English Heritage Battlefield Report: Otterburn 1388

Otterburn or Chevy Chase
(19 August 1388)

Parish: Otterburn

District: Tynedale

County: Northumberland

Grid Ref:NY 877936 (centred on Percy's Cross)

Historical Context

The instability caused by Richard II's struggle with the lords appellant extended to all corners of the Kingdom. In the north of England the Neville family was stripped of its official positions and the rival Percys placed in the ascendant. The Scots were aware of the disunity caused by the power struggle and decided to take advantage. In the summer of 1388 an army estimated at 40,000 by contemporary chroniclers invaded northern England. By far the greater number struck west towards Carlisle under the Earl of Fife; a smaller force around 6,000 strong, commanded by James, Earl Douglas headed for Durham.

To counter the threat posed by Douglas's expedition the head of the Percy family, the Earl of Northumberland, sent his sons, Henry and Ralph, to Newcastle. During one of the skirmishes that occurred outside the walls of the City, Douglas snatched the silk pennon from the end of Henry Percy's lance. Percy, whose impetuosity had earned him the sobriquet 'Harry Hotspur', vowed to recover the pennon and Douglas, who was equally chivalric, promised to give him the opportunity to do so. Thus, in the course of their retirement to Scotland, Douglas prevailed on his colleagues to wait for their pursuers at Otterburn, 32 miles northwest of Newcastle. The Scots busied themselves in an unsuccessful attempt to capture Otterburn Tower. Meanwhile the English, who by now realised that with the bulk of the Scottish army operating near Carlisle they outnumbered their opponents, were prepared to allow Hotspur to fulfil his vow. During the course of 19 August Hotspur drove on his army of approximately 8,000 men and they arrived at Otterburn at nightfall.

Location and Description of the Battlefield

Although, thanks to Froissart[1] and other chroniclers, a good description of the course of the Battle of Otterburn has come down to us, none of the accounts are sufficiently precise in their topographical references to enable the battlefield to be unhesitatingly identified. This has meant that in the past a number of alternative locations for the battlefield have been proposed. At one time the camp on the hill above Overacres, a little over a mile to the east of Otterburn, had its supporters[2]. More recently Sir James Ramsay has argued in favour of the river flats around Otterburn Mill and the hill at Castle Rigg[3]. The consensus that has emerged, however, is that the fighting took place to the west of Otterburn, extending as far as the hillside above Greenchesters. In justification of this view, the location of the battlefield monument, Percy's Cross, is cited[4]. The monument was already ancient when it was moved a short distance in 1777 and the tradition has long been that its siting was associated with an event in the battle, possibly marking the spot where the Earl of Douglas was killed. Locating a battlefield in the vicinity of a monument is one method of proceeding when documentary sources fail to provide firm guidance; thereafter all that is possible is to attempt to match what topographical references there are in the written sources to the landscape as it is today.

Otterburn battlefield lies to the north of the River Rede at a place where the valley broadens to a width of about 1,000 yards. The gradient of the hillside on which the battle was fought is relatively gentle, sloping down not only southwards to the River Rede but eastwards towards the Otter Burn, which flows into the Rede at Otterburn

village. Land use is primarily agricultural. Tree plantations of varying sizes cluster near the crest of the ridge, which reaches a maximum height of 700 feet behind the Cross Plantation.

Landscape Evolution

In 1388 the battlefield comprised marshes near the River Rede (mentioned by Froissart) and light woodland on the firmer ground elsewhere. The *Scotichronicon*[5] alludes to the role played by 'thickets and thorn brakes' in the battle and Andrew of Wyntoun[6] refers to 'buskis' (bushes). Although the bottom of the valley is now much better drained, marshy ground is still indicated in places on the Ordnance Survey map.

The earliest maps show fields on the battlefield called Townhead Common Land and, next to the present school, Townhead Ancient Land. The common land would probably have been rough grazing, whilst "Ancient Land" indicates old enclosed land. Whether this was pasture or down to grain is impossible to tell, but there is no documentary or field evidence for medieval open field arable agriculture in the battlefield area, nor any old hedgerows. What evidence there is suggests the battle was fought on valley-bottom pasture land.

