English Heritage Battlefield Report: Neville's Cross 1346

Neville's Cross (17 October 1346)

Parish: Durham, Bearpark

District: Durham

County: Durham

Grid Ref: NZ 263421 (centred on Neville's Cross)

Historical Context

In 1346 King Edward III invaded France, won a resounding victory at Crécy on 26 August and then set about besieging Calais. To provide a diversion, King Philip of France asked his ally, David II of Scotland, to attack England. Since David was convinced that the bulk of England's fighting men were in France he was ready to accede to the request. Gathering together an army at Perth, David entered England early in October, destroying the pele tower at Liddel and oppressively occupying the priory at Lanercost. The priory at Hexham was sacked next, whereupon the Scots crossed the River Tyne at Ryton and advanced into the Bishopric of Durham. On 16 October they set up camp in the Prince Bishop's manor park of Beaurepaire, or Bearpark, a short distance to the west of Durham city.

The possibility that the Scots might intervene in the war between England and France had been anticipated and on 20 August the English Regency issued a proclamation of array, appointing the Archbishop of York, Henry de Percy and Ralph de Neville to command the forces in the north. By 16 October the three leaders had assembled an army at Auckland Park, eight miles south of Durham. When, early next morning, the English advanced, a 500 strong Scottish raiding party commanded by Sir William Douglas received a rude surprise, as the Lanercost Chronicle recounts:

> While the Scots were plundering the town of Merrington, suddenly the weather became inclement, with thick fog. And it came to pass that when they heard the trampling of horses and the shock of armoured men, there fell upon them such a spasm of panic that William and all those with him were utterly at a loss to know which way to turn. Wherefore, as God so willed, they unexpectedly stumbled, to their astonishment, upon the columns of my lord the Archbishop of York and Sir Thomas de Rokeby, by whom many of them were killed, but William and two hundred with him who were on armoured horses, escaped for the time, but not without wounds[1].

Douglas managed to get back and warn King David of the English army's approach. The Scottish army raised camp and moved forward to meet the English who, by this time, had taken up a position by Neville's Cross.

Location and Description of the Battlefield

There is little cause to question where the battle was fought. The contemporary Anonimalle Chronicle of St. Mary's Abbey, York stated that, to meet the enemy, King David rode from Bearpark to Neville's Cross, arranging his army in three battles (*le dit David, de Beaurepaire ou il fuist herberge, devers la Nevyle Croice pres de Dorem chyvaucha et illoeqes soun host en trois batailles dyvysa*). The English, so the chronicle continues, also formed three battles, gathering a little outside Durham, just by Neville's Cross (*le avantditz batailles assemblerent un petit de Dorem, ioust la croice de Nevylle avauntdite*)[2]. The accuracy of this placement of the battle is confirmed by letters of thanks sent to twelve English leaders from the Tower of London three days after victory was achieved: in them the battle is referred to as occurring *in praelio apud Nevill's Cross*3.

We are fortunate in that not only do we know the site of the battle but the directions from which the opposing sides approached it: the Scots from Bearpark to the north-west and the English from Auckland via Merrington to the south. This, in conjunction with a study of the ground, enables us to determine the probable alignment of the two armies on the battlefield.

The visitor to Neville's Cross discovers that the town, on the outskirts of the city of Durham, is situated on a narrow belt of level ground about 350 feet high. Eastwards, towards the city centre, the terrain falls away sharply some 200 feet; to the west is the steep-banked River Browney. At its broadest point the Neville's Cross ridge is approximately 1,000 yards wide.

From north to south, along the ridge, runs the A167. Running across it, from east to west, is a railway line: the cutting is 80 feet deep. Much of the battlefield, excluding an area to the west, is built over.

Landscape Evolution

The main area of conflict of the battle, along the north south ridge of Red Hills-Crossgate Moor, was probably open rough grazing land 1346. There is no map, documentary evidence or field evidence to suggest medieval open field arable agricultural or enclosed, hedged pasture fields here and battle accounts do not mention fighting through enclosed ground except on the western margin; according to the Scottish chronicler Andrew of Wyntoun, an area to the west of the battlefield was criss-crossed by ditches and enclosures[4]. Although today in the area around Arbour House only relatively modern hedgerows form field boundaries, it is possible the lower land of the Browney Valley was meadowland with boundaries and ditches. The River Browney itself followed a similar course then as now, although its sides were probably more densely wooded.

