English Heritage Battlefield Report: Northallerton 1138

Northallerton or 'The Standard'
(22 August 1138)

Parishes: Brompton; Northallerton

District: Hambleton

County: North Yorkshire

Grid Ref: SE360977 (centred on battlefield monument)

Historical Context

The Battle of Northallerton, or The Standard, was fought in August 1138 as a consequence of King David I of Scotland's attempt to profit by the troubles attending King Stephen's rule in England. Stephen had seized the throne on the death of King Henry I in 1135 but much of the country preferred to recognise the late King's designated successor, his daughter the Empress Matilda. Baronial revolt was widespread and Stephen was fully occupied near Bristol when, in July 1138, David of Scotland made his third and largest incursion of the year into England. As an uncle of the disinherited Matilda King David was ostensibly acting in her interest, but it was widely believed that the Scots king harboured an ambition to annex Northumberland.

Resistance to Scottish depredations was organized by Archbishop Thurstan of York, the King's Lieutenant in the north who made the task of repelling the Scots a holy crusade. It was because he was so successful in raising an army that the ecclesiastical chroniclers, who provide us with most of our information about Norman England, took a particular interest in the Northallerton campaign. This ensured that the Battle of the Standard and the events that preceded it were remarkably well-documented.

Thurstan's army gathered at York and then marched north to Thirsk. From there two barons rode on to try to negotiate with King David. It was a fruitless exercise. Their overtures were rebuffed and on Sunday 21 August the Scottish Army crossed the River Tees from Durham into Yorkshire. To halt the Scots' progress the English Army marched north and drew up in battle order beyond Northallerton early next morning.

Location of the Battlefield

The most precise placing of the battlefield is made by the chronicler Prior Richard of Hexham. Since he wrote before 1154 his account is almost contemporary with events. He describes the arrival of the English at the Battlefield:

While thus they were awaiting the approach of the Scots, the scouts whom they had sent forward to reconnoitre returned, bringing news that the King with his army had already passed the River Tees and was ravaging their province in his accustomed manner. They hastened to resist them; and, by-passing the village of Northallerton, they arrived early in the morning at a plain distant from it by about two miles. Some of them soon erected in the centre of a frame which they brought, the mast of a ship to which they gave the name of the Standard..[1]

The English were advancing northwards from Thirsk, so in by-passing Northallerton those two additional miles would have taken them that distance further towards the Tees. And this, between two and three miles from Northallerton, is where we find the traditional site of the Battle of the Standard.

The battlefield, near the village of Brompton, is largely framed by the A167 to the west, Brompton Lane to the

east and an overgrown track known as Scotpit Lane to the south. The main feature of the ground within this triangle are the two gentle hills that rise from the generally flat landscape On the southernmost hill, on which today the second of two properties named Standard Hill Farm stands, the English are held to have been arrayed. The Scots are usually represented as drawn up 600 yards to the north upon the other hill, on which the first Standard Hill Farm is now situated. The battlefield, as this mention of farms would suggest, consists today entirely of agricultural land.

The persistent description of the Battle of Northallerton as having taken place on Cowton Moor has caused some confusion. Cowton Moor is actually some eight miles to the north-west of Northallerton, so the designation is at odds with Richard of Hexham's statement that the Battle took place a bare two miles north of the town. A number of writers, while accepting the traditional site of the battlefield near Brompton, have avoided the problem by calling that Cowton Moor instead[2]. But how did the contradiction first arise?

The problem stems largely from the later additions that were made to the text of the other main source for the Battle of Northallerton, *De Bello Standardi* by Ailred of Rievaulx. As the editor of the published text in the Rolls Series commented, the version in the Cottonian MS (written in a fifteenth century hand) is an 'absurdly corrupt and interpolated text', and one of these interpolations describes the battle as taking place 'at Allerton *on Cowton Moor*'[3]. Nor is this an isolated instance: a similar addition had been made at a later date to the text of Roger Hoveden's chronicle so that it too now refers to the battle taking place 'at Allerton *in Cowton Moor* '[4]. It seems evident that an attempt had been made to provide misplaced clarification. Fortunately, one need not rely solely on the fact that later additions are inherently suspect to show that references to Cowton Moor are redundant: the survival of place names and battlefield archaeology come to the rescue.