The battlefield area has been enclosed by the current field system in stages from the 1770s until the 1860s. Some field lines may pre-date 1779. Holt Wood may have been continuously wooded, having been spared from more general clearance, but the current woodland there is not ancient. Cross Plantation was planted after 1860, Long Plantation was planted between 1840 and 1860.

The Otterburn Road and Dere Street were mapped in 1779. The A696(T) road which runs through Otterburn to Scotland follows the route of the eighteenth-century turnpike, which in turn follows the route of the mediaeval road to the border at Carter Bar. It was when the turnpike was being constructed that Percy's Cross was moved. The then Duke of Northumberland wished to commemorate the part played in the Battle of Otterburn by his illustrious Percy ancestor. The local landowner however refused him permission to erect a monument, offering instead to do so himself. To that end he dug up the ancient stone and used the socket for a new monument, which the landowner sited 180 paces to the west so that it could be seen from the new road. Robert White, who published the first substantial work on the battle in 1857, was a local and in his youth walked with a man who pointed out to him the Stone's original position[7].

As the information panel which Northumberland County Council has provided alongside Percy's Cross explains, a lintel from the kitchen fireplace at Otterburn Tower was placed in the original socket and became the new monument. The Tower Hotel in Otterburn was built on the site of the mediaeval fortification.

The pastoral landscape of the battlefield has not been greatly altered since the enclosed fields were built across it, probably from the late eighteenth century. Some of these boundaries have disappeared since 1860 but those remaining do not interfere with the open views across the Rede Valley and to the fells. Holt Wood, Cross and Long Plantations do not extend beyond the fringes of the battlefield area. Only the school, the small woodland planted around the Percy's Cross and Greenchesters Farm provide any focal points in the flat pastureland.

The Sources

There are a number of written sources for the Battle of Otterburn. Pre-eminent amongst them is the account of the battle penned by Jean Froissart[8]. Although by this stage Froissart had returned to his native Low Countries he had earlier, as a member of the entourage of Edward III's Queen, Philippa of Hainault, travelled widely in Britain: as Froissart remarks, he had met Douglas, the Scottish commander at Otterburn, when the future captain was but a youth. Afterwards, within the year, he spoke to men of the rival armies who had fought in the battle. Froissart may have been a foreigner writing about events at some distance but he understood the culture of the men involved and his telling of the battle possesses authentic touches. Indeed the fame of the Battle of Otterburn is largely due to him. Deeply impressed as Froissart was by examples of chivalric endeavour the occasion brought out the best in his writing.

As the victors at Otterburn, the Scottish accounts of the battle tend to go into greater detail than the English versions. Both the *Scotichronicon*[9] of Walter Bower (abbot of Inchcolm 1418; died 1445) and the *Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland* by Andrew of Wyntoun[10] (prior of Lochleven 1395-1413; completed his chronicle in retirement 1420-24) give full descriptions of the fighting. They are, moreover, in close agreement on the course of events. It is reassuring that some of their detail corroborates references found in Froissart. However, the case of the Latin poem written *c.*1418 by the Glasgow canon of Bothwile, Thomas de Barry, is problematical[11]. As Colonel A H Burne recognised when he wrote an account of the Battle of Otterburn in one of his battlefield guides, 'the poet seems more intent on his rhymes and puns than on presenting a straightforward historical account'[12]. Little of independent value can be derived from Barry's poem.

The perception of English chroniclers of the battle varies. John Harding, who joined Sir Henry Percy's household as a boy two years after the battle, many years later recorded the version of the battle that he had been told. In Harding's account the English effectively won the battle; unfortunately the Scots captured Sir Henry Percy[13]. While the continuator of Henry Knighton's chronicle (writing at Leicester Abbey)[14] and Thomas Walsingham[15], at the time of the battle a monk at St. Albans, both record Percy's capture, this only occurs after he has killed the Earl of Douglas with his own hand. Walsingham acknowledges that during the Scottish counterattack - when Percy was captured - the English suffered heavy losses, but the Scots too were so battered that they fled the kingdom and did not dare return. In this way the English defeat is cast in a favourable light. The *Polychronicon*, a continuation of the work begun by Ranulph Higden at St. Werberg's Abbey in Chester in the early fourteenth century, is the only contemporary English source to adopt a critical stance, enumerating the reasons for Percy's lack of success[16].

