

# Inventory of Historic Battlefields

## KILLIECRANKIE

27 July 1689

Local Authority: Perth & Kinross

NGR centred: NN 909 634

### Overview

The Battle of Killiecrankie marked the beginning of the first Jacobite Rising (supporters of the restoration of the House of Stuart). John Graham of Claverhouse, the Viscount Dundee, had raised an army after James VII and II was ousted from the throne by the arrival of William of Orange in 1688. The battle came after a summer of manoeuvres where Major General Hugh Mackay led Government troops across the Highlands in pursuit of the growing army of Jacobites.

The battle, fought on the slopes of the Killiecrankie Pass, was a victory for the Jacobites. It was, however, one of the bloodiest fought during the fifty years of the Jacobite risings, with huge losses on both sides. The most significant fatality was Dundee, leaving the cause with no effective leadership. This ultimately prevented the Jacobites from capitalising on their achievement and without a clear successor the rising petered out the following year in 1690.

### The Battle

The battle came at the end of a cat and mouse chase around the Highlands as Mackay and Dundee each tried to get an advantage over the other and bring him to a decisive battle. In July 1689, both were heading for Blair Atholl to take the castle there. Dundee was coming south with around 2,400 men, while Mackay was marching up the Pass of Killiecrankie, a gorge formed by the River Garry, with between 3,500 and 5,000 men and three leather guns (a light mobile cannon, reinforced in rope and encased in leather). Dundee reached Blair Atholl first and, as Mackay emerged from the pass down on the lower river terraces, his scouts reported elements of the Jacobite army in the area. He sent a vanguard out to confront these units, but then realised that Jacobites were on the high ground within a quarter mile of his location. Mackay then ordered a *Quart de Conversion*, (where the columns performed a quarter of a circle turn to the right), and then marched up the slope that was now to their front. This 'steep and difficult ascent, full of trees and shrubs' (from Mackay's own account) is exactly the same today, leading from the old road up to Urrard House. This brought Mackay's army onto a terrace of level ground, which allowed them to deploy and face the enemy.

The Jacobites came over the top of the hill and drew up their line somewhere around the 200 m contour. Mackay's line was roughly 1,500 m long, which meant that his men were fighting three deep, rather than the more normal six. The smaller Jacobite force was spread along a smaller front. Once in position, the two armies spent several hours insulting each other while Dundee apparently waited for the sun to go down so that it no longer shone in their eyes. During this period, the Government lines were harassed by Jacobite snipers in a building standing between the two lines. Mackay sent a party of men under the command of his brother to force them out, which they duly did and inflicted several casualties on the Jacobites. According to Jacobite sources, these snipers were some of Cameron of Lochiel's men.

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This small scale action seems to have precipitated the main battle. Shortly after the Government soldiers regained their own lines, at around 8 pm in the evening, the Jacobites moved down the hill in three groups in a classic Highland charge. As they charged, they were shielded from much Government shooting by a series of natural terraces that meant they kept disappearing from view. Primary accounts note that on the left flank in particular, the Government troops were able to fire no more than three volleys before the Jacobites smashed into them and scattered them. On the right flank of the Jacobites, the MacDonalds took heavy fire as they were slowed in the charge by field walls and buildings. However, the 40 strong Jacobite cavalry under Dundee broke the Government right flank; it was during this action that Dundee was fatally wounded. A brief rally from Mackay's 100 strong cavalry was quickly ended as they realised that the infantry lines were collapsing, while the Jacobite right was keeping many of them bogged down in fighting on this side. Men started to stream from the battlefield with the Jacobites in pursuit. Many stopped to loot the baggage train, while others continued the pursuit for several miles.

Mackay was able to gather the remains of his right flank, an English regiment led by Hastings, and Leven's regiment from the centre and retreated in reasonable order back through the Pass down to Stirling. There was little attempt to stop them, largely because the Jacobite army was in no state to do so. Some were at the baggage train, some were pursuing troops over the surrounding countryside and they had also taken heavy losses in the fighting. Both Government and Jacobite sources suggest that Dundee's army took between 600 and 800 casualties. The Government army took around 2,000 casualties, most of them Lowland Scots. These figures are very high, but all of the sources agree reasonably well on the scale of losses. The Jacobite losses represent about a third of their army, while the Government losses were at least half of theirs. These are very severe for both sides and all the more remarkable given that the main action took less than an hour.

