

Inventory of Historic Battlefields

HARLAW

24 July 1411

Local Authority: Aberdeenshire

NGR centred: NJ 753 243

Overview

The Battle of Harlaw was one of the bloodiest battles of the Medieval period in Scotland. The MacDonald army under the command of Domhnall MacDonald, the Lord of the Isles, was advancing on Aberdeen to defend his control over the Earldom of Ross. The Earl of Mar, Alexander Stewart, was sent by his uncle, the governor Duke of Albany, to stop them. The outcome of the battle was militarily inconclusive, both sides claimed victory despite each having suffered heavy losses.

The consequence of the battle was to halt MacDonald's advance towards Aberdeen and bring his campaign to an end. The Duke of Albany quickly seized a firm grip on the Earldom of Ross and the Lord of the Isles, who had been the chief internal threat to Stewart control of Scotland, was forced to relinquish his claim in the Treaty of Lochgilphead in 1412. Robert, the Duke of Albany, was left in control of Scotland as governor for the imprisoned James I.

The Battle

The battle was fought between Domhnall MacDonald, with an army of somewhere between 6,000 and 10,000 Highlanders and Islanders, and the Earl of Mar, with an army of 1,500 to 2,000. Domhnall's army were encamped at the northern end of a plateau of high ground north of Inverurie. On the night of 23 July 1411, the Earl of Mar mustered an army of men drawn from Buchan, Angus and Kincardineshire at Inverurie; there was also a small group of burgesses (freeman of the burgh) from Aberdeen under Provost Robert Davidson. In the early dawn on 24 July they moved up onto the plateau, probably where the village of Balhalgardy now stands. The van of Mar's army advanced, to be met halfway by a charge of Islesmen that pushed them back substantially; according to the 16th century ballad of the battle, Mar's men were pushed back three acres or more. Sir James Scrymgeour led a counter-charge of Mar's cavalry, which relieved the pressure on the schiltrons (a compact body of spearmen forming a battle array) but resulted in the deaths of several of the cavalry including Scrymgeour. From that point, it was a long and bloody infantry action that seems to have lasted for the entire day. Fighting would have broken off at intervals because of the sheer physical effort involved, but by the end of the day, neither side had made a breakthrough and had taken heavy casualties. Later historians writing of the battle describe the battle ending as darkness fell. Mar apparently remained on the field with his surviving men, while Domhnall withdrew towards Inverness; Mar seems not to have been aware of the Islesmen's withdrawal and was surprised to find them gone the next morning.

Hector Boece (a 16th century Scottish philosopher who wrote *The History of the Scottish People* in 1527) suggested that both sides withdrew at the end of the fighting, with Domhnall retiring completely while Mar remained in the area. Whether this was the real situation or not, Domhnall withdrew having lost around 900 men including his main captain, Hector Maclean of Duart, and having inflicted around 600 casualties on Mar's better-armoured men. It has long been celebrated as a defeat for

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the Lord of the Isles and a famous victory for the men of the north-east. However, the casualty rate for the Islesmen were around 9-15% (900 casualties from his army of 6-10,000, depending on the historical source), while the rate for Mar was between 30 and 40% (600 casualties from an army of 1,500-2,000) and included many of the leading nobility of the area. The impact of the battle was undoubtedly far worse for Mar and his men than for Domhnall, who had lost Maclean of Duart but no other significant figures. In contrast, Mar's losses included the Sheriff of Angus, the Constable of Dundee, the Provost of Aberdeen and many of the nobility of eastern Scotland.

Events & Participants

The battle was part of the struggle for position between the MacDonalds as Lords of the Isles and the Stewarts as the royal party within the Medieval Kingdom of Scotland. The ostensible cause of the campaign was a dispute over the Earldom of Ross, a large area that acted as a buffer zone between the lands of the Stewarts and the MacDonalds. From 1402 Robert Stewart, Duke of Albany, controlled the earldom, and therefore had the MacDonalds encircled. Protracted negotiations to resolve the situation were unsuccessful, and Domhnall raised a large army to take the earldom by force. On defeat the pro-Stewart army of the Mackays at the Battle of Dingwall, he took Inverness and marched on Aberdeen. The town was a Stewart stronghold and it was rumoured that Domhnall had promised to burn it. The failure to gain a decisive victory at Harlaw stopped Domhnall's advance, although pro-MacDonald accounts portray this as a decision not to destroy what was now his by right of arms.

There were many individuals of great regional significance involved in the battle, from Provost Robert Davidson of Aberdeen and Sir Alexander Irvine of Drum on the Stewart side, to Hector Maclean of Duart and Donald Cameron of Lochiel on the MacDonald side. In terms of nationally significant figures, the most important was Domhnall, Lord of the Isles, who was the most powerful noble in Scotland after the governor, the Duke of Albany. The commander of the Stewart force, the Earl of Mar, was the illegitimate son of the Wolf of Badenoch and was a similarly predatory noble who had taken his earldom by force in 1404; he was later appointed Admiral of the Realm of Scotland and was a leading noble in Scotland after James I's return despite James' purge of Albany's successor.