The Battle

Froissart's description of the battle begins once Douglas has prevailed on his colleagues to remain at Otterburn and make another attempt on the castle.

> [The Scots] settled down comfortably and peacefully, no one hindering them, and built a large number of shelters from trees and leaves. They protected themselves by making skilful use of some big marshes which are there. On the way in between these marshes, on the Newcastle side, they quartered their serving-men and foragers. They placed all their cattle in the marshland. Then they made great preparations to assault the castle again on the next day, for such was their intention.

What Froissart writes suggests that at least part of the Scottish camp was sited amidst the marshy ground at the bottom of the valley. His observation that the Scots made shelters from trees and leaves hints at the wooded nature of the landscape.

Yet it appears strange that the Scots, who were after all awaiting the arrival of the English, should have relaxed to the extent that they did. When Henry Percy, as the *Scotichronicon* explains, approached 'to attack the army of the Earl of Douglas, then in pitched camp at Otterburn in Redesdale', we are assured that

> The Earl of Douglas did not suspect any evil from his foes, so with the Earls of March and Moray, his two brothers, and many other knights and nobles, he and they were dressed, unarmed, in gowns and long robes, ready for feasting on the day of St Oswald. As they reclined at table a certain Scot came to them, sitting on a saddled horse, calling frantically to all to fly to arms, 'because our enemies are speeding upon us'. At his voice all jumped up from their supper, and flew to put on their armour.

Wyntoun agrees and describes a scene of some panic. Douglas and his party, because of the heat, had put on their gowns (*for the hete tuk on syd gownys*) when suddenly a rider appears shouting a warning. The Scots don their armour: 'But that was done with great speed, That many failed in that need.' Douglas 'reckless he of his arming

was'; the Earl of Moray forgot his basinet.

During the course of the day Percy had hurried on from Newcastle. The distance to Otterburn is actually 32 miles but Froissart believed it to have been as few as eight, an instance where either his sources or his own recollections failed him. Arriving near Otterburn at nightfall, Percy, perhaps uncharacteristically, paused to take stock of the situation and decided to send a force round the enemy flank to attack their rear. Command of this flanking attack is ascribed by the chroniclers to a variety of men: Sir Matthew Redman's name is mentioned most often. The *Polychronicon* approves the strategy: it was set to deliver victory. Andrew of Wyntoun too was aware of the English plan. Sir Henry Percy was

To meet the Earl [of Douglas], to whom he would give fight:
The other body then ride to the right
Until the pavilions, and there
When the main bodies fighting were,
Destroy and slay all that they find.

Unfortunately, as far as the author of the *Polychronicon* is concerned, Percy throws away the opportunity by reverting to type and launching a rash attack. But this is not how the *Scotichronicon* sees it:

Henry Percy found that his men were crowded together, so he divided his army into two. He led one part himself, with Ralph Percy his brother; the other part he entrusted to the lords Maurice [?Matthew] Redmane and Robert Ogyl, to destroy pavilions and tents; he himself hastened to the field. The arrival of the English increased the hubbub amongst the Scots, who took to flight, keenly pursued by Redmayne and Ogyl. But when the part led by Percy was waiting for the fugitive Scots, and was rejoicing at the prospect of their flight, the Earl of Douglas got his best men to mount their horses and advance unseen through thickets and thorn brakes. They approached the field unseen by the English, and suddenly burst out near the English line, with twelve banners unfurled, and gleaming in the setting sun.

Douglas's manoeuvre would ultimately prove to be the battle-winning tactic. Wyntoun mentions it also:

With this the Earl James was passing
Towards his foes the nearest way,
Where bushes were, as I heard say,
Where Englishmen saw not his coming;
For they were more intent on beholding The Scottish commoners, that they saw fly.
And when they had a little way
Beholden the folk, that fleeing was,
Sir James then of Douglas
Was past the bushes, and suddenly
He bolted up close at hand to them [by]
With twelve displayed banners, or more.

