

Battle Name:	Auldearn	Council area: Highland
Date:	9 th May 1645	
UKFOC number:	343	NGR: NH 916 554

AULDEARN

1 SUMMARY

1.1 CONTEXT

The Covenanter government of Scotland had entered into alliance with the English parliament and had entered the war in England in early 1644, the Scottish army having a dramatic impact in the campaign for the north of England. In response, following the royalists' dramatic defeat at Marston Moor (Yorkshire, July 1644), the King appointed the Marquis of Montrose as his military commander in Scotland. On 28th August 1644 Montrose raised the royal standard and with little more than 2000 troops fought a campaign in which he had won a series of dramatic successes in the Highlands against the Covenanter forces. Heavily outnumbered, he effectively exploited the terrain to outmanoeuvre his enemy defeating them at Tippermuir, Aberdeen, Fyvie and Inverlochy. When in April he attempted an assault on Dundee a Covenanter army under Baillie responded. Montrose retreated north and an army under Hurry was dispatched in pursuit, getting between the royalists and Inverness. As the royalists advanced across the river Spey, Hurry fought a rearguard action as he moved closer to Inverness to unite with local Covenanter troops before engaging Montrose. The royalist forces withdrew to quarters in and to the east of Auldearn on the night of the 8th May, with scouts out to the west. Hurry, having united with the local forces now advanced against Montrose on the morning of the 9th May 1645.

1.2 ACTION

When news arrived from the scouts of the Covenanter approach MacColla, who had the most advanced royalist position, in Auldearn village itself, led his troops westward. They took up a strong position west of Auldearn, probably on Garlic Hill, protected from cavalry attack by a marsh and an area of bushes.

The action, relatively unusually for a battle of this period, probably lasted much of the day, but in the form of periods of intense fighting interspersed by lulls. It began with a Covenanter attack in which, after an intense fire-fight, they drove MacColla's heavily outnumbered troops back close to Auldearn village. Here, from the village enclosures the royalists maintained musket fire to hold back the Covenanters, aided by the difficult, marshy ground. MacColla then made a counter attack, it too becoming bogged down in the marshy ground and, after intense fighting including Covenanter cavalry as well as foot, was forced back to the village. The fighting apparently continued house to house through Auldearn.

Having finally mustered the main body of his army to the east of the village Montrose now moved into a counter attack. Contrary to other secondary works, Reid interprets

Montrose's account to suggest that there were outflanking attacks to north and south of Auldearn village by the royalists. A flank attack by cavalry drove the Covenanter cavalry, with the royalists in pursuit, through some Covenanter infantry units and provided some relief for MacColla's hard pressed men in the village. A cavalry attack on the Covenanter left then dealt with their left flank cavalry, exposing both infantry flanks to attack. A combined attack of horse and foot on the Covenanter infantry saw many killed in intense fighting, but a substantial number may have kept order to retreat south westward, retreating over the River Nairn at How Ford. The next day Montrose's army retreated eastward across the Spey.

Figure 1: Auldearn (1645) - battlefield plan

Figure 2: Auldearn conservation boundary suggested by Martin (red line)

1.3 TROOPS

Numbers:

The troops on both sides seem to have been largely equipped, trained and to have fought according to contemporary European practice, rather than with the Highlanders' equipment and tactics seen in some later battles, except that some troops apparently carried bows rather than muskets. There is some dispute over the numbers with primary and secondary sources giving significantly different numbers for each side but the following are based broadly on Reid's discussion.

Royalist (Montrose): possibly c. 2000: c.1440 foot; c.600 horse: a mixture of experienced Highland and Irish troops with raw recruits.

Covenanter (Hurry): possibly c. 3000: c.1700 regular & c.1300 local foot; c.300 horse.

Losses:

Reid provides some figures on casualties but there are considerable uncertainties. The order of scale may be:

Royalist: c.200

Covenanter: c.500

1.4 COMMEMORATION & INTERPRETATION

The battlefield is signposted and there is a car park. An interpretation panel has been erected on the motte near the dovecote on the NW edge of the village, maintained by the National Trust for Scotland. This was a vantage point used during the battle itself and is said to be the best vantage point on the battlefield to appreciate the terrain and its influence on the outcome. There is also a memorial to fallen Covenanter troops in the old church at Auldearn.(1)

2 ASSESSMENT

2.1 LOCATION

The general location of the battlefield is well known and this is supported by the discovery of possibly battle related burials on or near Garlic Hill. The Ordnance Survey modern mapping does place the battle to the south of Aldearn, but no other secondary source examined supports such an interpretation.