The best case for believing that the Battle of the Standard took place on the traditional site near Brompton is the continuing description of part of the battlefield there as the Scot Pits. As the name implies this would have been where many Scottish casualties of the Battle were buried. Although by the early nineteenth century ploughing had levelled the graves, historians writing in the 1890s had informants who could recall hedgers and ditchers finding bones in Scot Pits Lane[5]. Clearly, the appellation was of a long standing nature: William Dugdale, writing his *The Baronage of England* in 1675, made reference to the Battle as follows: 'the Ground whereon it was fought, lying about two miles distant from North Alverton (on the right hand the Road, leading thence towards Durham) is to this day called Standard Hill, having in it divers hollow places still known by the name of the Scots Pits'[6.] The proximity of burial pits and the survival of a distinctive place name would appear to establish the site of the battlefield fairly conclusively. It certainly did not occur some five miles away on the present Cowton Moor.

Landscape Evolution

It is not an easy task to determine what the Battlefield might have looked like over 850 years ago but there are some clues which may provide the answer. As noted above, Richard of Hexham described the Battle as taking place on a 'plain'. The other major source for the battle, Ailred of Rievaulx, also refers to it being fought 'in a very wide plain'[7]. To modern ears the description of a battlefield as a plain might not sound particularly helpful, but in Norman England the designation appears to have had a technical meaning. Fifty years before the Battle of the Standard, Domesday Book was compiled on the orders of William the Conqueror to discover the extent and value of the estates of all those holding land in England. In 1086 the manor of 'Aluertune' (Northallerton) was described as waste - the result of William's 'Harrying of the North' - but in 1066, in addition to land under the plough, it had contained 'wood(land) and plain 5 leagues in length and the same in breadth'[8]. This was a sizeable tract of uncultivated land and it seems a distinct possibility that as ground returned to the plough in the fifty years after Domesday the original 'plain' would have remained untended longest. Field observation suggests Medieval ridge and furrow just north of the northern Standard Hill Farm but this could have been constructed later than 1138. The reference by both Richard and Ailred to the battlefield as a plain suggests that this is what it was: 'a very wide' expanse of uncultivated moorland.

The battlefield area lies on a low ridge with land falling away gently to east and west. Place names such as Cinnamire and Crowfoot to the west and Leascar and Danger Carr to the east indicate wet ground. There is no evidence of ancient woodland and all the accessible hedgerows appear to be 100-200 years old, even around Scotpit Lane.

The nearest settlement was Brompton, which appears to have had Medieval open fields possibly dating from 1138. It is unlikely these extended onto the battlefield area.

Before 1792 the battlefield was enclosed with the regular, straight sided Parliamentary Enclosure hawthorn hedged fields still visible. The present day isolated farmsteads were probably constructed at the same time, regularly spaced within their fields. Many of the local minor roads eg Crowfoot Lane, Brompton Lane and Northallerton Rigg follow lines at least as old if not older than the field patterns. The A167 - in 1842 a turnpike road, could also have been in existence before the Enclosure period. Scotpit Lane forms part of the Parliamentary Enclosure landscape, named after the burial pits it was partly built across.

The Sources

The chronicle of Richard of Hexham, as already indicated, is a contemporary source. In the extract quoted already it will be recalled that Richard had placed the battlefield two miles north of Northallerton. Here the Standard was erected.

> On the top of this pole they hung a silver pyx containing the Host and the banners of St Peter the apostle, and John of Beverley and Wilfrid of Ripon, confessors and bishops. In so doing their hope was that our Lord Jesus Christ, through the efficacy of his Body, might be their leader in the struggle. They also provided for their men a sure and conspicuous rallying point, by which they might rejoin their comrades in the event of their being cut off.