Neville's Cross itself, which gave its name to the battle, was destroyed in 1589; more recently the socket, now with a milestone placed in it, was moved when the A167 Newcastle Road was straightened. The 1838 Crossgate tithe apportionment map shows the old course of the road before the crossroads, by which Neville's Cross stands, was created[5]. There was no settlement at Neville's Cross at the time of the battle, the Cross marking the boundary of Durham town. Field and map evidence suggests that both the roads currently called the A167 (the old line of the A1 hereabouts) and the Aldingrange Road follow old lines. It is possible that the bridge by which Aldingrange Road crosses the Browney is medieval and marks the legendary spot of King David's capture.

Further afield, beyond the battlefield area, lay the Medieval park around Bearpark, whilst a small priory or its ruins may have been present near Baxter Wood. A small park may have existed just south of the Cross in an area shown as Tithe Free Land on the 1838 Tithe Map and showing a distinctly oval field pattern on the 1857 OS Map.

The landscape has changed considerably since 1346. The Crossgate Moor-Red Hills area was enclosed by hedged enclosures in the 1770s, though some parts may have been enclosed earlier. Both Arbour House and Quarry House were present probably before 1770, as was presumably the quarry on the Browney River and Quarry Lane. Red Hills Lane was built as part of the enclosures in 1770.

By 1857 a railway had cut across the Red Hills area running north-east into Durham, two paper mills had been built along the Browney River and a few houses had been built along the roads in the vicinity of the Cross. The battlefield, however, remained as enclosed pasture land.

Only since 1857 have Durham and Neville's Cross expanded and the main ridge along the A167 been built over. The junction of the roads by the Cross has been altered to the west and the Cross itself moved a few yards from its original position. Only the western half of the battlefield remains agricultural pasture land, although the quarries and mills along the Browney River are all disused.

The Battle: its sources and interpretation

Of the various chronicles that mention the Battle of Neville's Cross the most readable is the Chronicle of Lanercost. The priory's chronicler, having endured enemy occupation earlier in the campaign, clearly relished the opportunity to write about the defeat of the Scots. His account is highly prejudiced.

On that day David, like another Nebuchadnezzar, caused the fringes of his standard to be made much larger, and declared himself repeatedly to be King of Scots without any hindrance. He ordered his breakfast to be made ready, and said that he would return to it when he had slain the English at the point of the sword. But soon afterwards, yea very soon after, all his servants had to hurry, allowing the food to fall into the fire. Thus David, prince of fools, wished to catch fish in front of the net, and thereby lost many and caught but few. Therefore he failed to carry out the plan he had laid, because, like Aman and Achitopel, that which he had prepared for us befell himself. So David, having reckoned up his forces, called the Scots to arms - the folk that were eager for war and were about to be scattered; and like Jabin against Joshua, he marshalled three great and strong columns to attack the English. He set Earl Patrick over the first division; but he, like an ignorant fellow, refused to lead the first line, demanding the third, more out of cowardice than eagerness. The Earl of Moray forthwith undertook his [Patrick's] duty, and so held chief command in the first division of the army, and afterwards expired in the battle. With him were many of the valiant men of Scotland, such as the Earl of Stratherne, the Earl of Fife, John de Douglas, brother of William de Douglas, Sir Alexander de Ramsay, and many other powerful earls and barons, knights and esquires, all of one mind, raging madly with unbridled hatred against the English, pressing forward without pause, relying on their own strength, and, like Satan, bursting with over-weening pride, they all thought to reach the stars.

King David himself commanded the second division - not, however that David of whom they sang in the dance that he had put ten thousand to flight in battle, but that David of whom they declared in public that his stench and ordure had defiled the altar. With him he took the Earl of Buchan, Malcolm Fleming, Sir Alexander de Straghern (father and son without the holy spirit), the Earl of Menteith, and many others whom we do not know, and whom if we did know, it would be tedious to enumerate. In the third division was Earl Patrick, who should have been more appropriately named by his countrymen 'Non hic'. He was late in coming, but he did splendidly, standing all the time afar off, like another Peter; but he would not wait to see the end of the business. In that battle he hurt no man, because he intended to take holy orders and to celebrate mass for the Scots who were killed, knowing how salutary it is to beseech the Lord for the peace of the departed. Nay, at that very time he was a priest, because he led the way in flight for others.

His colleague was Robert Stewart; if one was worth little the other was worth nothing. Overcome by cowardice, he broke his vow to God that he would never await the first blow in battle. He flies with the priest [Patrick], and as a good cleric, will assist the mass to be celebrated by the other. These two, turning their backs, fought with great success, for they entered Scotland with their division and without a single wound; and so they led off the dance, leaving David to dance as he felt inclined.

