

Inventory of Historic Battlefields

AULDEARN

9 May 1645

Local Authority: Highland

NGR centred: NH 914 551

Overview

The Battle of Auldearn was a major victory for the Scottish Royalists over the Covenanter army (Scottish Presbyterians opposed to interference by the Stuart Kings in the affairs of the Church of Scotland) during the Civil Wars. It was the fourth battle of the campaign of the Marquis of Montrose on behalf of Charles I and was central to his reputation as a highly skilled commander.

Auldearn was the first time that Montrose had faced an experienced Covenanter army. Due to brilliant military tactics he was able to inflict a heavy defeat on them despite being outnumbered. The battle has been viewed as Montrose's greatest victory and a significant Royalist success story in the later stages of the First Civil War.

The Battle

Montrose had been retreating northwards after attempting to besiege Dundee. He was pursued by a Covenanter army under William Bailey, but a second, smaller army had been sent to outflank him. This army, under Sir John Hurry, beat him to Inverness and fought a rearguard action to keep Montrose from the town. Montrose retreated to Auldearn, but wanted to deal with Hurry before Baillie could arrive and surround him. However, during the night of 8 May, Hurry advanced on Auldearn under the cover of bad weather. Unfortunately, because of the wet conditions, the Covenanter troops fired their muskets to clear the barrels, and this was heard by Montrose's scouts and the alarm was raised.

By morning, Hurry was drawn up to the west of Auldearn with an army of at least 3,000 men including regulars and levies and at least 300 cavalry; some of the primary sources put Hurry's strength at around 5,000. Montrose had around 2,000 men consisting of a mixture of recruits and experienced Irish infantry with 300-600 cavalry. Montrose had Alasdair Mac Colla, his most experienced infantry officer, on the right wing at Boath House (a mansion house located to the north of the village) with the vanguard of two regiments, roughly 400 men; he placed a small body of experienced infantry in the enclosures at the centre of his line, together with his artillery and the royal standard. The standard was intended to persuade the Covenanters to focus on the centre and right. The remainder of Montrose's army were on the left, including all of the cavalry. They were largely hidden from the view of the Covenanters.

Mac Colla on the right and the troops in the centre were ordered by Montrose to hold their position at all costs. However, Mac Colla appears to have disobeyed this order. As the Covenanters attacked the Royalist right, as Montrose had intended, Mac Colla made a charge to drive them back. However, the Covenanter vanguard was too strong and he had to fall back into the enclosures. He then appears to have made a second sally, but was again heavily counter-attacked by the Covenanter vanguard and was pushed back to the enclosures for a second time; Montrose's judgement

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that these positions were virtually impregnable appears to have been justified by these events.

The Covenanter vanguard paused at this point to allow the main body of the army to join them, but this gave Montrose time to get his left wing out to the battlefield and charge the Covenanters. The cavalry under Lord Gordon broke the Covenanter cavalry, who scattered and left the infantry unprotected. The Covenanter infantry stood their ground, however, and may have been able to fight off the assault. However, the right wing of the Covenanter cavalry wheeled in the wrong direction and disrupted their own infantry line. As the Royalist cavalry started to break through the Covenanter infantry, Mac Colla charged from the enclosures. Hurry's infantry broke and ran, the rout soon turning into a bloody execution as the Royalist cavalry pressed home the pursuit. In the aftermath of the battle, the commander of the Covenanter cavalry on the right flank, Captain Drummond, was blamed for the defeat. It was believed that he had deliberately ridden his men into the infantry, disrupting the line and allowing the Royalists to break through. Part of the reason for this belief was the defection of Sir John Hurry, who was seen as the instigator of the cavalry action, to the Royalist cause. Whether or not there was any truth in the allegation, Drummond was executed for his mistake.

Events & Participants

The Covenanter government of Scotland had allied itself with the English parliament as initial Royalist successes suggested that Charles would gain the upper hand and be able to turn his attention to Scotland. Troops sent south to support the Parliamentarians had a significant impact in the campaign for the north of England in 1644. In response, in August 1644 the Marquis of Montrose (previously a Covenanter, but who supported the king as the only lawful sovereign) raised the royal standard in Scotland. Rarely able to raise more than 2,000 troops and usually outnumbered, he won a series of dramatic successes starting with the Battle of Tippermuir on 1 September 1644.