Froissart's account also recognises the importance of Douglas's counterstroke. Although his description of the battle does not take cognisance of Redman's flanking attack which, as has been seen, the partisan narratives of both English and Scots mention, the foresight of the Scots in planning how they should react to an enemy attack is given due prominence:

While the Scots were sitting over supper - though many had already gone to bed, for they had had a hard day attacking the castle and meant to get up early to assault it again in the cool of the morning - suddenly the English fell upon their encampment. When they first came to it, they mistook the quarters of the servants, near the entrance, for those of the masters. So they raised their cry of

'Percy! Percy!' and began to break into that part of the camp, which was quite strong. You know what a great commotion there is at such moments, and it was very fortunate for the Scots that the English made their first attack on the serving-men for, although these did not hold out long, it gave the rest of them good warning of what to expect. Their commanders therefore sent up a number of their strongest servants and foot-soldiers to keep the English busy, and meanwhile armed themselves and formed up, every knight and man-at-arms under the banner or pennon of their captains, and thence under the earls whom they were to follow, each of whom had his own command. Night was now falling fast, but there was a moon and it was fairly light. It was in August and fine and cloudless, and the air was calm and clear.

When the Scots had formed up noiselessly in the order I have described, they left their encampment. Instead of advancing directly ahead to meet the English face to face, they skirted round the marshes and a hill which was there. They enjoyed the great advantage of having prospected the terrain during the whole of the previous day, when the most experienced among them had discussed it and said: 'If the English tried to surprise us in our quarters, we would go that way, and do this and so on.' It was this that saved them, for it is a great thing for men-at-arms who are exposed to a night attack to know the ground round them thoroughly and to have already concerted their plans.

The English soon overcame the servants who had met their first onrush. But as they went farther into the encampment, they constantly ran into fresh men coming up to fight and hinder them. And suddenly there were Scots on their flank, having come round as I described, who charged down on the English like one man, shouting their battle-cries all together and taking them completely by surprise. The English rallied and closed up, seeking a position on firm ground and shouting 'Percy!' in reply to the 'Douglas!' of the Scots. A fierce battle began, with prodigious lance-thrusts and men on both sides hurtling to the ground in this first clash.

By this point in the battle each side had executed what it hoped would be a battle-winning manoeuvre. We now also possess virtually all the topographical references that the chroniclers are prepared to vouchsafe us. It seems appropriate, therefore, to attempt to relate both manoeuvres and topographical references to the terrain around Percy's Cross.

As already noted, Froissart's repeated mention of a marsh indicates that at least the servants' section of the Scots' camp was at the bottom of the valley. The servants, Froissart tells us, were placed at the entrance of the marsh on the Newcastle side, with the quarters of the men-at-arms and knights by definition further to the west. The tents of the knights were probably on the higher ground near Greenchesters, although whether any part of their camp really reached as far as the ancient settlement on the bluff above Greenchesters is open to question.

When Sir Henry Percy launched his flanking attack on the rear of the Scots' camp it was, according to Andrew of Wyntoun, sent to the right, which means that Sir Matthew Redman would have traversed the ground further up the hillside. A reference in a poem must always be treated with caution - 'right' is included to rhyme with 'fight' in the previous line - but the presence of the River Rede would preclude an outflanking move to the left. The comment appears sound.

But if the presence of the Rede dictates that Redman's thrust must have taken place to the right, so too must the Earl of Douglas's counterstroke. How did the two outflanking moves miss each other? The explanation favoured by Colonel Burne, and adopted by subsequent writers on the battle, is that Redman swung sufficiently far wide for his approach to be hidden by the crest of the ridge. If this were the case he would have had to march to the north-east of the present Cross Plantation. Douglas, meanwhile, is held to have manoeuvred within the arc of Redman's

sweep.[+]

If the testimony of the *Scotichronicon* and Andrew of Wyntoun alone were being considered it would be sufficient to attribute the surprise caused by Douglas's counterattack to the bushes and thickets that screened his approach. But Froissart claims that Douglas had to skirt round the marshes and a hill. The marsh creates no difficulty: if the Scots servants at the marsh's entrance were being attacked to their front, the knights and men-at-arms would have had to move round the edge of the marsh to get at the enemy without meeting them head-on. The 'hill' poses more of a problem. Burne, in his analysis of the battle, claims to have identified it, but in reality he is talking about folds in the ground. The extent to which these exist depend upon where one stands. A combination of the gathering gloom, the bushes and thickets which would flourish further up the slope away from the low-lying marshes, and the uneven nature of the ground, should be enough to explain the fact that Douglas's riposte came as a surprise to the English.

