounts of the battle agree that the scratch English army's inexperience was a severe handicap. Malmesbury contrasts this with the toughened condition of the Scots. Moreover, while the English advanced in disorder (as Malmesbury informs us), the Scots maintained a tight formation, the *Brut* likening it to a shield with flanks withdrawn. Both Malmesbury and the *Brut* agree that the Scots set fire to some hay to confuse the enemy and achieve tactical surprise.

Malmesbury omits to mention that the battle was fought at Myton. He also fails to mention the River Swale and the large numbers that drowned in it, or the fact that the disaster was made the greater because the English allowed themselves to be cut off from the bridge. The description of the battle given in the Chronicle of Lanercost (a contemporary source, compiled at the Abbey of Lanercost in Cumberland) restores some of the missing details. While King Edward and Thomas, Earl of Lancaster besieged Berwick:

> My lord Thomas Randolph, earl of Moray and Sir James of Douglas, not daring to encounter the king of England and the earl, invaded England with an army, burning the country and taking captives and booty of cattle, and so pressed as far as Boroughbridge. When the citizens of York heard this, without knowledge of the country people and led by my lord archbishop William de Meltoun and my lord the bishop of Ely, with a great number of priests and clerics, among whom were sundry religious men, both beneficed and mendicant, they attacked the Scots one day after dinner near the town of Myton, about twelve miles north of York; but, as men unskilled in war, they marched all scattered through the fields and in no kind of array. When the Scots beheld men rushing to fight against them, they formed up according to their custom in a single schiltron, and then uttered together a tremendous shout to terrify the English, who straightway began to take to their heels at the sound. Then the Scots, breaking up their schiltron wherein they were massed, mounted their horses and pursued the English,

> killing both clergy and laymen, so that about four thousand were slain, among whom fell the mayor of the town, and about one thousand, it was said, were drowned in the water of the Swale. Had not night come on, hardly a single Englishmen would have escaped. Also many were taken alive, carried off to Scotland and ransomed at a heavy price[8].

Interestingly, the *Lanercost Chronicle* maintains that the citizens of York went to battle without enlisting the aid of the countryfolk. This, however, was probably the writer's way of emphasising that the army was one of burgesses and clerics, which is a constant theme in accounts of the Battle of Myton. The Lanercost chronicler specifies that the battle was fought at Myton, 12 miles north of York, and that 'as men unskilled in war' the English attacked in no kind of array, which echoes Malmesbury's comment. Similarly, as did the *Brut*, the Lanercost chronicler sheds light on the formation adopted by the Scots. The schiltron, a wedge-shaped hedgehog of spearmen, was developed by William Wallace during the Scottish Wars of Independence as a means of combating the English superiority in heavily armoured horsemen. It is clearly this formation that was meant by the *Brut* when it referred to the Scots arrayed 'with their wings in the manner of a shield' i.e. a wedge, with the flanks withdrawn. In the circumstances that the Scots found themselves at Myton, however, the defensive precaution was unnecessary. Tactically they could be more aggressive. Whereas Malmesbury and the *Brut* claim that the Scots achieved surprise by hiding their deployment behind a smokescreen, the Lanercost chronicler suggests that the raw English army was unnerved by their opponents' mighty shout and it was after they started to flee that the Scots mounted up. The *Brut* represented the Scots mounting their horses to cut the English off from Myton bridge, but although the Lanercost Chronicle fails to mention the bridge its writer does refer to a thousand Englishmen drowning in the Swale.

A fourth account of the Battle of Myton is given in the Anonimalle Chronicle, written c.1350 at St. Mary's Abbey, York. It is the fullest of the shorter versions of the *Brut* continuation.