A strong theme in many secondary accounts about Harlaw is that the battle was effectively a contest between Highland Gaelic Scotland and Lowland Anglophone Scotland. It is undoubtedly true that the two armies can be caricatured in this way, but it is far from clear that this was a consideration on the day of battle. The political issues seem to have been the governing reasons for the campaign and battle, and the division between Gael and Anglophone more of an effect, albeit an important one, than a cause. It seems unlikely that any of the combatants thought that they were fighting for their language and culture.

Physical Remains & Potential

Numerous antiquarian discoveries have been made in the general area of the battlefield although none have confirmed association with the battle. In 1837 human remains were uncovered in a field to the east of Harlaw House. These twelve individuals were not recorded in detail or retained for further study.

There are several records in the *New Statistical Account* (NSA) (an account of each parish compiled by the local minister in the 1830s) of features believed to relate to the battle, most of which are no longer extant. Three cairns are recorded within the

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NSA which were said to mark the location on the battlefield where significant figures were killed, none of which survive. Drum's Cairn marked the spot where Sir Alexander Irvine of Drum died as a result of personal combat with Hector Maclean of Duart, whose death was marked by a cairn called Maclean's Grave. These cairns were recorded within the vicinity of the modern commemorative monument to the battle located within the 'Pley Fauld', west of West Balhalgardy Cottages. To the east of these was Provost Davidson's Cairn, again recording the location of his death.

Local traditions state that a standing stone known as Liggars' Stane, located immediately to the north of Harlaw house, mark the graves of female camp followers; its location on the north of the battleground would suggesting that it was MacDonald's followers . However, there is nothing in the accounts of the battle that would suggest a reason for camp followers on either side to have been killed, so the tradition may be entirely groundless.

The fighting seems to have consisted largely of axe and spear against spear schiltrons, with no mention in accounts of the battle of the use of archery. It is unlikely that there was no archery involved, but it may not have been a significant factor and there is a possibility that only a relatively low incidence of arrowheads, if any at all, survive within the defined area.

The hand to hand nature of the fighting and the length of the battle suggest that there is a high probability of finding items of personal dress or adornment within the Inventory boundary.

Cultural Associations

The battle is still well known, particularly in north-eastern Scotland, and the 'Heroes of Harlaw' are still toasted today. The involvement of names such as the Lord of the Isles and the Earl of Mar gave a great deal of resonance to the event throughout the ages and the battle was celebrated in a number of ballads and a march. The surviving ballads are factually very inaccurate, claiming MacDonald had an army of 50,000 islanders and that he was killed in the fighting.

The site has one of the largest and most imposing battlefield commemorations in Scotland. Erected in 1914 by the successors of Provost Davidson of Aberdeen Council, the dark granite monument is a hexagon tower standing at 12 m in height. It was described by historian W. D. Simpson as having 'the strength necessary for this windswept site, previously a desolate, blood-bolstered moor'.

Battlefield Landscape

The general location of the battle is well established but as no contemporary accounts of the battle survive and the secondary sources are largely poetic in nature, the topographic details of the action is extremely vague.

Domhnall appears to have advanced south-east from Moray down a route that largely matches the line of the modern A96. Mar had come east from his home at Kildrummy, and mustered his army at Inverurie. They prepared for battle during the night and marched out to meet at dawn.

The site of the battle lies in the valley of the River Urie in the shadow of Bennachie. The battle took place on a relatively flat area of high ground to the north of Inverurie. This plateau forms a natural arena approximately a mile in length and width, with steep slopes falling away on each side. This topography would have limited the spread of the fighting in an otherwise fairly open landscape. The landscape appears

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to be almost unaltered from the time of the battle, with the main changes being the removal of the fermtouns and their replacement by farms and field enclosures. The construction of Harlaw House and minor roads has also impacted on the landscape. Despite these changes, the landscape context of the battlefield is easily comparable to the period of the fighting. The views available to the combatants are largely the same as they were then, and it is easy to see how Domhnall would not have seen the arrival of Mar's army until they were on the plateau if he had no sentries.

There has been relatively little development in the area since the late Medieval period, although Inverurie has expanded northwards almost to the River Urie. The battlefield is free of forestry and consists for the most part of arable fields. The B9001 road runs along the western edge of the battlefield and will have had a minor impact on the site.

Inventory Boundary

The Inventory boundary defines the area in which the main events of the battle are considered to have taken place (landscape context) and where associated physical remains and archaeological evidence occur or may be expected (specific qualities). The landscape context is described under *battlefield landscape*: it encompasses areas of fighting, key movements of troops across the landscape and other important locations, such the position of camps or vantage points. Although the landscape has changed to some extent since the time of the battle, key characteristics of the terrain at the time of the battle can still be identified, enabling events to be more fully understood and interpreted in their landscape context. Specific qualities are described under *physical remains and potential*: these include landscape features that played a significant role in the battle, other physical remains, such as enclosures or built structures, and areas of known or potential archaeological evidence.