For the present purposes two broad areas have been defined as the first stage of definition of the battlefield:

- an inner search area likely to encompass the main action
- an extended search area required for terrain reconstruction and to encompass manoeuvres etc
- a wider area to the west to encompass any skirmishing associated with the flight / retreat towards Inverness has not been included due the substantial uncertainties, but this remains an issue to be tackled

The exact deployment of the forces and detail of the action is open to dispute. Thus the exact extent of the battlefield is difficult to define without further documentary and archaeological investigation of both the battlefield terrain and the battle archaeology. Resolution of the variation in location of the detail of the action is critical if there is to be implementation of any effective management of the battlefield as an historic landscape or an archaeological monument.

The extent of deployment and thus the action north westward of the village is in dispute between Reid and others secondary works, though the potential extent of marsh would tend to support Reid's interpretation. However with the detail of cavalry action shown by Reid the potential extent of marsh may raise difficulties, as may the fact that primary sources show action continued as far south as Brightmony, with Covenanter troops being killed there and near Kinstearry. Other troops retreated westward but the extent of action both during the battle, when the troops were in battle array, and in subsequent skirmishing, once they had been disordered, is undefined in this direction. It does appear fairly certain that the action did not extend to the north east of Auldearn village.

These uncertainties make defining the extent of the battlefield difficult, particularly on the south east and on the west. The lack of secure terrain reconstruction for 1645, including the location and extent of the marsh and the exact extent of Auldearn village and its enclosures, also means that even in the central area of the battlefield there remains substantial uncertainty as to the interpretation and placing of the fine detail and extent of action.

2.2 PRIMARY SOURCES

There is one detailed Covenanter report and several royalist reports on the battle. They are not presented in full in any of the sources consulted for this assessment and need to be made easily available.

2.3 SECONDARY WORKS

The most substantial discussion of the battle is by Reid (2003), who makes good use of the primary accounts, though unfortunately he does not reproduce them in full. The use of '3D' perspective depictions makes the accurate mapping of his suggested deployments very difficult. The terrain features shown on his plans are not sourced and seem to be as spurious as similar terrain detail provided in other books in the Osprey campaign series, such as Edgehill. Some of the detail appears to be direct reproduction of modern colour aerial photography, for it includes cropmarks. All the terrain features depicted must therefore be taken as spurious until proved otherwise.

Guest & Guest's review is highly derivative and the plan very stylised, however they show the infantry action focussed further north across what is now the A96.(2) Both they and Bennett broadly follow Seymour's depiction of the deployments.(4) This interpretation may be seriously compromised by the possible extent of marsh as suggested by the extent of alluvium.

2.4 BATTLE ARCHAEOLOGY

The only battle archaeology identified during the research for this report is the report of human remains noted on the 1st edition 6" Ordnance Survey mapping (1871) as having been found on Garlic Hill and recorded on the NMRS.

The geology of the battlefield is largely sands and gravels and as such the site is likely to have a low pH, which will have been aggressive towards preservation of ferrous artefacts in the topsoil. There are however several areas of alluvium which are likely to relate to the area of marsh reported in the accounts of the battle which could have preserved artefacts from mechanical damage from cultivation. The past land use history, if largely one of pasture, may also show whether there is an increased potential for good preservation of ferrous artefacts. There may also be potential here for exceptional preservation of waterlogged deposits. It should however be noted that most bullets recovered from a battlefield are probably retrieved from within the top 10cm and almost all from within the top 30cm, thus alluvial burial would make metal detecting survey work difficult in these areas, with negative results not necessarily reflecting lack of action. Where masked in this way by alluvium there is however the potential for exceptional preservation. Thus a key survey strategy should be to sample any intensive battle archaeology following the distributions from the sands & gravels into the alluvial area.

Some of the Highland levies in the Covenanter army are said to have been armed with bows and so the potential for iron arrowheads should be taken into account. There would appear to have been no study of a 17th century battlefield which has so far recovered significant evidence of archery, as the bow was largely obsolete by the 1640s in Western Europe. If the bow was actually used in any significant numbers at Auldearn in conjunction with musketry then this site might offer unusual potential for investigation of the issue of ferrous arrowhead survival and distributional patterning on the battlefield. The issues regarding potential for preservation of ferrous artefacts discussed above may be relevant here.

2.5 BATTLEFIELD HISTORIC TERRAIN

Research is required into the major road network in 1645 as there appear to have been significant changes. In 1776 the main route from Aberdeen to Nairn apparently ran along the coastal route, now just a minor road, but in 1830 a second route also seems to be shown running south of Auldearn, through 'Peniclara Park'. If the latter is not on the course of the 20th century A91, the course of the roads may modify our understanding of the exact approach of Hurry's forces to the field and thus the likely location of deployment and direction of attack and retreat/flight.

The 5m contours on the OS Explorer mapping appear to give an adequate impression of the relief which will have provided one of the key factors determining the tactical potential in the area. However lesser scale features than Garlic hill that still have significant military importance may only be visible from ground inspection and by use of a high resolution digital terrain model (NEXTMap Britain).

