English Heritage Battlefield Report: Solway Moss 1542

Solway Moss (24 November 1542)

Parish: Arthuret

District: Carlisle

County: Cumbria

Grid Ref: NY 381675 (centred on Arthuret Knowes)

Historical Context

The reluctance of King James V of Scotland to end his pro-French policy or effect a religious Reformation in his kingdom on English lines exasperated King Henry VIII. In October 1542 Henry despatched 20,000 men under the command of the Duke of Norfolk on an expedition across the Border. Norfolk burnt Roxburgh and Kelso but lacking supplies and with an undefeated Scottish army under the Earl of Huntley on his flank he ordered a retreat. King James meanwhile had assembled 30,000 men on Fala Moor and was ready to pursue Norfolk into England. The Scottish nobles, however, refused to comply: they maintained that the war was being fought in the interests of France, not Scotland. Outraged by both this defiance and the fact that the invasion of his kingdom had gone unavenged, James set about raising another force. This, with the aid of Scotland's great churchmen, who were more sympathetic to his rule, James was able to do.

The King's new army was at least 10,000 men strong and may have numbered as many as 17,000. Its aim was to cross the Border towards Carlisle and ravage the English Western March. On the night of 23 November the army encamped at Langholm and Morton Kirk. The next morning it crossed the River Esk and started burning the property of the Grahams, the predominant Border clan in the region. To oppose the Scots the English deputy-warden of the March, Sir Thomas Wharton, led 3,000 men out of Carlisle.

Location and Description of the Battlefield

The Battle of Solway Moss took place between the Rivers Lyne and Esk in the Parish of Arthuret, five and a half miles north of Carlisle. To the west of the battlefield is the floodplain of the River Esk. To the north is Longtown, a market town that grew up near one of the principal fords across the river. At the heart of the battlefield is Arthuret Hill with one of two steep-sided mounds, known as Arthuret Knowe, surviving at its southern end. Further still to the south is a ridge, now crowned with a plantation called Hopesike Woods. At the time of the battle the feature was known as Hopesikehill.

Landscape Evolution

In 1542 much of the battlefield landscape would have been rough uncultivated ground characterised by gorse and birch scrub. The prominent landscape features would have been the river and ford, the road and pockets of ancient woodland on Hopesike Hill. The Arthuret Knowes would also have been prominent. The medieval hamlet at Arthuret had gone, although some of its surrounding fields may have persisted. St. Michael's Church was derelict. It was only after the Union of the Crowns in 1603 and the elimination of the Grahams, the warlike clan that had held sway over the area, that prosperity could begin to return. King James I personally ordered the rebuilding of the present Arthuret Church in 1609[1].

The exact route of the road to the river ford cannot be confirmed but it is likely that from the River Lyne it took the high ground to Hopesike Hill before following the minor road down to Arthuret and beyond.

William Stukeley toured Eskdale in 1725:

> This valley by the river side is very good land, with some shadow of Nature's beautiful face left; but every where else about us, is the most melancholy dreary view I ever beheld, and as the back-door of creation; here and there a castellate house by the river, whither at night the cattle are driven for security from the borderers: as for the houses of the cottagers, they are mean beyond imagination; made of mud, and thatched with turf, without windows, only one storey: the people almost naked. We returned through Longton, a market town, whose streets are wholly composed of such kind of structure: the piles of turf for firing are generally as large and as handsome as the houses[3].

Modern Longtown only appeared in the later eighteenth-century after the construction of the Esk Bridge. Dr Robert Graham planned the new town on a chequerboard pattern. The ford that the bridge superseded was situated at the bottom of Esk Street[4].

The nineteenth century saw major changes in the landscape, especially the imposition of the regular field pattern of Parliamentary enclosure. This enclosure occurred at the time or just after the building of the 1817 Turnpike Road (A6071) from Brompton to Longtown but probably before the new alignment of the A7 had been carried out in the 1850s - the field boundaries are cut by the A7 but not by the A6071.

The most recent change in the topography of the battlefield occurred in the 1950s when the western of two mounds known as Arthuret Knowes was bulldozed. It had been quarried for sand during the Second World War. The twin knowes were long-believed to be prehistoric burial mounds but the sand is now thought to have been deposited on the boulder clay beneath by a glacial icesheet[6].