### Events & Participants

The Battle of Killiecrankie was the first encounter between the Jacobites and the Government army. Victory for the Jacobites was bitter sweet and short lived, the death of their leader Dundee on the battlefield resulted in disputes over leadership between the Irish contingent and Cameron of Lochiel. This led to divisions in the cause and with defeats at Dunkeld in August 1689 and at Cromdale on April 30 1690, the rising petered out. By spring 1692, following the battles of the Boyne (1690) and of Aughrim (1691) that ended James' Irish hopes, the Jacobite chiefs had sworn allegiance to William as king.

The two commanders were both significant historical figures. The commander of the Jacobites, John Graham of Claverhouse, or Bonnie Dundee, was an experienced soldier with a history of fighting for the Crown. He had led the suppression of the conventicles (a mixture of a religious meeting and a political rally, held in the open air by the Covenanters - Scottish Presbyterians opposed to interference by the Stuart Kings in the affairs of the Church of Scotland) in south-west Scotland for Charles II and had been defeated by the Covenanters at Drumclog before being a part of the Government victory at Bothwell Bridge on 22 June 1679. He was one of the first of the Scottish nobility to reject the ascendancy of William and Mary, and had been declared a traitor before William and Mary accepted the throne of Scotland on 11 April 1689.

The Government commander, Major General Hugh Mackay, was another experienced soldier; like Dundee, he had extensive experience fighting in Europe for the Crown. In Britain, he had been part of the victorious Government force at Sedgemoor when the Monmouth Rebellion against James II was put down. After

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Killiecrankie, Mackay led the Williamite infantry against the Jacobites at Aughrim in Ireland in 1691, before being killed at the Battle of Steinkeerke in the Low Countries in 1692; he was commander of the British contingent of William's army.

## Physical Remains & Potential

A limited programme of metal detecting, geophysical survey, excavation and topographic survey was undertaken in 2003 which provided a great deal of information about the location of the battle and related sites.

The excavation of the supposed burial mound of officers from the battle, known as Tomb Clavers, revealed no burials. Similarly, Dundee's Mound (located within the walled garden of Urrard House) was shown to be a geological feature rather than the burial mound for Dundee's horse as local tradition stated.

Evidence of physical elements of structures located on the battlefield at the time of the battle were investigated. Surviving walls associated with the kitchen of the precursor to Urrard House, which was said to have been occupied by Jacobite troops after the battle, were identified.

One of the initial actions of the battle came when Jacobite snipers were driven out of a small building on the slope above Urrard House by a sally from the Government line. Traces of a sunken trackway, two buildings and a possible corn drying kiln survive in this location. Excavation within one of the buildings revealed a pistol ball in the turf remains of its gable end, which may have been fired by the officer leading the sally. A brass trigger guard broken from a musket was also recovered from close by, and this again may be indicative of close quarter fighting between the two battle lines.

The metal detector survey produced a range of material relating to the battle, from musket and pistol balls to buttons and other personal items. These distributions confirmed the location of the Government line and also revealed that the accounts of the battle that suggested the Government left flank fled without firing a shot are essentially correct. The Jacobite left flank took heavy fire from the Government right while caught up in buildings and dykes, suffering most of their casualties here; these have yet to be identified archaeologically.

The survey also pinpointed the location of the Government baggage train on the terraces above the Garry within a field containing the prehistoric standing stone Claverhouse Stone. This site was also significant because it occupied the majority of the surviving Jacobites after the initial charge.

There have been no unequivocal discoveries of human remains at the site. There is a tradition that the bodies were put into a burn to be washed down into the Garry and out to sea, but there is no evidence to support the story. Given the very high number of casualties reported on both sides it is likely that burials will survive within the defined area, especially in the general area of Urrard House which was the core of the fighting.

## Cultural Associations

The battle is relatively well known, partly because of the song *The Braes o' Killiecrankie* (popularised by the Corries in particular), composed by Robert Burns. William Wordsworth also wrote the sonnet *In the Pass of Killiecrankie* about the battle.