The Inventory boundary for the Battle of Harlaw is defined on the accompanying map and includes the following areas:

- Lands adjacent and north of Harlaw. The probable location of MacDonald's camp.
- The hill slopes to the north of Inverurie. The direction of the advance of the Earl of Mar's army uphill from Inverurie.
- The Pley Fauld and adjacent lands. The former location of memorial cairns which has high potential to contain further burials.
- The terrain of the plateau and its slopes and the views out from the higher ground. This landscape feature is key to understanding the restricted nature of the battleground and the limited views from MacDonald's initial deployment of the advancing army.

Relevant Publications

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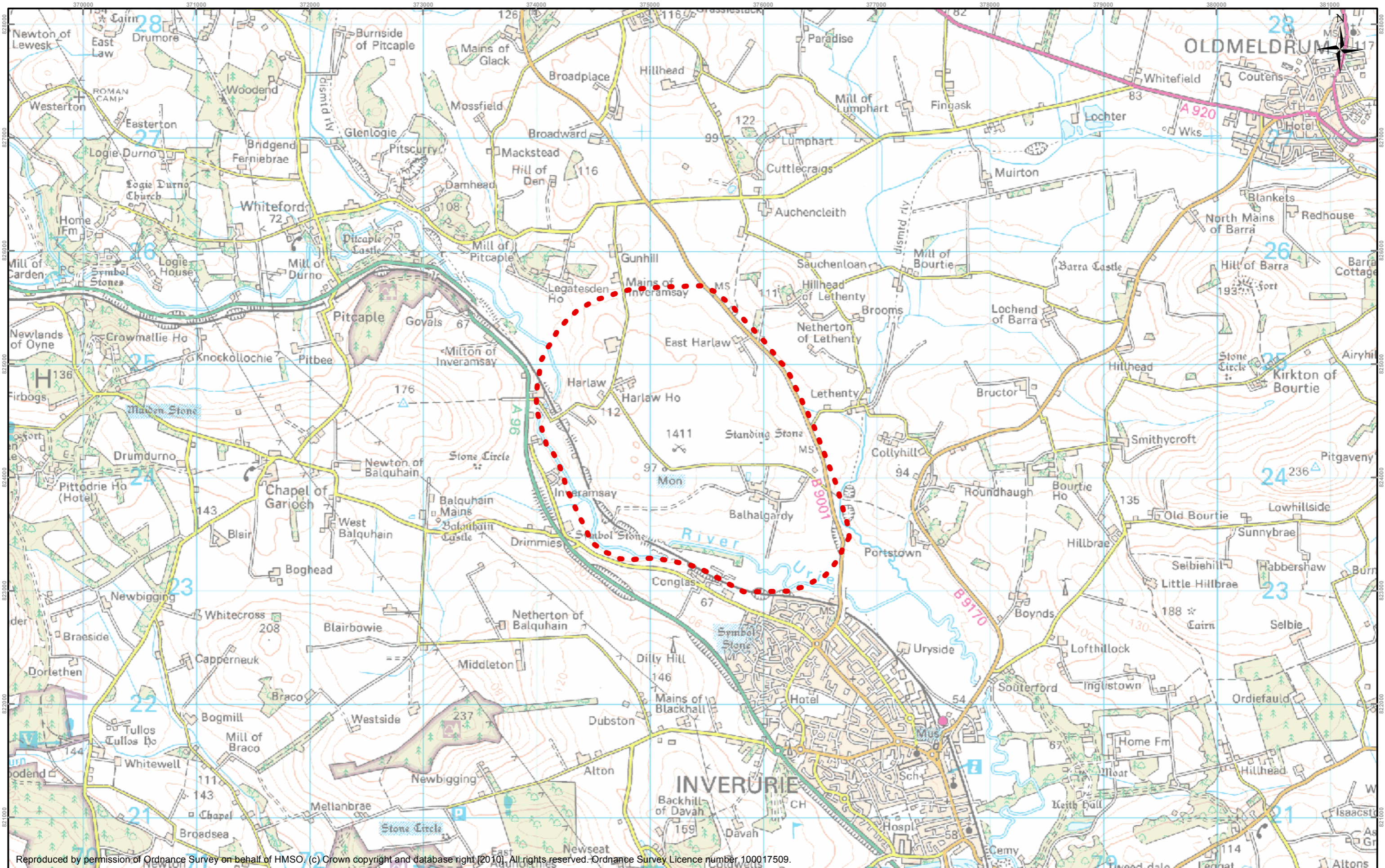
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●●●● Inventory Boundary

0 250 500 Metres

BATTLE OF HARLAW

24th July 1411

Aberdeenshire
NGR: NJ753243

HISTORIC SCOTLAND ALBA AOSMHOR



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