The Sources

For a considerable time the exact site of the Battle of Solway Moss was a mystery. Its name suggested the battle had taken place to the west of the River Esk in the vicinity of Solway Moss, a vast bog that covered much of a stretch of territory known as the Debateable Land, which in the sixteenth century was a buffer zone or no-man's land between England and Scotland. But writers on the battle had nothing to go on beyond a passage in Edward Hall's *Chronicle* (second edition published 1548) which was not very specific:

> The king of Scots ... raised an army of 15,000 chosen men of all parts of his realm under the guiding of the Lord Maxwell Warden of his West Marches, boasting to tarry as long in England as the Duke [of Norfolk] did in Scotland. And so on Friday being St. Katherine's Eve, they passed over the water of Esk and burnt certain houses of the Grahams on the very border. Thomas Bastard Dacres with Jack of Musgrave sent word to Sir Thomas Wharton Warden for the King on the West Marches, to come on to succour them: but the said two valiant captains, although the Scots entered fiercely, yet they manfully and courageously set on them, with a hundred light horse, and left a stale [an infantry formation] on the side of a hill where withall the Scots were wonderfully dismayed, either thinking that the Duke of Norfolk, had been come to the West Marches, with his great army: or else they thought that some greater army came, when they espied Sir Thomas Wharton, coming with 300 men only. But at that time so God ordained it to be, that they at the first brunt fled, and the Englishmen followed...[7]

The account of the battle concludes by stating that in the order of 200 Scottish notables and gentlemen were taken prisoner with 800 others. Twenty-four guns were captured.

The only topographical references in this account of the battle are that the Scots crossed the River Esk and saw the English on a hillside. Subsequent writers made of this what they could. W. Nanson, in an article published in 1886, hazarded that the hillside was Arthuret. But to reconcile the battle with its name, Solway Moss, Nanson assumed that the Scots had recrossed the Esk before what fighting there was took place. Even he,

however, could not follow the Ordnance Survey map which marked the battle as having taken place in the middle of Solway Moss itself. Nanson placed the battle south of the morass between the Esk and the River Sark[8].

Later writers' interpretation of the Battle of Solway Moss[9] took a giant stride forward when the Hamilton Papers in the British Museum were first published in 1890[10]. Amongst the papers were three letters and reports which shed considerable new light upon events. The first of these was a letter written on the day of the battle by Sir William Musgrave to Sir Anthony Browne. Musgrave penned his missive after returning to Carlisle from the field of battle.

> This shall be to advise you that the 24th of this instant a great army of Scotland as well of the inner parties of Scotland as also the East, West and Middle Marches of the same, to the number of 18,000 men and more, entered this West March and burnt the Grahams, that is to say as well [as] their houses of the river of Esk, as also their houses standing upon the Debatable Land, to the which Master warden, myself, and all other gentlemen of these West Marches, with the inhabitants of the same to the number of three thousand at the most, with all speed made repair to serve the king's majesty, sending Thomas Dacre, Jack of Musgrave, and other spears of the Borders to prick at them, and all other gentlemen with standards marching upon foot to have given battle with the king's officer here, so near that as I estimate the ground, within two arrow shot of our enemies, in good array upon foot with bows and bills, putting all horses clearly from us; and thus marching towards them, the noble men of Scotland and gentlemen of like sort, light off their horses to a great number, but the multitude durst not give battle, wherefore they took [to] their horses again, and then my brother Simon Musgrave, Jack Musgrave, with other under my rule, and the Grahams pricked sore at them, Thomas Dacre with the men of Gilliesland, and John Leigh with the barony of Brough standing in a [?]flieng stadle [i.e. stale]; we then marched towards the Scots, more and more the said Scots withdrew a soft pace homeward, and then the said horsemen as Jack Musgrave and others aforesaid, and my cousin Aygloinsby, set upon the hindmost and struck down many, so that the most part fled over the river of Esk, and then the Lord Maxwell with many other noble men and courtiers alighted at the water's side and fought valiantly. Notwithstanding, the said Lord Maxwell was taken prisoner, and many of his name with him, and all other that escaped was by there fleeing and durst not tarry, and always the good horsemen of England chasing and taking so many of them as they list, that the most part had one or two, some four or five, with geldings and weapons innumerable, and all their ordnance, which as I think be falcons and demi-falcons, and many half hakes[11].