About the third hour the English army attacked the Scots not far from Durham, the Earl of Angus being in the first division, a noble personage among all those of England, of high courage and remarkable probity, ever ready to fight with spirit for his country, whose good deeds no tongue would suffice to tell.

Sir Henry de Percy, like another Judas Maccabeus, the son of Mattathias, was a fine fighter. This knight,

small of stature but sagacious, encouraged all men to take the field by putting himself in the forefront of the battle. Sir Rafe de Neville, an honest and valiant man, bold, wary and greatly to be feared, fought to such effect in the aforesaid battle that, as afterwards appeared, his blows left their marks upon the enemy. Nor was Sir Henry de Scrope behindhand, but had taken his post from the first in the front of the fight, pressing on the enemy.

In command of the second division was my lord the Archbishop of York, who, having assembled his men, blessed them all, which devout blessing, by God's grace, took good effect. There was also another bishop of the order of Minorite Friars, who, by way of benediction, commanded the English to fight manfully, always adding that, under the utmost penalty, no man should give quarter to the Scots; and when he attacked the enemy he gave them no indulgence of days from punishment or sin, but severe penance and good absolution with a certain cudgel. He had such power at that time that, with the aforesaid cudgel and without confession of any kind, he absolved the Scots from every lawful act.

In the third division Sir John de Mowbray, deriving his name *a re*, was abounding in grace and merit. His auspicious renown deserves to be published far and wide with ungrudging praise, for he and all his men behaved in such manner as should earn them honour for all time to come. Sir Thomas de Rokeby, like a noble leader, presented such a cup to the Scots that, once they had tasted it, they had no wish for another draught; and thus he was an example to all beholders of how to fight gallantly for the sacred cause of the fatherland. John of Coupland dealt such blows among the enemy that it was said that those who felt the weight of his buffets were not fit to fight any longer.

Then with trumpets blaring, shields clashing, arrows flying, lances thrusting, wounded men yelling and troops shouting, the conflict ended about the hour of vespers, amid sundered armour, broken heads, and, oh how sad! many laid low on the field. The Scots were in full flight, our men slaying them. Praise be to the Most High! victory on that day was with the English. And thus, through the prayers of the blessed Virgin Mary and Saint Cuthbert, confessor of Christ, David and the flower of Scotland fell, by the just award of God, into the pit which they themselves had dug.

This battle, therefore, as aforesaid was fought between the English and the Scots, wherein but few Englishmen were killed, but nearly the whole of the army of Scotland was either captured or slain. For in that battle fell Robert Earl of Moray, Maurice Earl of Stratherne, together with the best of the army of Scotland. But David, so-called King of Scotland, was taken prisoner, together with the Earls of Fife, of Menteith, and of Wigtown, and Sir William of Douglas and, in addition, a great number of men-at-arms. Not long afterwards, the aforesaid David King of Scots was taken to London with many of the more distinguished captives and confined in prison, the Earl of Menteith being there drawn and hanged...[6]

The account of the Battle of Neville's Cross in the Anonimalle Chronicle of St. Mary's Abbey, York is very similar to that of the Lanercost Chronicle, so much so that it is plain the chroniclers shared a common source of information. Both impose a tripartite division on the respective armies and list the same participants in the battle - give or take a name or two. Both arrange their facts in the same way. The only substantial difference between the two is that the Anonimalle chronicler dispenses with his counterparts's scripturally inspired invective and provides instead a valuable indication of where the battle actually took place (see above).

The major Scottish source for the Battle of Neville's Cross is contained in Andrew of Wyntoun's *Orygynale Chronicle of Scotland*, written c.1420. Wyntoun describes how the Scots arrayed themselves in three divisions: the first under Moray and Douglas; the second under King David; and the third, the strongest, under the Steward.

Thare folk stowtly arayid then, And delt thame in till eschelis thre:
The Kyng hym-selff in ane wald be;
And to the Erle syne off Murrawe
And to Dowglas ane othir he gawe;
The Stwart hade the thyrd eschele, That wes the mast be mekill dele.

The English archers were a threat and Sir John Graham asked King David for 100 horsemen to neutralise them. He was refused but, nothing daunted, Graham led forward a handful of his own followers and enjoyed some success before his horse was killed underneath him.

