

Battle Name:	Kilsyth	Council area: N Lanarkshire
Date:	15 th August 1645	
UKFOC number:	279	

KILSYTH

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, 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 the Covenanter army in the campaign and in the actions. Having won victories at Tippermuir, Aberdeen, Fyvie, Inverlochy, Auldearn and Alford he now attempted to break into the Lowlands. This was the only positive news for the embattled Charles I, whose cause was now heading for destruction in England, having just lost the battles of Naseby (Northamptonshire) and of Langport (Somerset). The king's strategy now moved towards the uniting of Scottish and English royalist forces in a final desperate attempt to salvage the war.

From Alford, Montrose headed south along the east coast making for Glasgow; two Covenanter forces, under Argyll and Baillie, in pursuit. Montrose turned to engage them at Kilsyth, where the route from Stirling to Glasgow skirts south of the Campsie Fells.

1.2 ACTION

Montrose deployed in a high meadow. Part of the battlefield was one of fields divided by 'dykes'. Baillie advanced against the royalists, deploying on a reverse slope out of sight of the royalists, somewhere to the north of the main road. Here impassable ground precluded any further advance towards the enemy and also meant neither side would be able to make a viable attack. According to Reid the Covenanter forces may have been facing the royalist left flank. After assessing the situation Baillie made a move to outflank the royalists by taking higher ground on his right wing. This led to a skirmish for control of a groups of buildings and 'dykes', suggested by Reid as Auchinrivoch farm. Having failed to gain the high ground Baillie moved his troops from line of march into battle array once more. The royalist main infantry force then engaged, fighting through the enclosures. Meanwhile Baillie launched a cavalry attack against the royalist left, an attack which was only finally halted by the royalist cavalry reserve. The Covenanter cavalry were broken and fled, exposing Baillie's right wing of infantry. The royalists in the centre then carried the enclosure dykes and the main Covenanter infantry line broke, as did their reserve. A final attempt to rally the fleeing troops at a brook failed. Although some escaped the field, the last substantial Covenanter army in Scotland had been destroyed.

Figure 1: Kilsyth (1645) - battlefield plan**Figure 2: Kilsyth conservation boundary suggested by Martin (red line)****1.3 TROOPS**

Numbers:

Montrose: c.3000 foot; c.600 horse (3)

Baillie: c.3500 foot; 360 horse (3)

Losses:

uncertain

1.4 COMMEMORATION & INTERPRETATION

No on site commemoration or interpretation relating to the battle has been identified in this review.

2 ASSESSMENT**2.1 LOCATION**

The general location of the battle is well established. However within this broad area the exact location of the preliminary deployments and thus the exact position and direction of the Covenanter flanking move, the initial deployments and the attacks is not determined. Substantial differences of view are seen between secondary works, such as those by Seymour, Bennett, Warner or Reid, as to the location and orientation of the deployments. None provides a wholly satisfactory interpretation.

There are a number of potentially battle related place names present on the 1st edition 6 inch Ordnance Survey mapping: Baggage Knowe, Slaughter Howe and, Bullet Knowe, which might provide limited assistance in placing the events.

2.2 PRIMARY SOURCES

Kilsyth is a well documented battle, thanks particularly to the dossier prepared by Baillie as part of the inquest into the disastrous Covenanter defeat.

2.3 SECONDARY WORKS

The campaign is discussed by Reid 2003 which, although a largely identical text to that in Reid 2004, also includes a tabulation of the composition of the two armies and a plan showing an interpretation of the location of the main action. No single study devoted solely to the battle has been identified in the present review. The most recent examination is in Reid 2004, who exploits some of the primary sources to provide a reinterpretation of the detail of the action. However his study lacks the historic terrain reconstruction essential to resolving key issues of interpretation. There is also a substantial difference of view between

the secondary sources as to the exact deployment of the forces, the viability of and reasons for Baillie's outflanking move and indeed the sequence and nature of the whole action.