> There came to England, in the vicinity of Carlisle, Thomas Randolph, earl of Moray, and James Douglas with twenty thousand well armed Scots, and during the day they occupied and stayed in woods and marshes far from the towns, so that the people of the area should have no knowledge of them, and at night they rode with their army until they reached Boroughbridge and Myton-on-Swale which was only twelve leagues from York. They wished to go on to the city of York and to take the city by force, but soon news reached Sir William Melton archbishop of the city, and Sir John Hotham, who was then the king's chancellor, and immediately they assembled all the force that they could gather and raise for themselves. And a certain Nicholas Fleming who was then the mayor of the said city, a noble and valiant man, went with many others from the city in strength with all their force towards Myton to oppose the malice of their Scottish enemies. And when they had come to Myton, with the support of the local people, they formed up to give battle to their Scottish enemies. But the Scots, who were well marshalled and well equipped for war, had great scorn for the English and now began to sound their trumpets and without further delay began to fight the English and soon the English were killed and defeated; many were drowned in the River Swale, over which there was sorrow, and the said Nicholas Fleming was there cut down and dismembered. The archbishop, Sir William Melton, and Sir John Hotham, the chancellor, fled as best they could to the city of York and closed the gates and remained there. But Sir William Ayremynne, a noble and valiant clerk, was captured there and taken to Scotland, imprisoned, and was subsequently freed for a heavy ransom[9].

Among the remaining English descriptions of the Battle of Myton the St Albans Chronicle of John of Trokelowe (written sometime after 1330) mentions the wedge-shaped formation of the Scots, their martial expertise and the disorder of the English[10]. The Meaux chronicler, a contemporary authority, refers to the sudden irruption of 15,000 rampaging Scots into Yorkshire and the fact that the men of York and the surrounding area who advanced to meet them did so without any battle order (*non in aciebus dispositis processerunt*). He also appears to suggest that the Scots had initially planned to flee rather than fight it out, but

they encouraged themselves to resist manfully (*Unde Scotti, qui paulo ante fugam arripere pro certo cogitaverunt, sese ad resistendum viriliter hortabantur*)[11]. This comment appears to be the basis of the claim in Alex Leadman's article on the Battle of Myton that the Scots feigned a retreat as the English advanced[12].

The one Scottish account of the Battle of Myton appears in *The Bruce* by John Barbour, Archdeacon of Aberdeen, written in 1375. The poem, which is in the Scottish vernacular, tells how the Scots, advancing into Yorkshire, burn half of Ripon and then move on to Boroughbridge and Myton. The locals - archers, burgesses, yeomanry, priests, clerks, monks, friars, husbandmen and folk of all kind - gather together to a total of 20,000 under the Archbishop of York. They far outnumber the Scots.

Then he [the archbishop] displayed his banner,
And other bishops that there were
They display banners also.
All in a host forth can they go
Towards Myton the ready way;
And when the Scotsmen heard say
That they were to them coming near,
They prepared themselves on their best manner,
And divided themselves into battles two.
Douglas the vanguard he can make;
The rearward made the Earl Thomas [Moray],
For chieftain of the host he was.
And, so ordered it in good array,
Towards their foes they held their way.
When each had of other sight,
They pressed on both halves to fight.
The Englishmen come on sadly
With good countenance and hardy,
Right in front with a Banner,
Until they their foes come so near
That they their visage well might see;
Three spear-length, I believe [well] might be
Between them, when such drawing back
Took them, but more, into a hasty turn,
They turned their backs, and to go.
When Scottishmen had seen them so
Afrightened flee all their [way],
In great haste upon them dashed they,
And slew and took a great party.
The rest fled full afrightened
As they best might, to seek a place of refuge.
They were chased so near at hand,
That well one thousand dead were;
And of [them] there three hundred were
Priests, that died in that chase.
Therefore that fight called it were
'The chapter of Myton'; for there
Slain so many priests were[13].

Barbour is writing over fifty years after the events he describes and is constrained by the poetic format: the overall impression provided by him is probably of greater value than the detail. For instance, the fact that they

had defeated an army largely composed of clerics evidently intrigued the Scots and etched itself into the national consciousness. The poem too conveys well the panic that seized the English. Whether or not Barbour's own comment that they ran when 'Thre sper-lynth, I trow [weill] mycht be, Betuix thame' reflects specific information passed down to him from someone present at the battle is impossible to determine.

Barbour, of course, writes that the Scots were disposed in two battles rather than the single schiltron to which the English sources refer. Should one wish to reconcile the discrepancy it could perhaps be argued that from the English lines the Scots appeared as a single mass.