The marshy area that MacColla used to protect his initial position and which will have influenced the distribution of later action is likely to be broadly defined by one or both of the alluvial deposits immediately north west and south west of Auldearn village depicted on BGS mapping. The geological mapping taken together with the accounts mentioning the marsh obstructing the left wing of the MacColla's counter attack might indicate that the marsh lay in the alluvial area to the south east of Garlic Hill.

Determining the extent of settlement and of ancient enclosures around the village of Auldearn in 1645 will be important in pinpointing the action in the middle phase of the battle.

2.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BATTLE

At Auldearn Montrose defeated a significantly stronger force, even if at a substantial cost. Though the numbers involved were relatively small, the battle was another important element in the development of Montrose's reputation as a highly skilled commander. It set the scene for a series of new royalist victories, as the campaign moved south towards the Lowlands, and Montrose's campaign was the one significant royalist success story in the later stages of the First Civil War.

2.7 CURRENT STATE OF DEVELOPMENT

Auldearn village has expanded significantly, to the south, south east and north west, and a bypass has been constructed skirting the village to the north. However the vast majority of the probable battlefield remains open ground. A key area of the early action adjacent to the village, where MacColla held off the early attack, has probably been largely lost under the modern housing, though the mapping of the ancient enclosures may lead to some revision of this conclusion. There is a small area of surviving open ground around the Doocot, which may prove to be an archaeologically critical area for the understanding of this phase of the action if it enables the character and density of action close to the village to be assessed. Other than this, the battlefield seems to be fairly complete, with no obvious evidence on modern or late 19th century mapping for significant mineral extraction or other such destruction.

2.8 CURRENT DESIGNATIONS

Martin claims the site is already well covered in the Local Plan, but this has not been assessed here.(3) There are several listed buildings within the village and, immediately to the north west, a listed dovecote on the Scheduled motte. The site of the church in the village is also scheduled. Martin claims that the battlefield has been designated as a Conservation Area, but none is shown on the Conservation Areas digital data set provided for the project by Historic Scotland. No other designations have been identified.

2.9 POTENTIAL

The battlefield appears to have high potential both for investigation and interpretation.

It is clear from Montrose's own account that the terrain severely restricted the room for manoeuvre, allowing him only to deploy in two wings in his critical counter-attack. Given this and the terrain information in the primary accounts, it seems likely that a far clearer picture of the location and extent of the initial deployments and of the various phases of the action could be established by a detailed reconstruction of the historic terrain as a context for the re-interpretation of the primary accounts. This applies equally to the wider context of the battlefield as to the battlefield core. For example, there were probably two major roads leading east from Nairn past Auldearn towards Aberdeen, one running north and the other south of Auldearn. Knowledge of the exact course of these roads in 1645 would assist in the understanding the likely approach of Hurry's Covenanter army to the battlefield and thus the reconstruction of the initial manoeuvres and even the exact location of the initial deployments. Reconstruction may also assist in resolving the conflict between the interpretations in the secondary works, as for example where Reid interprets Montrose's account to suggest that there were outflanking royalist attacks around either side of Auldearn village.

Any interpretation would need to be tested by sampling the battle archaeology. Given the frequent reference in the primary accounts to intense fire-fights, there should be extensive evidence of battle archaeology in the form of lead bullets of varying calibre, which should be very amenable to systematic survey. One problem with the interpretation of the battle archaeology is that there were apparently three separate stages when attack and counter-attack flowed across Garlic Hill and the area up to the village, and distinguishing the evidence from each is likely to be impossible, unless there is some distinctive attribute of calibre or firing marks to the different phases. First however an assessment needs to be made to establish what metal detecting, if any, has been undertaken on the battlefield, if it has then whether any of the finds have been recorded and thus what damage is likely to have been done to the distribution patterns. In addition, given part of the action was through the village then, if there are any surviving buildings or other structures from the period, they should be examined for evidence of shot impacts.

2.10 THREATS

The high probability of survival of extensive non ferrous battle archaeology renders the site particularly vulnerable to treasure hunting and unrecorded/poorly recorded metal detecting surveys.

Further housing development, including infilling in remaining paddocks around the village, especially to the west and south would be very destructive of the battle archaeology.

If potential exist for the survival of waterlogged deposits from the former marsh then any intention for further lowering of the water table could prove destructive.

If past land use has been predominantly pastoral then conversion to arable now or in the recent past may represent a threat of rapid destruction of otherwise well preserved unstratified ferrous battle archaeology.

3 REFERENCES

(1) Reid Stuart. *Auldearn, 1645 : the Marquis of Montrose's Scottish campaign*. Oxford: Osprey, 2003.

(2) Guest, Ken, and Denise Guest. *British battles : the front lines of history in colour photographs*. London: HarperCollins 1996, 1996.

(3) Martin, David E. "The Battlefields of Scotland: A report on their preservation for Historic Scotland." *Historic Scotland*, 1997.

(4) Seymour W. *Battles in Britain and their political background 1066-1746*. London: Book Club Associates, 1979.

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