

# Inventory of Historic Battlefields

## ALFORD

2 July 1645

Local Authority: Aberdeenshire

NGR centred: NJ 567 162

### Overview

The battle of Alford was fought between the Scottish Royalists and Government Troops during the Civil War period. It was the fifth battle of the Marquis of Montrose's Scottish campaign on behalf of Charles I of England against the Covenanter army (Scottish Presbyterians opposed to interference by the Stuart Kings in the affairs of the Church of Scotland).

The battle ended in a victory for Montrose and opened the way to the lowlands for the Royalist army. The victory was a great boost for Charles I, whose cause was faltering badly after a crushing defeat at Naseby in June 1645. In Scotland, the effect of the battle was to expose the weakness in the Covenanter army, where the commander was subject to the orders of the powerful Committee of Estates (an organisation appointed to run Scotland when Parliament was not in session).

### The Battle

On the night of 1 July 1645, the Royalists quartered at Alford with the Covenanter army under Lieutenant-General William Baillie in pursuit about four miles away. In the morning, Baillie marched after the Royalists, who decided to deploy near Alford to engage him. While the Covenanters had the advantage in infantry, with perhaps 2,800 troops, it is possible that Montrose, with about 2,300 troops, had an advantage in cavalry for the first time in his campaign.

It appears that Montrose decided to stand and engage Baillie before the latter could be joined by any other forces. The Royalists probably deployed on the slopes above Alford church close by the main road, while Baillie crossed the river by a ford further to the east near Montgarrie. It is suggested that the Covenanters believed Montrose to be retreating and so advanced too quickly. They found themselves within just half a mile of Montrose when they discovered he had in fact deployed to fight. The Royalist forces stood largely out of sight on the top or back slope of the hill, and so Baillie halted in the valley and took advantage of a strong defensive position amongst enclosures on the low ground. The two armies deployed in a standard formation with two cavalry wings and infantry in the centre. The Royalist cavalry charge, seconded by detachments of infantry who had also been positioned on the wings to strengthen the cavalry deployment, soon drove off the Covenanter horse. In contrast, the Covenanter infantry stood and fought until they were outflanked and attacked at the same time to the rear, by the Royalist cavalry, and to the fore by infantry. According to Baillie, they had had to deploy just three ranks deep, instead of the more normal six deep, to avoid being over-winged by the wider formation of the Royalists. As a result they were unable to respond to a simultaneous attack at both front and rear. Baillie's infantry broke and ran, the rout soon turning into a bloody execution as the Royalist cavalry pressed home the pursuit. While the Covenanters suffered perhaps 700 killed, the Royalist casualties were very light but did include the death of their cavalry commander Lord Gordon.

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## Events & Participants

The Covenanter government of Scotland had allied itself with the English parliament as the initial successes of Royalist armies suggested that Charles would soon be able to turn his attention to Scotland. Troops were sent south to support the Parliamentarians and a Scottish army had a significant impact in the campaign for the north of England in 1644. In response, in August 1644 the Marquis of Montrose raised the royal standard in Scotland. With little more than 2,000 troops and usually heavily outnumbered, he won a series of dramatic successes in the Highlands, starting with the Battle of Tippermuir on 1 September 1644 and leading up to the battle of Auldearn on 9 May 1645.

William Baillie was the commander of the Covenanter army that had spent May and June manoeuvring after Montrose and trying to bring him to battle after the destruction of Sir John Hurry's army at Auldearn. Baillie was a veteran soldier who had led a regiment under Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden on the Continent in the 1630s. He had also commanded the Scottish vanguard at Marston Moor exactly a year before the battle at Alford.

Lord George Gordon was the son of the Royalist commander, the Earl of Huntly, who was beheaded in 1649 in Edinburgh. He was an effective and well considered cavalry commander, who fought with distinction at Auldearn in May.

## Physical Remains & Potential

No artefacts or archaeological features associated with the battle are known to have been recovered. There is a 19<sup>th</sup> century account of a skeleton with a sword and an Elizabethan shilling being found at Bloody Faulds, some 4 miles to the south-east of the battleground. These artefacts appear to have been lost and their provenance is unclear.