Sir John Hurry was the commander of the Covenanter forces. He first came to prominence in the so-called Incident when Royalists plotted to kidnap the Marquis of Argyll, the Marquis of Hamilton and the Earl of Lanark; Hurry betrayed the plot to the Covenanters and joined the Covenanter cause. He fought for the Parliamentarians at Edgehill and Brentford before switching sides to the Royalists for whom he fought at the Battle of Chalgrove Field and at Marston Moor. He switched sides again, and it was as a Covenanter that he led the army sent to bring down Montrose in the spring of 1645.

The other significant historical figure present in the battle was Alistair Mac Colla. He was a MacDonald fighting against the Campbells of Argyll, and a Catholic fighting against the Protestant Covenanters. He had been fighting in Ireland against the Protestant settlers, and was sent to Scotland to aid the Royalist cause in 1644, leading an army of Ulstermen and MacDonalds. He joined Montrose and was with him from Tippermuir to Kilsyth, the last of Montrose's victories; they parted company because Mac Colla had no interest in the Lowlands or an advance into England.

Auldearn is notable for being one of the last battles in Britain where there was significant use of the bow. Bows had become largely obsolete in England and in Europe by the 16th century, but some of the Highlanders still used them. Their use at Auldearn is rare for a European battlefield, as no other 17th century battlefields in Europe have currently produced evidence for significant use of bows.

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Physical Remains & Potential

The discovery of human remains was noted on the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey map of 1871 on the summit of Garlic Hill, immediately to the south-west of Auldearn. Local tradition also places burials on land to the south of Garlic Hill, an area renamed Dead Man's Wood in the late 19th century. Other local legends suggest that those killed near the Royalist right wing were buried in a hollow below Auldearn churchyard wall and that a soldier was executed in the old orchard immediately to the north of Kinnudie Farm.

As the battle had a very high number of Covenanter casualties it is likely that burials will survive within the battlefield area, especially on the probable routes of the rout on the west and south-west side of Auldearn.

The only building standing from the time of the battle is the now ruinous medieval part of Auldearn church. Although the building does not appear to have played any part in the action it was an important building within the village and undoubtedly would have been a focus at points during or in the aftermath of the battle. The churchyard may contain artefacts associated with the battle and may have been the location of the burial of some of the dead. Boath House and its park walls, where Mac Colla's troops stood prior to the battle, were rebuilt in the 19th century. The policies of the house have potential to retain in-situ evidence of Mac Colla's stand.

A small central group of Montrose's army were located on the western edge of the village, within walled enclosures. These enclosures boundaries have almost certainly been replaced or subsumed by later housing but a cartographic study of the village may give an indication of their location and there is potential for the survival of physical evidence of the battle in and around them.

The left flank of Montrose's army was located to the south or south-east of Dooket Hill, a medieval motte with a later 17th century dovecot on the summit. Although no action actually took place on the motte, it was a key to the direct manoeuvres of the Royalist troops and it is likely that lands surrounding the castle have potential to contain evidence of the initial deployment.

The growth and development of Auldearn village is likely to have removed evidence of the battle and the likelihood of pockets of undisturbed ground to survive within this area is unknown without further investigation. However, the land to the west of the village appears to have remained fairly undisturbed and the potential for surviving in-situ evidence associated with the battle in these areas is high. The main form of evidence for the battle will be the distributions of lead shot and personal items such as buttons. Artillery was present in the enclosures on the west of the village, which means that case shot (a thin metal case containing a large number of bullets or small projectiles) should also be present in the assemblage. Normally fired at 150 m maximum range, but with bullets typically carrying well over 300 m, there is potential for survival of evidence beyond the developed area, particularly where the centre and northern part of the frontage was located, to the north and west of Dooket Hill and beyond the Auldearn Burn.