> Scarcely had they set themselves in battle array when tidings were brought that the King of Scots was close at hand with his whole force, ready and eager for the battle. The greater part of the knights dismounted and fought on foot. A picked force, interspersed with archers, was arranged in the front rank. The others, with the exception of those who were to deploy and reinforce the army, mustered with the barons in the centre, near and around the Standard, and they were guarded by the rest of the host, who closed in on all sides. The troop of cavalry and the horses of the knights were stationed at a little distance, lest thay should take fright at the shouting and uproar of the Scots. In like manner, on the enemy's side, the king and almost all his followers were on foot, their horses being kept at a distance. In the front line were the Picts; in the centre the king with his knights and his English allies, and the rest of the barbarian host poured roaring around them.

> As they advanced in this order to battle, the Standard with its banners was visible at no great distance; and at once the hearts of the King of Scots and his followers were dismayed by terror and consternation; yet, persisting in their wickedness, they pressed on to accomplish their evil ends. On the octave of the Assumption of St Mary, being Monday, 22 August, between the first and third hours this battle began and ended. A large number of Picts were slain in the first attack, while the rest, throwing down their arms, disgracefully fled. The plain was strewn with corpses; very many were taken prisoner; the king and all his magnates took to flight; till in the end, of that immense army all were either slain, captured or scattered as sheep without a shepherd ... And the power of God's vengeance was most plainly manifested in this, that the army of the conquered was inestimably greater than that of the conquerors; for, as many affirm, of that army which came out of Scotland alone, more than ten thousand were missing, and in various localities of the Deirans, Northumbrians and Cumbrians, many more perished after the fight than fell in battle[9].

Prior Richard imparts useful information about the formations adopted by the two sides but there is, unfortunately, a dearth of topographical detail. The same is true of the other major source, the chronicle of Ailred of Rievaulx. As noted earlier Ailred, like Prior Richard, writes simply that the Standard was planted 'in a very wide plain near Northallerton'; no hill is mentioned. Ailred was another contemporary author and although his account is largely intent on glorifying the role in the Battle of Walter l'Espec, into whose mouth Ailred puts a stirring speech (l'Espec was the founder of the Cistercian monastery of Rievaulx), he includes much other useful information, particularly about the Scots' Council of War. Only four years before, Ailred had been a royal official in King David's Hall and he clearly retained a measure of sympathy for his former master. The battle, moreover, was fought within a few miles of Rievaulx: Ailred could hardly fail to be stirred by the conjunction of personalities and events.

According to Ailred, while the English made their preparations, the knights having 'decided to remove all their horses farther, and to engage as infantry, wishing either to die or to conquer',