Given the nature of the fighting, there could be large numbers of lead bullets and items of personal apparel such as buttons within the defined area. There may well be burials associated with the battle given the high numbers of casualties recorded. These are likely to extend over a considerable area because of the rout; the main action lasted around an hour, but the rout and pursuit lasted into the evening.

## Cultural Association

The Battle of Alford has drawn little popular attention and left no trace in popular culture outside of the district. The Gordon Stane, a natural boulder located within Murray Park to the north of the town, has a traditional association with the site of the death of Lord Gordon. A commemorative plaque is located close to the stone and a battlefield walk has been created. Another memorial stone is located by the War Memorial in the town cemetery, which has an inscription giving brief details of the battle and commemorating the death of Lord Gordon.

There is a fragment of a ballad relating to the battle, but the surviving verses relate to the march to Alford and not to the fighting. The name of Feight Faulds, a field to the south of the Gordon Stane, has long been locally associated as the location of a Covenanter massacre although there is no physical evidence to substantiate this.

## Battlefield Landscape

The general location of the battle is well established by a series of primary and secondary sources. However there are a number of alternative locations for the

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specific actions of the battle. It is clear that the Covenanters were crossing the River Don from the north when the fighting took place. Two alternative crossing points have been proposed at Montgarrie and to the north of Alford Church at the river's confluence with Leochel burn.

The Royalists were drawn up on a hill that is most likely to have been Gallow Hill to the south-east of Alford Old Parish Church (located over a mile west of the modern Alford town). The main fighting appears to have taken place to the north and east of Gallow Hill, with Montrose using the topography to form a natural defence. An important aspect of the battlefield's landscape was the pattern of enclosures on the valley floor situated within boggy ground which was the focus of the Covenanters' defensive action. The position of these enclosures and marshland is not currently known, but may be traceable through survey or excavation.

According to primary sources the pursuit of the Covenanter army by the Royalist cavalry continued until the early evening for a distance of up to 9 miles. It is likely that the Covenanters fled northwards, back over the River Don.

The battle was fought within open ground on the lower hill slopes on the south side of the River Don. The Howe of Alford occupies the middle reaches of the River Don and is characterised by the flat river plain with hills rising up from water on the north and south. The landscape of the battleground has been altered by the development of Alford town in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the enclosure of the land and the construction of roads. However, its overall character, key landscape features and strategic views have survived well. The topography of the hill slope, which appears to have played a key role in the battle manoeuvres of both armies, is well preserved as open farmland and it is possible to visualise Montrose's troops on the top or back slope of the hill, overlooking the Covenanter army at its base. The spatial relationships and views between significant landscape elements such as the summit and slopes of Gallow Hill, the southern bank of the river and its crossings survive intact and the entire area still gives a reasonable impression of the landscape that the troops would have seen.

The western half of the defined area is presently mainly farmland and small areas of forestry plantation with the town of Alford and designed parkland on the east. The spread of Alford has so far had a relatively minor impact on the battlefield, which may survive well.

### 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 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 Alford is defined on the accompanying map and includes the following areas:

- The southern plains of the River Don. The direction of the advance of the Covenanter army and their approach to Gallow Hill.

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- The slopes and summit of Gallow Hill and the views out from the Royalist vantage point. The position of the Royalists initial deployment and a key landscape feature in Montrose's exploitation of the terrain to outmanoeuvre the Covenanter army.
- Lands to the east and north-east of Gallow Hill including Murray and Haughton Parks. The probable route of the Covenanter rout.