Joseph Bain, the editor of the Hamilton Papers, suspects that Musgrave dashed off the letter and dispatched it by special messenger so that the King might first hear of the victory from him rather than his chief, Sir Thomas Wharton[12]. As such the hastily-written letter supplies a sequence of events and confirms that the Scots did not fight well. But beyond establishing that the bulk of the fighting, if not the pursuit, took place to the east of the River Esk, the letter provides no information which would enable the location of the battle to be pinpointed more precisely. For this kind of detail we must turn to Sir Thomas Wharton's 'remembrance ... containing briefly the overthrow given to the Scots between Esk and Lyne' written for his superior, the Earl of Hertford, Lord Warden of the Marches, who was resident at Alnwick[13]. Wharton began:

> First, the Scots lodged the night before in two powers, the one at Langholm and the other at Morton Kirk in the Debatable Land, estimated in both their numbers above 14,000 men; some say above 20,000 on horse and foot - fortified with strong forays of all the best horsemen of Scotland, and great battles on horseback following for their relief, with their several numbers on foot in their battles. They had four falconets of brass, twelve bases upon every cart, and three half bases upon one cart, having above thirty standards besides flags. They began to burn like an hour and a half after the day was light, at the foot of Esk, and so burnt to the Akeshawhill [Oakshawhill], like two mile in length.

Wharton had been warned by Hertford of reports that the Scots were planning a large-scale cross Border raid. Scouts had subsequently confirmed this intelligence. Accordingly,

> he [Wharton] with those gentlemen and good subjects thereabouts, leaving the town and castle of Carlisle with wise and discreet men, issued forth of the town after the day was broken, and marching towards Levyn [Lyne], not two mile without the town and then not three hundred men with him, they saw the fire begin and so marched to the water side of Levyn [Lyne], and there stayed as well to see the prickers [i.e. mounted skirmishers] draw to the enemy as to have a true knowledge of their powers, their order, and intent, and also thereby to draw the more number as they come to their own strengths. Thus standing there they might divers times see our prickers sore chased and put aback very far, having many messages in that time of sundry opinions.

> And so the Scots after a great and long chase of our prickers at Akeshawhill [Oakshawhill], returned down towards Artureth howes, and there great numbers then perfectly in our sights and partly as we stood, with their sides towards us burning homeward, and our prickers not pricking because of their ordnance and great powers, they then something homewards, we with six standards, [that is] to say my lord Parre's in the order of my near cousin Walter Strickland and two hundred archers of Kendale with him; my cousin Sir William Musgrave's; my brother-in-law Sir Thomas Curwen's; my cousin and deputy John Lowther's; my son in law William Pennington's; and my own with the number of twelve hundred men or near thereabouts; come over the water of Levyn more than a pace on horseback to Howpsikehill [Hopesike Hill] full in the sight of the Scots, and there a little paused on horseback to put the six standards with those men to the most show and safety for the relief of our prickers.

> And with the sight and order of the same the Scots stayed as in a maze, and therewith moved the next part of their field towards us; with the sight whereof immediately we alighted from our horses and ordered men as to fight, who most comfortably put themselves at [a] command in readiness; and so standing, the Scots put their ordnance in that part of their field before them, and did alight of foot and marched easily towards us. Our prickers came and told us that they were alighted and had ordered, and was coming to fight. We advised them as the Scots came within our shot of arrows, that they should set upon them at the side upon the right hand, for upon the left hand was a great moss. And doomsday being then amongst all prickers of both the sides and not one headstrong horse of neither side - thus ordering, the Scots suddenly began to stand when their foremost men and our standards was within forty score [?yards] together; and immediately thereupon the furthest in the field began easily to recoil, and so the other followed, and after[wards] the ordnance. And then we with our prickers devised how they should be annoyed; and so they desired that we would abide them at all adventures upon Howpsikehill on foot. And so abiding long, anon we marched on foot forwards, with divers standings for order, and did leave our horses upon that hill, and so came to the top of Artureth howes; our prickers being divided in sundry parties could a long time after have no time to set upon them.

> And when the Scots came near to Artureth mill dam, where a straight ford is which is called Sandyford, having a great moss, a great standing water and the river of the Esk was before them and the moss upon their left hand, then our prickers in a holm before they came to the dam, got them in a shake all the way. The shot of their ordnance as they might and divers horse slain; and having them in a shake more than in warlike haste at that dam, the standing water moss and the river of Esk, our prickers gave them there a fresh onset and overthrew them, where was above twelve hundred prisoners taken, twenty slain and divers drowned. Ten men was drawn with fisher nets from the Esk three days after. And of that number there was taken two earls, five barons, and of their lords and in the name of their gentlemen, above

> five hundred prisoners, twenty carted pieces of ordnance for the field. There was won six half hakes, and great number of handguns was won. There was thirty and more standards with all their flags amongst the footmen was won and overthrown. None of them was borne on high over the water of Sark which divideth Scotland and the Debatable ground. Of the English party, there was in all horsemen and footmen under two thousand, and of that number seven slain and one taken before noon ...