> ...King [David] gathered together his earls and the highest nobles of his realm,and began to discuss with them the array of battle. And it pleased the greater number that all the armed men, knights and archers whom they had should go before the rest of the army, so that armed men should attack armed men, and knights engage with knights, and arrows resist arrows.
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> The Galwegians [men of Galloway] opposed this, saying that it was their right to fill the front line, to make the first attack upon the enemy, to arouse by their courage the rest of the army. The others said it was dangerous if at the first assault unarmed men met armed men; for if the first rank sustained not the brunt of battle but yielded to flight the courage of even the brave would be readily dispelled.
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> Nonetheless the Galwegians persisted, demanding that their right be granted to them. 'For why art thou fearful, O King,' said they; 'and why dost thou so greatly dread those iron tunics which thou seest far off? We surely have iron sides, a breast of bronze, a mind void of fear; and our feet have never known flight, nor our backs a wound. What gain were their hauberks to the Gauls at Clitheroe? Did not these men unarmed, as they say, compel them to throw away their hauberks, to forget their helmets, to leave behind their shields? Let then your prudence see, O king, what it is to have confidence in these, which in a strait are more burden than defence. We gained at Clitheroe the victory over mail-clad men: we today shall use as shield the valour of our minds, and vanquish these with spears.'
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> After this was said, when the King seemed rather to incline to the counsels of his knights, Malisse, earl of Strathearn, was greatly wroth, and said: 'Why is it, O King, that thou reliest rather upon the will of Gauls, since none of them with their arms today will advance before me, unarmed, in the battle?' And Alan de Percy, base-born son of the great Alan - a most vigorous knight, and in military matters highly distinguished - took these words ill; and turning to the earl he said, 'A great word hast thou spoken, and one which for thy life thou canst not make good this day.'
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> Then the king, restraining both, lest a disturbance should suddenly arise out of this altercation, yielded to the will of the Galwegians.
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> The second line the King's son [Prince Henry] arranged with great wisdom; with himself the knights and archers, adding to their number the Cumbrians and Teviotdalesmen ... The men of Lothian formed the third rank, with the islanders and the men of Lorne. The King kept in his own line the Scots and Moravians; several also of the English and French knights he appointed as his bodyguard. And thus was the northern army arrayed.

Ailred's view of the English dispositions is similar to Prior Richard's:

...The southerns, since they were few, very wisely massed into one column. For the most vigorous knights were placed in the first front, and the lancers and archers so distributed through them that they were protected by the arms of the knights, and could with equal vigour and security either attack the enemy or receive his attack. But the nobles who were of a maturer age were arrayed (that they might support the others) around the royal banner, some being placed higher than the rest upon the machine itself.

Shield was joined to shield, side pressed to side: lances were raised with pennons unfurled, hauberks glittered in the brilliance of the sun; priests, white-clad in their sacred robes, went around the army with crosses and relics of the saints, and most becomingly fortified the people with speech as well as prayer.

The Scots advanced to the sound of trumpets and the clashing of spears and shields. 'Earth trembled, heaven groaned; the mountains and hills around returned the echo'.

And the column of Galwegians after their custom gave vent thrice to a yell of horrible sound, and attacked the southerns in such an onslaught that they compelled the first spearmen to forsake their post; but they were driven off again by the strength of the knights, and [the spearmen] recovered their courage and strength against the foe.

And when the frailty of the Scottish lances was mocked by the denseness of iron and wood they drew their swords and attempted to contend at close quarters. But the southern flies swarmed forth from the caves of their quivers, and flew like closest rain; and irksomely attacking the opponents' breasts, faces and eyes, very greatly impeded their attack. Like a hedgehog with its quills, so would you see a Galwegian bristling all round with arrows, and nonetheless brandishing his sword and in blind madness rushing forward now smite a foe, now lash the air with useless strokes.

The Galwegians faltered and the entire Scots line began to recoil. Prince Henry, stationed on the right wing and leading the only mounted force in the whole army, attempts to save the day.

Struck with panic all the rear were on the point of melting into flight, when the noble youth, king [David's] son, came up with his line and hurled himself, fierce as a lion, upon the opposing wing; and after scattering that part of the southern army like a spider's web, slaying all who opposed him advanced beyond the royal banner. And thinking that the rest of the army would follow him, to remove from the foe their refuge in flight he attacked those stationed with the horses, routed and dispersed them, and compelled them to flee as far as two furlongs. At this wonderful onslaught therefore the unarmed folk fled in terror.

But by the fiction of a certain prudent man, who raised aloft the head of one of the killed and cried that the King was slain, they were brought back and attacked their opponents more eagerly than ever.

Then the Galwegians could sustain no longer the shower of arrows, the swords of the knights; and took to flight after two of their leaders had been slain, Ulgric and Donald. Moreover the column of the men of Lothian scarcely awaited the first attack, but immediately dispersed.

Seeing the rout developing King David dismounted and, with his bodyguard, prepared to face the enemy. But when the English began to move forward his knights forced him back into the saddle and compelled him to retire.

