

Battle Name:	Largs	Council area: N Ayrshire
Date:	2 nd October 1263	
UKFOC number:	430	

LARGS

1 SUMMARY

1.1 CONTEXT

Despite the Scots victory at Renfrew in 1164 and several campaigns by Scottish kings to conquer the territory, the Norse had retained control of the Isles and Argyll. There they maintained their rule in a semi-autonomous fashion under the overlordship of the kings of Norway. In response to the continued pressure from the Scots, the king of Norway mounted a pre-emptive attack to secure Norse control of the territory. In July 1263 King Haco is said to have sailed from Bergen with 200 ships. In the Hebrides he was joined by the King of Man with additional forces. From there they sailed down the coast of Scotland raiding the mainland. Initial negotiations were opened but this time was used by the Scots to buy time to raise their forces. Then in a storm some of the Norse ships were beached at Largs and an armed engagement began, forcing Haco to land his main force in disadvantageous circumstances on a difficult coast. (1).

1.2 ACTION

Little is known of the detail of the action, which soon escalated into full battle, but it seems that the Norse were never able to form up fully in battle array before they were engaged. The arrival of Scottish reinforcements may finally have turned the tide of the action, forcing the Norse army to break. It is said that they were then pursued with great slaughter, with most fleeing to their boats. (1).

Figure 1: Largs (1263) - battlefield plan

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

1.3 TROOPS

Numbers:

Scots: 1500 mounted men at arms, according to the Norse accounts, though this is dubious (1).

Norse: uncertain

Losses:

Claims of 25,000 Norse dead are spurious (1).

1.4 COMMEMORATION & INTERPRETATION

The monument to the battle stands on Far Bowen Craigs, overlooking the sea immediately to the south of Largs. There are also several standing stones and cairns which have, by

tradition, become associated with the battle. The site of a standing stone in the southern part of Largs (4) is said to mark the spot where Haco was killed, though in the accounts he is said to have escaped the field. A cairn on The Holm, on the north east side of Great Cumbrae Island (2km across the sea to the west of Largs), is said to be the site of burial of other of Haco's men, while a standing stone towards the centre of the island is said to be a memorial to the fallen Norse soldiers. (2).

2 ASSESSMENT

2.1 LOCATION

The traditional site of the battle is recorded on Armstrong's map of Ayrshire in 1775, which shows the town of Largs wholly north of the Gogo Water and the site of the battle of Largs immediately to the south of that river. The location is repeated by the Ordnance Survey in 1857. (4). However there does not appear to be sufficient detail within the primary accounts to accurately locate the battlefield, while the potential for battle archaeology which might otherwise resolve the matter is uncertain for battlefields of this period and character of warfare.

The locational uncertainties are so great that it was not felt appropriate to attempt to define a 'search area' for the battle of Largs at this stage.

2.2 PRIMARY SOURCES

The primary accounts appear to provide very limited information on the action.

2.3 SECONDARY WORKS

No modern study of the battle has been identified in the research for this project.

2.4 BATTLE ARCHAEOLOGY

Human remains, said to be associated with the battle, are reported in Largs on the north side of Gogo Water, though there is no confirmation of the association. (3). The site of a cairn said to have contained a coffin and sword handles is reported by the Ordnance Survey in 1857 close to the centre of the traditional site, but again no confirmation of the association with the battle has been identified (4). If the artefacts themselves or drawings of them can be traced it is conceivable that secure dating could be achieved which might determine the potential for genuine association with the battle.

2.5 BATTLEFIELD HISTORIC TERRAIN

2.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BATTLE

Largs was a major victory for the Scots which had great political significance. It led the defeated king of Man to swear allegiance to the king of Scotland; a punitive expedition also followed in the Hebrides, forcing their allegiance also to the Scottish king; then, three years later, the king of Norway signed a treaty relinquishing all claim over Man and the Hebrides. (1).

2.7 CURRENT STATE OF DEVELOPMENT

While the settlement of Largs in the 18th century appears to have been wholly to the north of the river, by the 1850s it had begun to expand southward across the battlefield. Today almost the whole of the plain to the south of the river is developed. There are a few small areas of undeveloped land within the area. The latter might prove of significance as it might contain some battle archaeology. However as there is no exact information as to the location and extent of the action, the present location apparently resting largely on tradition, there is some uncertainty as to whether any part of the actual battlefield might survive undeveloped.

2.8 CURRENT DESIGNATIONS

The battle monument is Listed. There are also several listed buildings within the urban area. A Scheduled cairn lies on the eastern side of the battlefield and the designed landscape of Kelburn Castle lies to the south.

Martin defines a tiny area of land for conservation. This represents the largest piece of open ground at the centre of the traditional site of the battle, but if there are any potentials for conservation of the site then assessment should also be undertaken of the other areas of open ground closer to the beach.

2.9 POTENTIAL

The location and extent of the battlefield are not securely established. It is possible that a detailed study of the primary accounts and reconstruction of the historic terrain might enable some improvement in understanding, though given the early date of the battle this may not be practicable, other than for any crude geological changes to the extent of land on the seaward side and identification of previous presence of marsh or of burial such as by colluvium/alluvium.

Despite the great national significance of the battle, given the difficulties of recovering battle archaeology from medieval actions and the state of the development of the traditional site, there would not seem to be a high priority for such investigation compared to that seen on some other potentially better preserved and located battlefields of the medieval period. In particular it is unclear what role, if any, archery played in the battle but, even if arrows were deposited, there is a high probability that any unstratified ferrous items like this will have decayed over the almost 750 years since the action, unless exceptional preservation conditions can be demonstrated (eg: soil pH, land use, alluvial or colluvial burial). Other non ferrous artefacts may however have been deposited during the hand to hand fighting and be recoverable, but no intensive survey has yet been undertaken on a securely located site of such an early date to demonstrate such survival. Mass graves may also exist but they are most likely to have already been identified in the 19th and 20th century development of the area. Further such discoveries are unlikely, although watching briefs on any substantial developments/redevelopments in the area might be justified. Any development in close proximity to the reported burial sites, unless those sites can be shown to be unassociated with the battle, should be a priority, as locating a securely associated mass grave with clear trauma, as at Towton, would be of high archaeological importance both in its own right but also for the locating of the battlefield. Any development threats that arise on the few small

areas of land not previously developed within the traditional site of the battle should probably be subject to archaeological survey, including intensive metal detecting, prior to and during development. It would be appropriate to review the priorities regarding this battle once at least one better preserved battlefield from the 11th – 14th centuries has been surveyed and the nature of the battle archaeology is determined.

2.10 THREATS

Given the intensively developed character of the site the threats are likely to be very few, restricted to redevelopment of the known burial sites, major redevelopment schemes, and any encroachment upon the undeveloped fragments of the traditional battlefield site.

3 REFERENCES

- (1)Black, C. Stewart. *Scottish battles*. Glasgow: Brown Son & Ferguson, 1936.
- (2)NMRS: NS25NW6; NS15NE6 & 15.
- (3)NMRS: NS25NW5
- (4)OS 1st edition 6inch mapping, 1857.

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