> The Scots purpose was the night after their burning to have lodged at Gretna or thereabouts, and upon the morrow to have left their horses in Scotland and to have burnt along the Marches unto Beaumont, and there to have passed on foot over the sand as the Scots say; but whether they had other purpose or no I am not certain because of their great powers...

Wharton's report tells us a good deal about the movements of both sides. The Scots had begun the day by burning land between 'foot of Esk' and Oakshawhill, two and a half miles north-west of Longtown. This appears to have been their immediate objective: Scottish prisoners told Wharton that the following day they had planned to ravage the countryside as far as Beaumont, south-west of the River Eden. Having begun their first day's work at the foot of the Esk the Scots would most likely have crossed into England by the ford at the river's mouth known as 'Willie of the Boats', five miles (rather than two, as Wharton wrote) distant from Oakshawhill.

Wharton was not far out of Carlisle before he discerned the smoke of the Scots' ravagings on the horizon. He hurried up the Roman road to the River Lyne at Westlinton. The English mounted skirmishers or 'prickers' (so-called because they pricked the enemy with their lances) had been harrying the Scots forces near Oakshawhill. The Scots, however, were now returning towards Arthuret Knowes and were putting the English skirmishers under pressure. Wharton advanced his little army a mile further up the road as far as Hopesike Hill. Here he was in full view of the Scots. To give his skirmishers some breathing space he advanced his six standards in a brave display.

This clearly is the incident to which Hall's *Chronicle* refers: the Scots saw the English on the side of a hill and 'were wonderfully dismayed'. Wharton himself noted their confusion: 'with the sight and order of the same the Scots stayed as in a maze'. The subsequent disintegration of their army makes it plain that there was something seriously wrong with the Scots' morale. What was the explanation?

When King James had raised his new army and sent it into England he had not accompanied it. He remained instead at Lochmaben on the Scottish side of the Border and awaited news of the invasion. But in the absence of the King no commander of the army had been appointed. It was only now, with the enemy in view, that one of James's courtiers, Sir Oliver Sinclair, announced that he had been given a commission to be the army's general. That James could appoint one of his favourites to be commander and have it announced in such a fashion revealed the extent of the breach - previously manifest at Fala Moor - between the King and his great nobles. The army's officers refused to accept Oliver as their leader. Although the Scots army made a show of advancing towards the English on Hopesike Hill its soldiers had lost their confidence and began to drift away[14].

The English cavalry hastened the flight of the Scots. It was only some time after that the rest of the English army advanced from Hopesike Hill to the Arthuret Knowes to witness the full extent of the rout. What they saw were the Scots hemmed in against the River Esk, probably near the Longtown Ford. As Sir William Musgrave reported, some of the Scots notables led by Lord Maxwell attempted to make a fight of it, but their men were more intent on flight. The English cavalry had the full extent of the 'holm', the flat low-lying land by the river's edge, in which to operate. The Scots were wedged together with the Esk in front of them and 'a great moss' - Solway Moss - beyond. They had a smaller moss, long since disappeared, to their left. The ford which they were struggling to cross was called 'Sandyford', a name prompted no doubt by the red sandstone which colours the riverbed in many places. It is tempting to believe that the present-day Fauld Mill is the Arthuret Mill mentioned by Wharton, but Fauld Mill is too close to Arthuret Knowe: Wharton gives the impression that his men watched the rout of the Scots from a greater distance.

The final report on the Battle of Solway Moss was sent to the Privy Council from Alnwick on December 6. King Henry had wanted to know where King James was when the battle was fought; how large the Scots army had been; and how many prisoners were captured. In answering these questions the Council's correspondents imparted other fresh information. Whereas the Scots were reckoned to number 17,000:

The king's highness's subjects assembled at the time to withstand them were not above two thousand, who put themselves in good array, and put in the stale fifteen hundred. The residue which were the horsemen, seeing the Scots coming on and some of them lighting on foot to meet with the stale, our said horsemen perceiving the Scottish horsemen slow in setting forwards, thought best to set upon them before the battles on foot should join, whereupon part of our horsemen, as the Grahams with their band, pursued the horsemen of Scotland which fled, and Jack Musgrave with his band, and other gentlemen on horseback of the country, to the number of three hundred, entered upon the footmen that were light of their horses and in array with their standards, who seeing them fiercely coming on, and the stale also keeping their array in following, retired back and fled towards the water. And the number of them that were taken with the names of the chief of them, we wrote to the king's graces in our letter jointly with my Lord of Hertford. Nevertheless Jack Musgrave showed us that there is taken five thousand horses, by reason of a marsh whereunto they fled, and because their horses could not pass it, ran away on foot[15].