The Inglis archerys come so nere, That wyn to thame welle nere mycht thai.
Than gud Schyre Jhone the Grame can say
To the Kyng, "Gettis me, but ma,
Ane hundyre on hors wyth me to ga,
And all yhone archerys skayle sall I:
Swa sall we fecht mare sykkerly."
Thus spak he, bot he mycht get nane.
His hors in hy than has he tane,
And hym allane amang thame rade,
And rwdly rowme about hym made.
Qwhen he a qwhille had prekyd thare,
And sum off thame had gert sow sare,
He to the battaylis rade agayne.
[Sa fell it, thai his hors hes] slayne.

The Earl of Moray's division, on the right of the line, got into difficulties among the ditches and lost their formation. This contributed to their defeat. Those of Moray's command who survived initially sought sanctuary with the King's division but found the ground not to their liking and linked up instead with the Steward's division on the far wing. Here, at least, there was room to fight.

The Erle off Murrawe and his menyhe
Than nere wes that assemble:
At hey dykis assemblid thai,
And that brak gretly thaire aray;
Tharfor thai war swne dyscumfyte.
Thai, that held hale, sped thame full tyte
To the Kyng, that assemblid was
In till a full anoyus plas,
Than nane, but hurt, mycht lyfft his hand,
Qwhen thai thaire fayis mycht noucht wythstand.
To the Stwartis rowt than went thai,
That was asemblyd nere that way.
Thare had thai rowme to stand in fycht;
Thare mycht thai welle assay thare mycht.
Than bathe the fyrst rowtis rycht thare
At that assemble wencust war.

Never before had such fierce fighting been witnessed. Those who had fled two miles or more from the battlefield could look back and see the banners flying. Then, at last, the Scots were utterly vanquished. King David was taken by John of Coupland, but not before he had dislodged two of his captor's teeth. Moray and Strathern were killed. Four more earls were captured. The Scottish dead numbered 500 killed in the field, 1,000 slain overall.

Thare wes hard fechtyng; as man sayis,
Swilk wes nevyre sene befor thai dayis:
Swa hard fechtyng than wes thare,
That qwhen the flearis twa myle and mare
War fled, the banaris war standand,
And thai ware face to face fychtand,
As mony sayd; bot noucht for-thi
Thai war syne wencust wtarly.
Mony fled, and noucht agayne
Repayrid, and thaire war mony slayne.
Jhon of Cowpland thare tuk the Kyng
Off fors, noucht yholdyne in that takyng;
The Kyng twa teth owt off his hevyd
Wyth a dynt off a knyff hym revyd.
In that fycht slayne war Erlis twa,
Murrawe and Stratherne war tha:
And foure war takyn in presowne
Off Fyffe the fyrst, and syne Wyctown,
Menteth syne, and Swthyrland;
Thir foure Erlis war tane in hand.
Fywe hundyr slayne ware, as sayd thai,
Bot thai, that deyd in [the] forray:
Swa thai all, that slayne war thare, Nowmryde till a thowsand ware.

In the Bodleian Library, Oxford, are copies of a letter containing a report of the Battle of Neville's Cross. The letter was apparently sent by someone called Thomas Sampson to his friends. From it we learn that the Scots were drawn up in three divisions and that the battle lasted from noon to vespers before the English triumphed. Twice in the course of the battle the English archers and foot soldiers were forced to give ground before the men at arms could stabilise the situation (*Deux fois se retrairent les archers e comunes de nostre partie, mais nos gents darmes se combatierent e se continuerent durment bien tantq les archers e comunes reassemblerent*). At the end of the battle Thomas de Lucy arrived with a reinforcement of more men at arms and was able to take over the pursuit[8].

There remain two other sources often cited in connection with the Battle of Neville's Cross. The first, the Chronicle of Henry Knighton, is more given over than is usually the case with monastic writings to emphasising the part played by clerics[9]. Little can be derived from it. This leaves the letter on the battle written by Prior Fossor to the Bishop of Durham. Fossor is useful in that he confirms the Scots occupied Bearpark manor. He does however introduce a note of obscurity by telling the bishop that the battle which followed was fought on Bearpark Moor between the city of Durham and Findon Hill. Since Findon Hill lies three miles north of Durham Fossor's statement can only be reconciled with other evidence about the site of the battle if we assume that he is referring to the extent of the pursuit afterwards. Fortunately, the assumption seems borne out by the fact that Fossor, immediately afterwards, writes of the battle ending at Findon Hill[10].

