

Battle Name:	Falkirk I	Council area: Falkirk
Date:	22nd July 1298	
UKFOC number:	287	

FALKIRK I

1 SUMMARY

1.1 CONTEXT

In March 1298, following the English defeat at Stirling Bridge, William Wallace led a punitive raid into Northumberland. In response, later in 1298, Edward I assembled an army of 15,000, including veterans from his campaigns in France as well as Welsh and Irish troops. In the campaign that followed Wallace was outnumbered and forced to employ hit and run tactics, avoiding open battle, and implementing a policy of clearing or destroying resources in the path of the English army in order to weaken its ability to fight. In response Edward, who had mustered his army at Roxburgh, organised seaborne supplies to support his forces as they marched north to Edinburgh. Wallace planned a night time attack on Edward's army near Kirkliston, just to the north west of Edinburgh, but was betrayed by two Scottish nobles, who resented Wallace's rise to power. Wallace now had little alternative but to face Edward in open battle before he reached Stirling with its strategically important castle. He chose Falkirk as the location.

1.2 ACTION

Though outnumbered, Wallace was forced to engage the English, choosing terrain in which he could use an area of marshy ground to protect his deployment. His infantry were organised in four schiltrons ('great circles') of spearmen, with the archers between these and with the cavalry to the rear.(1) The English deployed in three battles: the vanguard under Norfolk & Hereford, the rearward battle under the Bishop of Durham and the main battle under Edward I. The vanguard moved to the right and the main battle to the left of the marsh, the first cavalry attack having become bogged down. This second English charge caused the Scottish cavalry to flee and then carried on to ride down the Scottish archers, but were halted by the schiltrons.(2) But then the English archers advanced and opened up the schiltron lines with hails of shot, providing openings which the English cavalry then exploited, destroying the schiltrons and defeating Wallace's army, which was then destroyed in the pursuit.(2)(3)(4)

Figure 1: Falkirk I (1298) - battlefield plan

1.3 TROOPS

Numbers:

English: The contemporary chronicles give impossibly large numbers up to 80,000 or more;(3) 12,500 infantry; 2500 cavalry;(2) about 18,000.(4) Including 8000 archers; 3000 armoured infantry; 200 heavy cavalry (knights).(4)

Scottish: outnumbered; Improbable medieval numbers: 30,000; 1000 archers; small cavalry reserve (3). 14,000; mainly infantry militia spearmen; about 180 cavalry (4). 5-6000 (1).

Losses:
uncertain

1.4 *COMMEMORATION & INTERPRETATION*

No monument or interpretation has been identified.

2 *ASSESSMENT*

2.1 *LOCATION*

The location of the battlefield is contentious, with two main sites being identified in the secondary works. The traditional site is that on the north side of the medieval town of Falkirk, which is where it is positioned by the NMRS. Most recent authors, including Smurthwaite, Seymour, Matthews and the most recent study by Armstrong, place the action to the south of Falkirk. They show the Scottish army deployed on high ground immediately to the south of Callendar Wood, looking south across valley of the Glen Burn. Reid provides a concise summary of the case for the two sites (3). The primary accounts merely state that the battle was ‘On hard ground and on the side of a hillock, next to Falkirk’ (5), ‘on the side of Falkirk’ (6) and on ‘the plain which is called Falkirk’ (7).

Pont’s 16th century map shows woodland along the valley below the Callendar site, while the woodland of Callendar itself, if extant in 1298, would have provided an improbable backing for the army, not allowing easy retreat (2).

The site is also well away from the later, and probably also the 13th century, main road from Edinburgh to Stirling, which was Edward’s objective. However this need not be a major problem with the Callendar site because the 18th century battle of Falkirk, which was fought under similar strategic imperatives, was also fought well to the south of the major road.

There is nothing in the geological mapping on the Callendar site which would seem to accord with the marshy ground referred to in the primary accounts, the whole area being boulder clay. In contrast the traditional site is on a limited area of sand and gravels surrounded by extensive areas of silts & clays. The latter might accord with the reference to the Scottish army standing on ‘hard ground’ and with marsh areas affecting the English attack.

2.2 *PRIMARY SOURCES*

A detailed account is provided by Walter of Guisborough which is internally consistent and can be checked against other sources. Gray’s Scalacronica and the Lanercost Chronicle both provide short accounts. Other accounts follow Guisborough word for word (8).