This description of the battle lays greater emphasis on the part played by the cavalry in causing the Scots army to break up in the first place, rather than just harrying it in its flight. More interesting, however, is the allusion to the capture of 5,000 horses: Jack Musgrave said that the horses were abandoned because they could not cross the marsh into which the Scots fled. If, once across the Esk, the Scots sought safety in the marshes, this might explain why the battle came to be known as Solway Moss.

Indication of Importance

Solway Moss was far from being a hard-fought and bloody battle, but in terms of numbers involved it was the largest battle fought on English soil between Flodden in 1513 and Newburn Ford in 1640. The battle also had important political repercussions. Defeat was such a shock for James V that he went into a decline and died within a month. He was only thirty. The news that his Queen, Mary of Guise, had been delivered of a daughter rather than a son merely accelerated the end. The accession of the infant Mary Queen of Scots to the throne ushered in King Henry's policy of the 'rough wooing': he was determined that Mary should betroth his son, Prince Edward (later Edward VI). Warfare continued on the Border for the remainder of Henry's reign and beyond.

Thanks to the letters in the Hamilton Papers the written documentation for the Battle of Solway Moss is good. No commander before this date had provided such a detailed description of a battle in England as did Sir Thomas Wharton.

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 north-west the battlefield is bounded by the River Esk. Although the English pursuit of the Scots continued beyond the river, organized resistance ceased at its banks. To the north the growth of Longtown has radically changed the landscape. However, approximately half the town is included in the battlefield area: this, in conjunction with the River Esk, helps create a funnel leading to the bottleneck of the ford at the bottom of

Esk Street. It was over this ground that the Scots would have streamed in their bid to escape.

The boundary of the battlefield area continues eastwards from Longtown along Mill Street Old Road and then heads southwards past Longtown Hospital towards Brisco Hill. This will provide room for the Scottish pike formations to deploy. The Scots' right rests on the Arthuret Knowes, to which Wharton wrote that they were heading just before his own force advanced to Hopesike Hill. Their left is in front of Ladyseat Wood. The English, meanwhile, are positioned on the front slope of Hopesike Hill near the present junction of the A7 Carlisle Road with the turn-off for Arthuret. The battlefield area boundary line runs west behind the English position on the hill's reverse slope.

Once the boundary line meets the Hall Burn it continues across the dismantled railway as far as the Fauld Farm and then heads north to the Esk along the eastern edge of the exhausted gravel pits at the river's edge. This allows the inclusion of much of the Esk's floodplain over which the Scots scattered. There is some evidence that there was a second ford across the Esk, opposite Fauld Mill and just north of the gravel pits, which the Scots could have used[16].

Notes

1. Spence, R I 'The Pacification of the Cumberland Borders, 1593-1628', *Northern History* xiii (1977) pp59-160.

2. Quoted in Spence *ibid.* p144.

3. Quoted in Spence *ibid.* pp152-3.

4. *Arthuret, Debatable Land: Walks from Longtown*. Leaflet published by East Cumbria Countryside Project.

5. Margery, Ivan D *Roman Roads in Britain* (3rd ed. London, 1973) pp455-6.

6. *Arthuret, Debatable Land: Walks from Longtown.*

7. Hall, Edward *Chronicle* (1809 ed.) p856.

8. Nanson, W 'Solway Moss' *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Archaeological and Antiquarian Society* viii (1886) pp257-60.

9. For example McIntire, W T 'Solway Moss' *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Archaeological and Antiquarian Society* xli (1941) pp5-9.

10. *The Hamilton Papers. Letters and Papers Illustrating the Political Relations of England and Scotland in the XVIth Century* ed. Joseph Bain. Volume I 1532-1543 (Edinburgh 1890).

11. *Ibid.* pp307-8.

12. *Ibid.* xxxiii.

13. *Ibid.* lxxxiii-lxxxvi.

14. Brown, P Hume History of Scotland (Cambridge 1899) i 394.

15. *Hamilton Papers* pp317-8.

16. *Arthuret, Debatable Land: Walks from Longtown* p11; information supplied by Mr Ivor Gray of Longtown.