2.4 BATTLE ARCHAEOLOGY

A traditional site of Covenanter burial lies on the western side of the battlefield but, in the absence of firm evidence of association with the battle, the attribution appears improbable as it seems to lie too far to the west.

2.5 BATTLEFIELD HISTORIC TERRAIN

The historic terrain played an important part in Montrose's choice of battlefield, with walled fields and buildings being effectively exploited to achieve his victory. There are topographical details in the primary accounts which should enable the accurate placing of the deployments and action if a detailed reconstruction of the historic terrain can be achieved: for example the deployment of the royalists in a high meadow and the Covenanter flanking move to take the high ground on their right.

2.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BATTLE

Kilsyth was the high point of the royalist campaign in Scotland. Montrose had destroyed the last Covenanter army in Scotland and if he could now raise sufficient Lowland forces then control of Scotland for the king was a genuine possibility. However Montrose failed to capitalise effectively on this opportunity and by early September his army began to disintegrate. The defeat at Kilsyth forced the Covenanters to order detachments of the now battle hardened Scottish army in England to return home to counter Montrose. This in itself was a success, but it came far too late to rescue the king's cause in England, because Charles's last English field army had already been destroyed at Langport in July. Thus Kilsyth was a dramatic victory with substantial potential implications that were never realised.

2.7 CURRENT STATE OF DEVELOPMENT

A significant part of the battlefield, as interpreted by most authors, appears to lie beneath the Banton Loch reservoir, however Reid seems to place most of the action to the north east and east of the reservoir. Given the uncertainties about the exact location of the deployments and action it is therefore unclear how much of the battlefield has actually been lost beneath the reservoir.

The 6 inch 1st edition Ordnance Survey mapping shows coal and ironstone mines and several limestone quarries across particularly the western part of the battlefield. However without a detailed assessment of mapped and aerial data it is not possible to establish the exact extent or percentage of the area where the historic terrain or battle archaeology will have been destroyed or buried by these activities. It should be noted however that the geological mapping does not show any substantial areas of made ground which might be expected if the destruction was extensive. A small area of the battlefield has also been covered by the industrial village of Low Banton.

2.8 *CURRENT DESIGNATIONS*

On the battlefield there is one small Scheduled area, an unrelated motte. There are no other designations.

2.9 *POTENTIAL*

Given the apparent quality of the documentary record, together with the importance that terrain played in the location and outcome of the action, there is a high priority for the reconstruction of the historic terrain, accompanied by a re-assessment of the battle detail in all the primary accounts. To achieve this, in addition to any documentary evidence, it might prove necessary to include some archaeological investigation of the battlefield terrain, if relevant evidence survives. Having placed the events as accurately as possible in relation to the historic terrain, the re-interpretation should then ideally be tested by sampling any remaining battle archaeology, particularly the distribution of unstratified lead bullets.

Such work could contribute significantly to the positioning and understanding of the action. Without this it is impossible to make an informed assessment as to the survival or research potential of the battlefield, in terms of battle archaeology and battlefield terrain or indeed its interpretive potential for the public. Without such basic information neither can there be effective conservation of that part of the battlefield which does survive, as it is not known which features in the modern landscape, if any, survive from the time of the battle or which areas may contain battle archaeology.

The better understanding of the historic terrain and the way in which the action was played out within it, in this and other battles of 1644-5, would enable a far more informed assessment of Montrose's campaign. It may help to explain his successes, despite being often outnumbered by Covenanter forces, even where the latter included regular troops under very able commanders.

2.10 *THREATS*

The presence of extensive non ferrous battle archaeology renders any remaining unflooded parts of the site particularly vulnerable to treasure hunting and unrecorded/poorly recorded metal detecting.

3 *REFERENCES*

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- (2) Reid, Stuart. *Battles of the Scottish Lowlands, Battlefield Britain*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2004.
- (3) Reid Stuart. *Auldearn, 1645 : the Marquis of Montrose's Scottish campaign*. Oxford: Osprey, 2003.

4 *BIBLIOGRAPHY*

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