If one could repose greater confidence in Barbour's accuracy as opposed to his need to make the poem rhyme, his observation that the English marched 'Toward mytoune the reddy vay' would be useful corroboration that they left York and headed north along the east bank of the Swale, the most direct route.

Indication of Importance

The chief result of the Battle of Myton was the raising of the siege of Berwick. This had been insisted upon by the northern earls who wished to protect their lands. Edward II failed to intercept the Scots on their return homewards and a two year truce between Scotland and England followed. Relations between the King and his critics, principally Thomas, Earl of Lancaster, worsened further.

Thomas Randolph, Earl of Moray and Sir James Douglas, the leaders of the Scots at Myton, were two experienced soldiers who had served as divisional commanders under Robert the Bruce at the Battle of Bannockburn. William de Melton, Archbishop of York, is a figure well-known to history chiefly through his very full register, preserved at York.

The written sources for Myton are as detailed as those for any other fourteenth-century battle. They inform us of the preliminaries, the formations adopted by the two sides and the outcome once the fighting started. As with the Battle of the Standard almost two hundred years earlier the involvement of the Church probably accounts for the interest shown in Myton by the chroniclers of religious houses.

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.

The main requirement of the battlefield area is that it must be extensive enough to allow the Scots, once the English had advanced sufficiently far from Myton bridge, to ride around their opponents' flanks and cut them off. If, as seems militarily likely, the Scots positioned their schiltron on the gentle swell in the land somewhere between Coney Hill/Clot House Farm and Ellenthorpe Lodge, there would be well over a thousand yards separating them from the River Swale at Myton in which they could perform their manoeuvre.

The course of the River Swale provides the battlefield area with one boundary. When the Swale meets Myton Pasture Clough the boundary of the battlefield area continues along a field divide and track excluding the low ground of Ellenthorpe Ings. The battlefield boundary then crosses the track running from north to south (towards Long Bank and the Ure), crossing the two fields beyond on the same line until it meets the embankment and track south-west of Ellenthorpe Lodge. This boundary line enables the battlefield area to include the southern edge of the high ground occupied by the Scots.

From the embankment the battlefield boundary continues north to Ellenthorpe Lane and then traces a line across

The Knowles to a copse just north of Coney Hill. Again, this ensures that the high ground occupied by the Scots is included in the battlefield area. From the copse the battlefield line follows field boundaries to the River Swale and then crosses True Closes before rejoining the Swale once more. Drawing the battlefield boundary in such a fashion leaves sufficient space north of Myton Pasture Plantation for the Scots to ride around the English right flank. This completes the battlefield area.

Notes

1. *The Brut or the Chronicles of England* ed. F W D Brie (Early English Text Society, London 1906) i 211-212.

2. *The Life of Edward the Second by the so-called Monk of Malmesbury*, translated with notes by N Denholm-Young (London 1957) p96.

3. Samuel Lewis *A Topographical Dictionary of England* (London 1831) iii 337.

4. 'The Battle of Myton' by A D H Leadman *Yorkshire Archaeological Society* viii (1884) p119.

5. 'Myton', Leadman *op. cit.* p122.

6. *Brut op. cit.*

7. *Life of Edward the Second op. cit.*

8. *English Historical Documents 1189-1327* ed. by Harry Rothwell (London 1975) pp272-3.

9. 'The Anonimalle Chronicle 1307 to 1334 From Brotherton Collection MS 29' W.R. Childs and J. Taylor (eds.) *Yorkshire Archaeological Society* 147 (1987) pp97-99.

10. *Chronica Monasterii S. Albani Johannis de Trokelowe Annales* ed. H T Riley (Rolls Series 28, London 1866) p103.

11. *Chronica Monasterii de Melsa* ed. Edward A Bond (Rolls Series 43, London 1867) ii 336.

12. 'Myton', Leadman op. cit. p119.

13. *The Bruce; or, The Book of the most excellent and noble prince, Robert de Broyss, King of Scots: compiled by Master John Barbour, Archdeacon of Aberdeen, A.D. 1375* ed. Rev. Walter W Skeat. Early English Text Society 29 (1877) ii 426-7.