Then they who had fled saw the royal banner retiring (for it was blazoned in the likeness of a dragon, and easily recognised) and knew that the king had not fallen but was in retreat. And they returned to him and formed a column terrible to their pursuers.

Meanwhile that pride of youths, glory of knights, joy of old men, King [David's} son, looked back and saw that he was left with a few followers in the midst of the foe; and turning to one of his comrades he smiled and said, 'We have done what we could, and have surely conquered in so far as is in our power. Now there is need of resourcefulness no less than of valour. And nought else is a surer mark of a steadfast mind than not to be downcast in adversity; and when thou hast not strength thou mayest overcome the enemy by stratagem. Therefore throw aside the banners by which we are marked out from the others, and let us mix with the enemy as though we pursued with them, until we outstrip them all and come as soon as may be to my father's column, which I see afar off yielding to necessity, but continuing still in its strength'[10].

Richard of Hexham and Ailred of Rievaulx are the two major sources for the Battle of the Standard. Other twelfth-century chroniclers mention the battle and may include some detail, but apart from Henry of Huntingdon in his *Historia Anglorum* [11], who informs us that Prince Henry's assault was conducted with mounted men and that the Scots' battle cry was 'Albany! Albany!', they rarely add anything of substance.

The Battle

The significant feature of the chroniclers' accounts of the battle is that, in essentials, they do not contradict one another. Thus the sequence of events is clear. The English arrive first and deploy, at which point the Scots reach the battlefield. Whilst the English congregate in a single mass, with archers and dismounted knights to the fore, dismounted knights around the Standard, and the half-armed shire levies filling out the remainder of the formation, the Scots adopt what at first sight is a more flexible line of battle but one which, following the Galwegians' insistence that they should lead the assault, is fatally flawed. The Galwegians are in the centre of the line and to the front. According to Ailred, the second line, under Prince Henry, was composed of the levies from Cumbria and Teviotdale, the army's archers and the bulk of the Lowland English and Norman chivalry. The third line was made up of English-speaking troops from Lothian and the men of the Western Highlands. King David kept a reserve of Scots and Moravians, as well as the knights of his personal bodyguard, under his own hand.

Writers on mediaeval warfare such as Charles Oman[12] and John Beeler[13] do not take Ailred's depiction of the Scottish as ranged in three or four lines literally, but prefer to represent them in the more usual formation of a main battle with two wings. Accordingly, in their diagrams of the Battle of the Standard the Galwegians are in the centre with Prince Henry's 'second line' slightly withdrawn but to the Galwegians' right and the 'third rank' similarly refused but to the left. King David is centrally placed in the rear.

Both Prior Richard and Ailred write that the Galwegians (or Picts) made the first attack but were repulsed. Ailred perhaps credits them with more success than Richard allows. After that Richard tells us how the remainder of the Scottish army 'throwing down their arms, disgracefully fled'. Ailred, while acknowledging that the Lothian men scarcely awaited the first attack before fleeing, tells us of Prince Henry's impetuous attack which cut through the English line and scattered the horseholders to the rear. The Prince hoped that the infantry of his wing would pour into the hole in the English line made by his small number of mounted knights. The gap, however, was soon closed and, with the Galwegians having by now decamped from the field, the battle was effectively lost. Notwithstanding King David's desire to throw himself against the victorious English all that remained was for Prince Henry to extricate himself from his difficult position behind the English lines as artfully as possible and follow his father to Carlisle.

Indication of Importance

From the political point of view the Battle of the Standard ensured that Northumberland did not become part of Scotland, even on a temporary basis.

The detail which Richard of Hexham and Ailred of Rievaulx supply about the formations and the fighting sheds important light on contemporary tactics. Charles Oman found it interesting that the side which had the advantage in mailed knights (the English) should eschew the mounted arm and fight in a style reminiscent of King Harold's men at Hastings seventy years before[14]. It showed that Norman knights were not wedded to one particular way of fighting. The Scots, who were deficient in armoured cavalry, nevertheless demonstrated the value of mounted shock action when Prince Henry's charge provided a fleeting opportunity for victory.