Froissart writes that when the Scots counterattacked, the English rallied, closed up and sought a position on firmer terrain. They may therefore have eventually stemmed the Scottish onrush somewhere near the old Battle Stone, which White informs us was 180 paces to the east (not north-east, as Burne insists) of Percy's Cross. It was here that the severest fighting occurred. The *Scotichronicon* has the English, who are claimed to be three times as numerous as the Scots, 'counterattacking manfully'. Froissart makes the same point:

> Because the English were in great numbers and eager to beat the enemy, they stood their ground and pushed, driving back the Scots, who were very near to defeat. Earl Douglas, who was young, strong and spirited, and eager to win distinction in arms, ignored the knocks and the danger and had his banner brought forward, shouting 'Douglas! Douglas!' Sir Henry Percy and his brother Ralph, who were so angry with the Earl because of the loss of their pennon outside Newcastle, made towards him, shouting their own cry. Great feats of arms were performed when the two bannerets and their men found themselves face to face. As I said, the English were in such strength and fought so well at this first stage, that they drove the Scots back ... Earl James saw that his men were falling back, so, to recover the lost ground and show his warlike qualities, he took a two-handed axe and plunged into the thickest of the fight, clearing a way in front of him and breaking into the press. None was so well protected by helm or plate as not to fear the blows he dealt. He went so furiously forward, as though he was a Trojan Hector expecting to win the battle single-handed, that he ran into three lances which pierced him all at the same time, one in the shoulder, one in the chest just above the pit of the stomach, and one in the thigh. He could not avoid these thrusts or parry them and was borne to the ground, very badly wounded. Once down he did not get up again ... The English went on, paying little attention to him, merely supposing they had felled some man-at-arms...

Yet the tide of battle was set to turn again. The different narratives mention various Scottish knights whose endeavours affected the course of the fighting. Thomas Walsingham credits the intervention of the Earl of Dunbar. The *Scotichronicon* lauds 'a very experienced, strong, and brave Scot', John Swinton, who carved a path through the English: 'Because of this the Scots were able to penetrate the English line with their spears, so that the English were forced to give ground to this strong force'. Froissart commends the Earl of Moray, amongst others. One of Moray's household, Sir John Maxwell, captured Sir Ralph Percy. Froissart continues:

> Such as were behind, hearing the shouts of 'Douglas!' so often repeated, ascended a small eminence, and pushed their lances with such courage that the English were repulsed, and many killed or struck to the ground. The fighting passed beyond where the Earl of Douglas was lying, now dead. Numbers were continually increasing, from the repeated shouts of 'Douglas!' and the greater part of the Scots knights and squires were now there. The Earls of Moray and March [Dunbar], with their banners and men, came thither also. When they were all thus collected, perceiving the

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[+]   We are grateful to Mr J.T. Angus his contribution on this point.

English retreat, they renewed the battle with greater vigour than before.

If this stage of the combat occurred in the vicinity of the Battle Stone, as has been argued, the 'small eminence' onto which the Scots pushed must have been the hump that extends westwards from West Townhead between 400-500 yards. This is the most significant feature of land below the crest of the ridge to the north; much more so than the almost non-existent swell in the ground that Colonel Burne dubs 'Percy's Cross Ridge'.

Froissart goes on to say that during the relentless fighting, which continued throughout the night, the English were handicapped by fatigue: their long march from Newcastle the previous day told upon them. Also, because the fighting was at such close quarters and because it was dark 'the archers' bows were useless': this deprived the English of an advantage.

In the final big clash, Sir Henry Percy came face to face with the Lord of Montgomery, a very gallant Scottish knight. They fought each other lustily, untroubled by any others, for every knight and squire on both sides was hotly engaged with an opponent. Sir Henry Percy was handled so severely that he surrendered and pledged himself to be the Lord of Montgomery's prisoner.