In addition, some of the Highland levies in the Covenanter army are said to have been armed with, and to have made significant use of, bows, so the potential exists for substantial numbers of iron arrowheads on the battlefield, at least on the northern side, though any discovery will depend on how well they have survived in the soil.

Cultural Association

The battlefield is signposted and an interpretation panel has been erected on the top of Dooket Hill, a site maintained by the National Trust for Scotland. This was a

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vantage point used by Montrose during the early stages of the battle, and is the best place on the battlefield to gain an overall appreciation of the terrain and its influence on the outcome of the action. There are memorials to men who died in the battle in the church at Auldearn, one in the churchyard and the other inside the church itself.

Although there is no ballad about the battle of Auldearn, some of the verses of the Haughs o' Cromdale mention Auldearn. There is also a popular composition for the bagpipes called 'The Battle of Auldearn'.

Overall the battle is not well known, particularly in comparison to Culloden a few miles to the west.

Battlefield Landscape

The general location of the battlefield is well understood through detailed contemporary reports from both the Covenanters and the Royalists. However, due to discrepancies within these primary accounts, compiling an integrated account of the battle is problematic.

It is clear that the Royalist army was billeted in Auldearn on the night of 8 May 1645, while the Covenanters made a night march from Inverness in an attempt to take the Royalists by surprise. This means that there were no camps within the landscape.

The initial Royalist deployment consisted of Mac Colla on the right flank within the wall of Boath House, which protected against cavalry assault and musket fire. The park walls of Boath House may have been rebuilt and are not necessarily on the same line as the 17th century version.

Montrose put a small force in the centre behind what were probably enclosure or garden walls within or immediately adjacent to the village. This area is probably under the modern housing of Auldearn on the south-eastern side of Docket Hill. Montrose was on the left flank and had the main strength of his army on this flank, although hidden largely behind Docket Hill; this is all under housing today, but the upstanding earthwork of the motte gives a clear indication of how the Royalist deployment would have worked.

The Covenanters came from the west, either from Nairn or directly from Inverness. From Docket Hill, the views are open to Nairn and beyond, preserving the view of the battlefield and line of Covenanter approach from the Royalist perspective. The Covenanters drew up to the north-east of Kinnudie across the valley below Garlic Hill, and these areas are largely free of development and remain open fields. The potential lines of the rout, south-west past Kinnudie and south-east past Dead Wood in the direction of Kinstearry, remain largely undeveloped.

The battle was fought within the village of Auldearn and the open countryside which formed its immediate hinterland. The topography of the village played a key role in the manoeuvres of the Royalist troops and, although extensive development has occurred, important landscape features such as Docket Hill motte have remained essentially unchanged and the overall character of the village and its hinterland at the time of the battle is well preserved. The spatial relationship between surviving elements of the battlefield landscape such as the motte and the enclosed grounds of Boath House and the Covenanters position below Garlic Hill on the open land to the west survive well, allowing for the movements of the initial deployment by the Royalists and the flight of the Covenanters to still be easily read and understood.

The village of Auldearn has expanded considerably and now covers parts of the initial deployment of the Royalists in particular. However, the fighting is likely to have taken place to the west of the modern buildings in areas that are currently fields. The

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current A96, which bypasses the village, cuts through part of the ground where Mac Colla made his sallies and is likely to have had some impact on evidence of the fighting.

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:

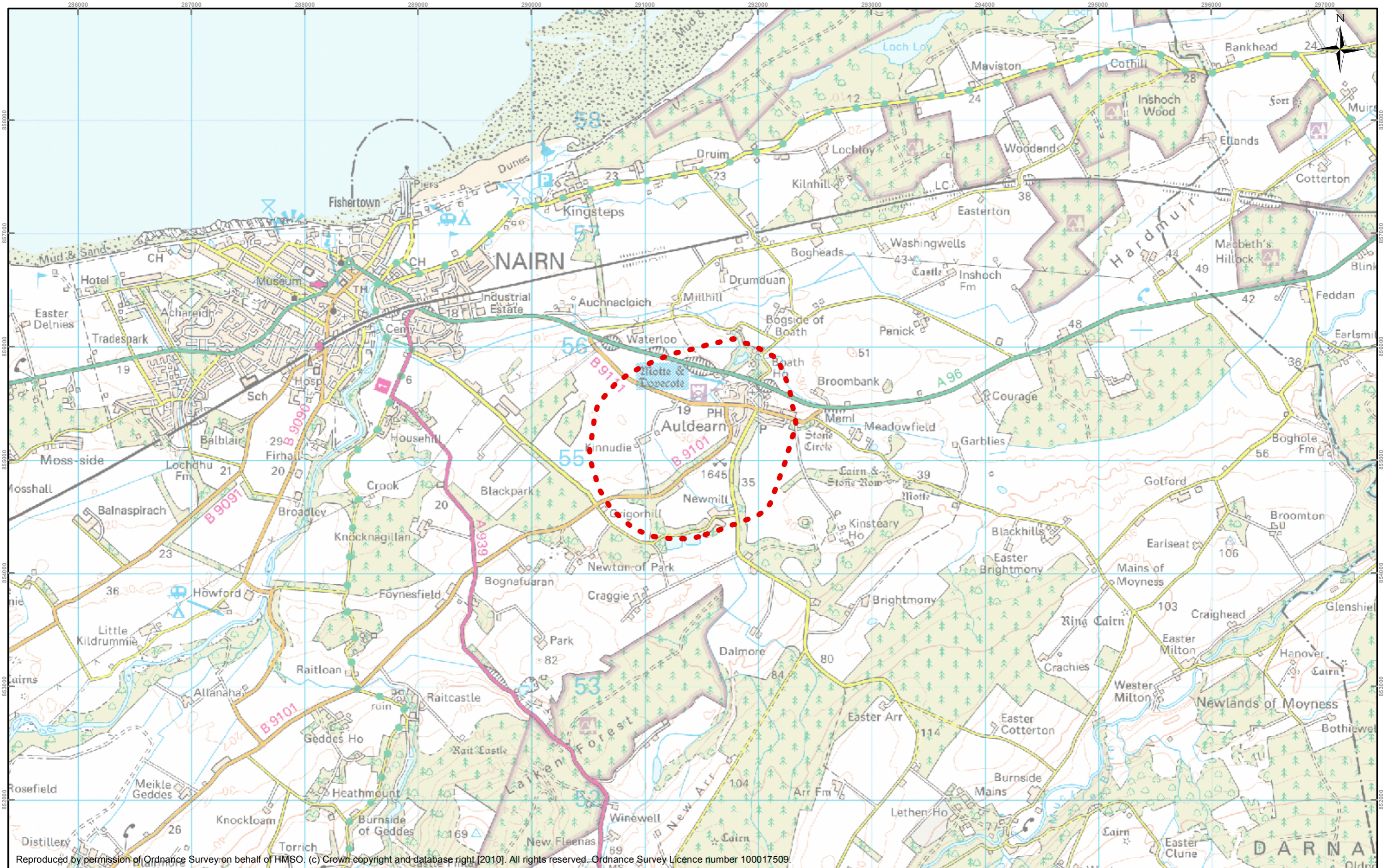
- Land to the west of Auldearn village. The direction of the advance of the Covenanter army and their initial organisation into battle formation around the farm of Kinnudie.
- Auldearn Village. The position of the Royalist troops within the village 'enclosures', the parkland of Boath House and the left flank to the south of Dooket Hill.
- The terrain surrounding Dooket Hill and views to the monument from the Royalist positions in the village. This landscape feature is key to understanding how Montrose effectively exploited the terrain to outmanoeuvre the Covenanter army.
- Lands to the south-west and south of Auldearn village including the summit and southern slopes of Garlic Hill and Dead Man's Wood. The probable route of the Covenanter's rout.

Relevant Publications

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

Reid, S. 2003 *Auldearn, 1645: the Marquis of Montrose's Scottish campaign*. Osprey, Oxford.

Stevenson, D. 1980 *Allastair MacColla and the Highland Problem in the 17th Century*. John Donald, Edinburgh.



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•••• Inventory Boundary

0 250 500 Metres

BATTLE OF AULDEARN

9th May 1645

Highland
NGR: NH914551