The battle's popular appeal is also due to the death of Dundee in the fighting, an event which has given the battle an air of romance with a doomed hero meeting his

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end. Equally, its fame derives from the story of the Soldier's Leap, where a Government trooper called Donald MacBane made a desperate leap across the gorge of the Garry to escape the pursuing Jacobites. The story is well known, not least because MacBane wrote a book about his experiences and was adept at self-publicity. The incident has been featured as a logo on a brand of Scottish whisky.

The National Trust for Scotland owns part of the Pass and there is a visitor centre near the traditional location of the Soldier's leap and interpretation boards at key locations within the Pass. The Tomb Clavers bears a plaque to the battle which also commemorates the son of Urrard House who was killed in the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960). This cenotaph is the feature of an annual commemoration of the battle by the White Cockade Society.

Within the Pass there is a range of place-names associated with the battle, such as Dundee's Mound, Soldier's Leap and Trooper's Den.

### Battlefield Landscape

The location of the battlefield is well established through a number of eye witness accounts and the recent archaeological fieldwork. The battle was fought at the head of the Pass of Killiecrankie, south of Blair Atholl and the landscape of the battle is reasonably clear. The Government troops advanced along the Garry, and climbed the scarp slope to Urrard House when they realised that the Jacobites were approaching and were on the high ground. The Jacobites were drawn up on the slopes of Creag Eallaich (probably on the 200 m contour line) while the Government troops were spread out along the base of the hill.

The current Urrard House is on the site of the house which stood at the time of the battle and from where the shot that felled Dundee is traditionally said to have been fired. The modern house is a far grander structure than the contemporary one, which was called Roan Ruirridh. The original house had an enclosed garden that Mackay briefly considered using as a defence; however, the current walled garden is probably a later feature because it does not appear on Roy's map. There is a wall surrounding the house that probably represents the enclosed garden that Mackay considered.

Mackay's right flank was anchored on a burn that runs downslope into the Garry called Allt Girnaig, and his left flank was anchored on a small hill, probably the knoll where Balchroic Cottage stands. The Jacobites were on the slopes of Craig Eallaich above them, probably along the 200 m contour. All of these elements of the landscape remain largely unchanged and are intervisible.

The mound known as Tomb Clavers is another artefact of post-conflict changes; rather than a constructed mound, the feature is a piece of ground left undisturbed by quarrying that was enhanced with a stone wall and rubble infill to create its current form.

These landscape features are all extant and unaffected by later developments and the terraces that provided protection to the charge of the Jacobite left flank are easily discernible. Indeed, overall the landscape has seen little major development, with no urban build up and houses being relatively isolated in the landscape. The most striking change is the presence of the A9 trunk road that now bisects the battlefield. This will undoubtedly have had an adverse impact on the ground it covers, but the visual impact of the site is undiminished by its presence.

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

- The base of the Killiecrankie Pass. The approach of the Government troops.
- The southern slopes of Creag Eallaich. The location of the Government and Jacobite line and the core of the battle as determined through archaeological fieldwork. This includes the remains of buildings associated with the Jacobite's initial sniper action, Urrard House and gardens and the position of the English Baggage train within the Claverhouse Stone field.
- Killiecrankie village and lands to the south-east including areas of land owned by the National Trust for Scotland. The route of the Government rout and retreat. This includes the Soldier's leap and land which has high potential to contain graves associated with the battle.
- The well preserved landscape characteristics of the battlefield including the terrain of the Pass and the slopes of Creag Eallich. The intervisible views from the base of the glen looking upslope and from the upper terraces of the hill downslope are key to understanding the manoeuvres of both armies.

## Relevant Publications

Barr, N. 2002 *The Killing Time: Killiecrankie and Glen Coe*. Tempus, London.

Barrington, M. 1911 *Grahame of Claverhouse, Viscount of Dundee*. Secker, London.