The extent to which the Battle of the Standard was the culmination of a religious crusade on the part of the English ensured that it was remarkably well-documented by monkish chroniclers. From the archaeological point of view the presence of the Scots Pits helps establish the Battlefield's location.

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 battlefield is largely contained within a triangle of two roads and a track. This might seem strange since the area so enclosed is a small one, but we know that the English adopted a very compact formation ('shield was joined to shield, side pressed to side'). The Scots, although their army was marshalled more loosely, seem to have conformed; we do not read of them attempting to attack from the flanks.

Working out the precise extent of the battlefield would be an easier task if the approximate totals of the two armies were known with more certainty. Richard of Hexham's claim that the Scottish army numbered over 26,000 men is regarded as a substantial over-estimate by most writers. It would have been an enormous army for that period. It appears safer to trust him simply when he observes that the Scots army was greater in size than that of the English[15].

John Beeler provides a scale for his diagram of the battle and he allocates the English - whose formation he describes as a phalanx - a frontage of 600 yards[16]. This means, when placed on the forward slope of the southernmost of the two hills, that the English line fits neatly between the A167 and Brompton Lane.

The Scots, arrayed on the other hill, would of necessity have seen their flanks extend beyond the present A167 and Brompton Lane, because the two roads steadily converge to create the apex of a triangle as they proceed north. Taking the formation described above, field boundaries will serve to define the limits of this part of the battlefield.

To the south, Scotpit Lane is the natural boundary for the battlefield area. It lies sufficiently far behind the English line to allow the 'unarmed' (by which Ailred meant the unarmoured) shire levies, who took fright when Prince Henry broke into the English formation, to flee their two furlongs before the claim that King David was dead rallied their spirits and persuaded them to lay on afresh. It would also be in the vicinity of Scotpit Lane that the English horses were gathered; the fight that Prince Henry's comrades had with the guards perhaps explains why there should be an area known to this day as the Scots pits behind the English lines rather than elsewhere on the battlefield.

Notes

1. *English Historical Documents 1042-1189* D C Douglas & G W Greenaway eds. (2nd edition Oxford 1981) p346.

2. Leadman, A D H 'The Battle of the Standard' *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* 10 (1889) p381; Barrett C R B *Battles and Battlefields in England* (London 1896) p30; N Fairbairn & M Cyprien *A Traveller's Guide to the Battlefields of Britain* (London 1983) p28.

3. *Chronicles and Memorials of the reigns of Stephen, Henry II and Richard I* ed. R Howlett (Rolls Series, 1886) vol. 3, pp lix, 182, 199.

4. *Chronica Magistri Rogeri de Houedene* ed. W Stubbs (Rolls Series 1868) i 193.

5. Leadman p387; Barrett p35.

6. Dugdale, William *The Baronage of England* (London 1675) i 62.

7. *Chronicles and Memorials op. cit.* p181-2.

8. *The Victoria History of the Counties of England: Yorkshire* (Folkestone and London 1974) ii 196.

9. *English Historical Documents 1042-1189* pp346-7

10. Translation of Ailred taken from Anderson, Alan O *Scottish Annals from English Chroniclers AD 500 to 1286* (London 1908) pp198-206.

11. *The Chronicle of Henry of Huntingdon*, translated and edited by Thomas Forster (1853; facsimile reprint Llanereh Press, Felinfach 1991) pp269-70.

12. Oman, Sir Charles *A History of the Art of War in the Middle Ages* (London 1924) i 401.

13. Beeler, John *Warfare in England 1066-1189* (New York 1966) p95.

14. Oman *op. cit.* p395.

15. *English Historical Documents 1042-1189* pp344, 347.

16. Beeler *op. cit.*