A satisfactory reconstruction of the Battle of Neville's Cross can only be accomplished if the findings derived from the written evidence can be matched with the terrain of the likely battlefield. Here the starting point must be the directions in which the opposing armies made their approach. The English we know approached Neville's Cross from the south. They found themselves on the narrow ridge previously described. Even the most modest computation of English numbers, contained in the Anonimalle Chronicle, provides them with a total of 700 men at arms and 10,000 archers, hobilars (mounted infantry) and other commoners, so they needed a measure of room in which to deploy. This being so, the writer Colonel A H Burne, in his reconstruction of the battle, positioned the English army at the point where the ridge is at its broadest, between the River Browney near Quarry House and the eastern end of the railway cutting[11]. The frontage is 1,000 yards.

The Scots meanwhile were advancing south-eastwards from Bearpark towards Redhills, at the northern end of the Neville's Cross ridge. According to the Lanercost chronicler their army was 30,000 strong but it was probably not half that number. As they advanced further, the Scots were increasingly funnelled between the Browney to the west and the precipitous slopes bordering Crossgate Moor to the east. Their front became more and more constricted, a possible explanation for why Moray's division on the right flank found it necessary to move amongst unfavourable ditches and fences. The ravine near Arbour House would have reduced space further as the Scots came within striking distance of the English position. Wyntoun's references to disordered formations and the disadvantages of the ground take on a new meaning when one sees the terrain for oneself.

In the battle which followed the three divisions on each side grappled with one another. Although the Scottish right hand division under Moray was in difficulties almost from the outset the English army's advantage was not immediate. Sir John Graham's exploits forced some of the English archers back and they had to be bolstered by men at arms. Soon, however, Moray's men did crack and the English left, under Mowbray and Rokeby, was able to swing round and attack King David's division in the flank. With Robert the Steward failing to make a full contribution to the battle on the far flank, King David found himself under mounting pressure. At vespers the climax of the battle arrived: David's men ran. Robert the Steward, who could perhaps have covered a retreat, had already left the field. The *Scotichronicon* states bluntly that he fled[12]. King David, left alone, was captured.

Indication of Importance

Neville's Cross was a shattering defeat for the Scots. When, the next year, the English followed up their victory, they were able to occupy virtually all of Scotland south of the Forth and Clyde rivers. It took a century for the Scots to recover all that they had lost.

A satisfactory reconstruction of the Battle of Neville's Cross is possible from the sources available. The nature of the ground is such that it is difficult to envisage where else the battle could have taken place.

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.

To the west the battlefield area is bounded by the River Browney. To the south the battlefield boundary leaves the Browney to cut across some school playing fields behind the English position as far as the A167 Newcastle Road.

The boundary of the battlefield area to the east is, in the main, the edge of the built-up area along the A167. To the north the battlefield boundary crosses behind the Scottish position using existing field boundaries for convenience. To the north-west the battlefield area incorporates the mouth of the ravine by Arbour House. This feature contributed to the Scots' difficulties with the terrain and so merits inclusion.

Although excluded from the battlefield area, the eastern half of the area over which the battle took place is shown for illustrative purposes by a dashed line. In this area are the mounds half way up the slope around Maiden's Bower which, according to tradition, clergymen from Durham Cathedral used as a vantage point from which to relay messages concerning the progress of the battle back to their colleagues.

Notes

1. Maxwell, Sir Herbert 'Chronicle of Lanercost' *Scottish Historical Review* X (1913) p179.

2. *The Anonimalle Chronicle 1333 to 1381* ed. by V H Galbraith (Manchester UP 1927) pp24-5.

3. See Robert White 'The Battle of Neville's Cross' *Archaeologia Aeliana* New Series I (1857) p278.

4. *The Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland by Andrew of Wyntoun* ed. David Laing (Edinburgh 1872) II 475.

5. *Tithe Apportionments and Maps of the City of Durham* ed. David Butler (Durham County Local History Society Documentary Series No. 7, 1988) pp6-7.

6. *Lanercost Chronicle* pp180-3.

7. *Wyntoun* op. cit.

8. Bodleian Library, Oxford: MSS Bodley 302 ff. 142-3 and Ashmole 789 f. 160.

9. *Chronicon Henrici Knighton* ed. J R Lumby II (Rolls Series 92, London 1895) pp41-45.

10. *Historical Papers and Letters from the Northern Registers* ed. James Raine (Rolls Series 61, 1873) pp387-9.

11. Burne, Colonel A H *More Battlefields of England* (London 1952) pp115-126.

12. John of Fordun *Scotichronicon.*