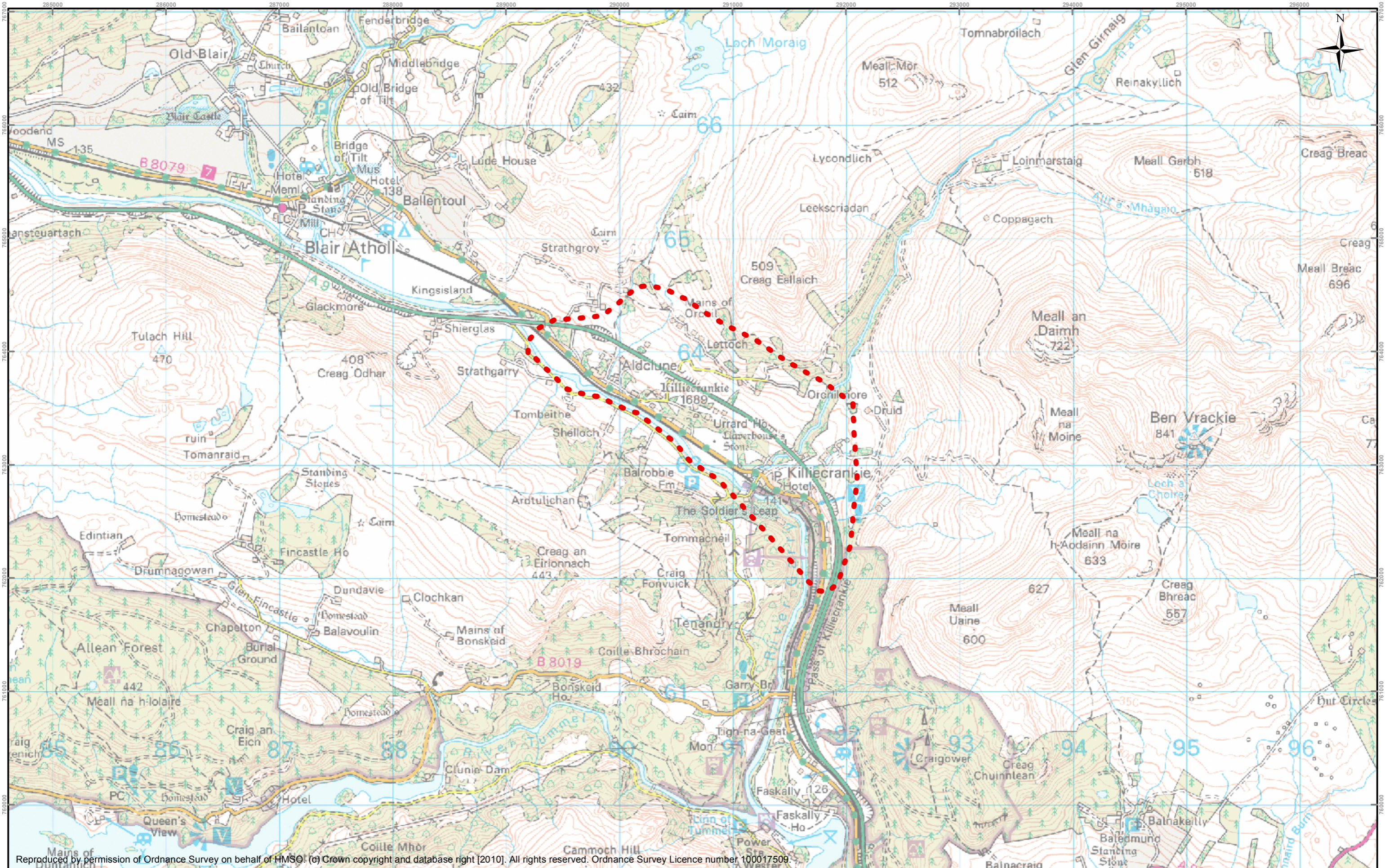
McBane, D. 1728 *The Expert Sword-man's Companion; or the True Art of Self-Defence; with an Account of the Author's Life, and his Transactions in the Wars with France; to which is annexed, the Art of Gunnerie*. James Duncan, Glasgow.

Mackay, H. 1833 *Memoirs of the War carried on in Scotland and Ireland, 1689 to 1691*. The Bannatyne Club, Edinburgh

Millar, A. H. 1906 'Killiecrankie described by an eye-witness', *Scott Hist Rev*, 4 (1906), 63-70.

Pollard, T. & Oliver, N. 2003 *Two Men in a Trench II: uncovering the secrets of British battlefields*. Michael Joseph, London.

Terry, C. S. 1905 *John Graham of Claverhouse*. Archibald Constable & Co., London.



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●●●● Inventory Boundary

0 250 500 Metres

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## 27th July 1689

Perth and Kinross  
NGR: NN909634