Victory now belonged to the Scots. But one loose end remains. What became of Sir Matthew Redman and his force? According to the *Scotichronicon* and the *Polychronicon*, Redman's flanking attack had successfully stormed the Scots camp. However, what these temporarily victorious Englishmen did next is not clear. Burne believes that hearing the sound of Douglas's and Percy's combat to the east Redman and his men would have hastened to join in. Certainly, Froissart recounts a lengthy tale of Redman's flight once he saw the battle was lost and his capture by Sir James Lindsey. Andrew of Wyntoun sheds further light on the fate of part of Redman's force by writing that the English who remained in the Scots camp were butchered when their foes returned.

The defeat of the English cost them between a 1,000 and 1,500 men killed and many more captured, including 21 knights. In turn 200 Scots who pressed their pursuit too closely were taken, including Sir James Lindsey, the captor of Sir Matthew Redman. There was a postscript to the battle the next day when English reinforcements under the Bishop of Durham arrived on the scene, but they showed no stomach for the fight and drew off.

Indication of Importance

If historical significance were the only criterion of importance the Battle of Otterburn's reputation would suffer. Although May McKisack[17] concluded that the English defeat jeopardised the safety of the North for many years to come and forced England to accept a three year truce in its war with France, the more widely-held perception of the Battle of Otterburn is probably that of Colonel Burne: 'never was battle fought on English soil that had less effect on the fortunes of Old England'.

But historical significance is not the sole criterion. The battle testifies to Harry Hotspur's impetuosity. Documentation counts too, and this battle is exceptionally well-served. In addition to the usual raft of chroniclers Otterburn has Froissart. His description of it elevates the battle to another plane. Writing about men like the Earl of Douglas and Sir Henry Percy is what Froissart did best. For, as he commented, 'Of all the battles that have been described in this history, great and small, that of which I am now speaking was the best fought and the most severe'. The quality of the description of fourteenth century chivalric warfare is almost unparalleled.

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 bounded by the River Rede to the south, mostly by the Otter Burn to the east, by the dead ground beyond the Cross Plantation to the north, and the top of Holt Wood to the west. The battle took place north of the Rede so that boundary makes sense, even if the river does not follow exactly its course in 1388. Sir Henry Percy would have waited until he was across the Otter Burn before detaching Redman on his outflanking manoeuvre; that accounts for the second boundary. The dead ground beyond the crest of the ridge would have been necessary to hide Redman's progress, hence its inclusion in the battlefield area. Existing boundaries have been used for convenience around Holt Wood and Greenchesters to close the battlefield area.

Notes

1. Froissart, Jean *Chronicles*. Selected, edited and translated by Geoffrey Brereton (Penguin Books, 1968) pp335-48.

2. See comments of Robert White in his *History of the Battle of Otterburn, fought in 1388* (London 1857) page xxvi.

3. Ramsay, Sir James *Genesis of Lancaster* p260.

4. See Burne, Lt.-Col. A H *More Battlefields of England* (London 1952) p133.

5. The *Scotichronicon* 's description of the Battle of Otterburn is translated in *English Historical Documents 1327-1485* ed. A R Myers (London 1969) pp163-4.

6. *The Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland by Andrew of Wyntoun* ed. David Laing (Edinburgh 1872) iii 35-9.

7. White *op. cit.*

8. Froissart *op. cit.*

9. *Scotichronicon* op. cit.

10. *Orygynale Cronykil* op. cit.

11. Printed in White *op. cit.*

12. Burne *op. cit.*

13. *The Chronicle of John Harding* (London 1812) p342.

14. *Chronicon Henrici Knighton* ed. J R Lumby (London 1895; Rolls Series 92) ii 297-8.

15. Walsingham, Thomas *Historia Anglicana* ed. H T Riley (London 1864) ii 176.

16. *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden Monachi Cestrensis* ed. J R Lumby (London 1886) ix 185-7.

17. McKisack, May *The Fourteenth Century 1307-1399* (Oxford History of England; 1959) pp146, 463.