2.3 SECONDARY WORKS

The main modern work is that by Armstrong (8).

2.4 BATTLE ARCHAEOLOGY

None has been identified in the research for this report.

2.5 BATTLEFIELD HISTORIC TERRAIN

The geological evidence on the traditional site suggests a combination of dry ground on sands and gravels where as the clay/silt areas might, in this low lying situation, have included marsh in some parts. On the Callendar site there is no geological evidence to support the existence of a marsh in the areas suggested by Seymour, but more detailed examination of soils data may reveal relevant evidence.

The major road between Edinburgh and Stirling appears likely to have been that running in the post medieval through the town of Falkirk and hence closer to the northern as opposed to the southern site.

Reconstruction of the major road pattern in 1298, mapping of the extent of Falkirk town in the medieval period and more detailed archaeological and/or documentary research on the likely nature of 13th century land use in the area, may assist in the more secure locating of the battlefield.

2.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BATTLE

Falkirk is a battle of international significance involving major military commanders of the period. It saw the Scottish army destroyed, leaving Edward I in control of south east Scotland, which he held with a few garrisons. Thereafter during the reign of Edward I another Scottish army could not be raised capable of challenging the English in the field.

2.7 CURRENT STATE OF DEVELOPMENT

The traditional site is wholly built over with practically no open ground. The Callendar site is partly built over by modern development but substantial areas remain undeveloped farm land.

2.8 CURRENT DESIGNATIONS

Callendar site:

Callendar wood is managed by the Forestry Commission. Woodend Farm is listed. The canal running across the southern part of the site is scheduled. Callendar Park and wood are clearly a designed landscape but are not identified on the digital data set provided for the current project by Historic Scotland.

Traditional site:

There are a number of listed buildings.

2.9 POTENTIAL

The limited topographical evidence in the primary accounts, especially the reference to an area of marsh, may be just enough to enable the correct area to be determined from the two alternative sites if an adequate reconstruction of the historic terrain of the two contending locations can be prepared.

If the Callendar site is not dismissed as a result then it would be possible to test this area for surviving battle archaeology. The use of archery on both sides, and its decisive role in the English victory, means that there will have been large numbers of arrows deposited on the battlefield, many of them not being recovered, especially where the action passed over the arrow fall and smashed them. Thus if the soil conditions and post battle land uses were conducive to preservation of iron then there may be extensive evidence of the arrowstorm. The Callendar site is almost wholly boulder clay, but it has not been determined in the present research whether this has produced a high or low soil pH and hence the potential for preservation of unstratified iron objects has not been established.

If the traditional, northern site appears to be the correct one, after terrain reconstruction and reanalysis of the primary accounts, then this cannot be tested archaeologically as it is wholly built over. The only potential here for confirmation through archaeological evidence would be the improbable situation of a mass grave being discovered by chance in redevelopment, but had such existed it might have been expected to have been reported when the site was first developed.

If the southern site is confirmed then the battlefield could prove of considerable importance. There is disagreement about the exact battle formation of both sides in the battle, something that is partly linked to the uncertainties about battle formations and tactics generally in the medieval period. It is important that well preserved battlefields with good potential for the survival of battle archaeology are identified throughout the medieval period in order to examine the battle archaeology to improve our understanding of the changing detail of military action in the period.

2.10 THREATS

It appears likely that the Callendar site will could come under threat from continuing development and so determining which the correct site for the battle is is particularly important. If it is the Callendar site then there is probably need for urgent action. In the absence of definitive evidence for either site, it would be appropriate to undertake evaluation on the Callendar site in response to any substantial development threat.

3 REFERENCES

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- (2) Smurthwaite, David. *The Complete Guide to the Battlefields of Britain*. London: Michael Joseph, 1993
- (3) Warner, Philip. *Famous Scottish battles*. London: Cooper, 1995.
- (4) Matthews, Rupert. *England versus Scotland, The great British battles*. Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2003
- (5) Guisborough

- (6) Scalacronicon
- (7) Westminster Chronicle
- (8) Armstrong Pete. *Stirling Bridge & Falkirk 1297-98 : William Wallace's rebellion*. Oxford: Osprey, 2003
- (9) Pont's map (National Library of Scotland)

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