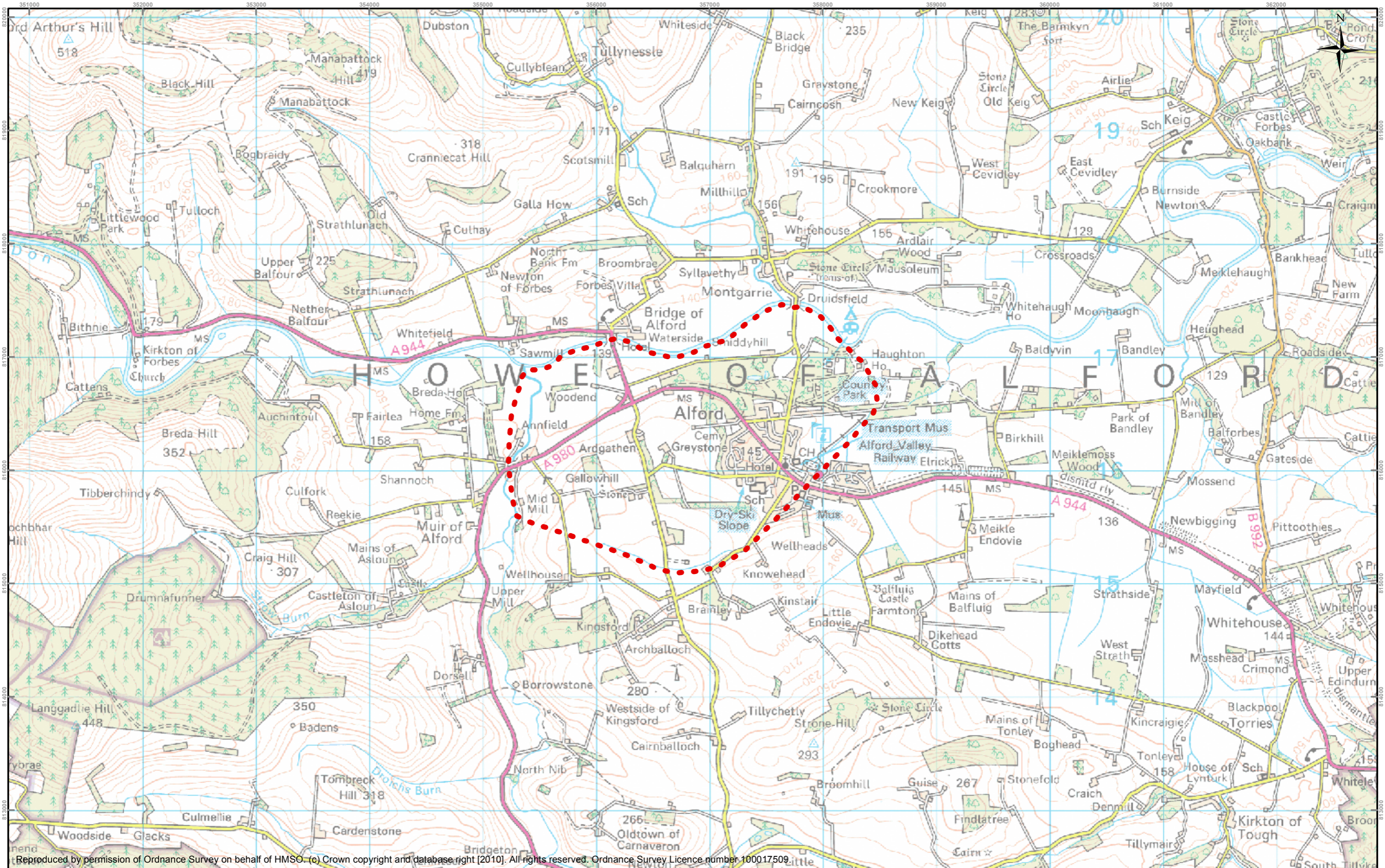
### Relevant Publications

Gardiner, S R 1893 *History of the Great Civil War: 1644-45*, Longman, London.

Marren, P 1990 *Grampian Battlefields: the historic battles of North East Scotland from AD84 to 1745*, Aberdeen University Press 1990, Aberdeen.

Reid, S 1990 *The Campaigns of Montrose: a military history of the Civil War in Scotland 1639 to 1646*, Mercat Press, Edinburgh.

Simpson, W D 1919 'The topographical problem of the battle of Alford', *Aberdeen University Review* 6,: 248-54.



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●●●● Inventory Boundary

0 250 500 Metres

# BATTLE OF ALFORD

## 2nd July 1645

Aberdeenshire  
NGR: NJ567162

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