

Battle Name:	Stirling Bridge	Council area: Stirling
Date:	11 <sup>th</sup> September 1297	
UKFOC number:	326	

## ***STIRLING BRIDGE***

### **1 SUMMARY**

#### ***1.1 CONTEXT***

With the failure of the House of Canmore in Scotland, Edward I of England supported the installation of John Balliol as a vassal king of Scotland. In 1295 there was a rebellion, leading to an English campaign involving the sack of Berwick and the defeat of a Scottish army at Dunbar. Balliol then sued for peace and accepted an English occupation but, in 1297 under the leadership of Sir William Wallace and Sir William Morray, there was a major Scottish revolt. This was at a time when the English were engaged in war with France and, as so often, the Scottish forces chose this time to challenge their enemy, when they were more vulnerable because fighting on two fronts. By August 1297 Morray and Wallace controlled almost all of Scotland north of the Forth, except for Dundee. As Edward I was fighting on the continent, the English governor, the Earl of Surrey, marched north with an army from Berwick to relieve Dundee.

#### ***1.2 ACTION***

It was at the crossing of the River Forth at Stirling that the Scottish army chose to meet the challenge. They deployed on the north east side of the Forth, here deep and impassable except by bridge, though a ford existed two miles upstream. The Scottish commanders are believed to have surveyed the battlefield from Abbey Craig, the high ground 1.5km from the bridge where the Wallace monument now stands. The Craig is named after the adjacent monastery of Cambuskenneth which also provided an alternative name for the battle.

A Scottish knight in the English army offered to take a force across the ford, to attack the enemy from the rear, but this option was not exploited. Instead Surrey chose only to advance across the bridge. An English detachment was sent forward over the bridge, wide enough for only 2 horses, to cover the crossing of the main English force. Wallace waited until a substantial number of the troops had crossed (possibly just 2000 (5)) and then attacked. The Scottish schiltrons fended off a charge by the English heavy cavalry and in the counter attack engaged the English infantry. They gained control of the east side of the bridge, cutting off the opportunity for English reinforcements to cross. Caught on the low lying ground in the loop of the river with no chance of relief or of retreat, most of the outnumbered English on the east side seem to have been killed, at most a few hundred escaping by swimming across the river. Following this decisive Scottish victory, the English army retreated to Berwick, most English garrisons surrendered and Wallace was installed as Guardian of Scotland.(3) (4) (5).

**Figure 1: Stirling Bridge (1297) - battlefield plan**

**Figure 2: Stirling Bridge conservation boundary suggested by Martin (red line)**

#### ***1.3 TROOPS***

**Numbers:**

There is good contemporary evidence for the composition of the English army but far less certainty for the Scottish.

*English:* in July 10,000 infantry claimed but by September possibly just 6000 foot, 300 horse (5)

*Scottish:* 5-6000 foot, 180 horse (5)

### **Losses:**

Uncertain but substantial numbers of English killed; the medieval chronicles quote wholly unbelievable numbers of Scots killed (5).

## **1.4 COMMEMORATION & INTERPRETATION**

The Wallace Monument is an impressive 19<sup>th</sup> century tower standing on Abbey Craig, in the general area from which Wallace is believed to have surveyed the battlefield prior to the action.

## **2 ASSESSMENT**

### **2.1 LOCATION**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century the location of the bridge was open to considerable dispute, with a suggestion that it stood at Kildean, more than a kilometre to the north west of the present bridge. Of modern authors only Kinross places the bridge on this site (1). In 1906 Cook suggested the currently favoured site, which is the only location at Stirling for which there is documentary or archaeological evidence for a medieval crossing of the Forth. Only a ford is known to have existed at Kildean, in the post medieval period, and this was therefore considered likely to be the ford referred to in the battle accounts. The foundations of the early bridge have been located immediately north of the surviving Old Bridge (2). There is now broad agreement between most authors as to the location of the initial deployments and action, in the loop of the river immediately to the east of Stirling Bridge.

### **2.2 PRIMARY SOURCES**

There are several original accounts for the battle, including the English account by Guisborough.

### **2.3 SECONDARY WORKS**

The most recent modern study is that by Armstrong, which in addition to providing an accessible summary of the action, is well illustrated and provides a useful overview of the armies and the background to the campaign (6). Reid provides a useful but brief account. Neither however are referenced, which is a major drawback.

### **2.4 BATTLE ARCHAEOLOGY**

None has been identified.

### **2.5 BATTLEFIELD HISTORIC TERRAIN**

Some physical remains of the 13<sup>th</sup> century bridge are known to survive (2). A causeway from the bridge running across the floodplain towards Abbey Craig is referred to in the secondary works.

### **2.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BATTLE**

This was the first major Scottish victory in the Wars of Independence, which brought most of the country back under Scottish control and raised Wallace to a position of political control.

### **2.7 CURRENT STATE OF DEVELOPMENT**

The vast majority of the battlefield is built over. Two rail lines and a modern major road divide up the only substantial remaining open area on the battlefield, separating the main open space from the

site of the bridge. However the limited areas of open ground (rugby and related playing fields) lie in the presumed area of the later phases of the action, adjacent to the river. Also there is a small area immediately adjacent to the east end of the bridge. There is one other small area of open ground within the urban area (school playing field). Though Abbey Craig remains undeveloped almost the whole of the area of the probable Scottish initial deployment is developed. A tiny fragment of the land on the western bank adjacent to the end of the bridge, where the English forces approached the bridge, is also undeveloped.

## **2.8 CURRENT DESIGNATIONS**

The Wallace Monument is listed and its immediate environs scheduled due to the presence of a much earlier fort. The slopes below the Wallace monument are an SSSI. The 15<sup>th</sup> century bridge is listed and both this and the remains of the 13<sup>th</sup> century bridge are also Scheduled, hence any immediately associated surviving battle archaeology may also be protected. The surviving open ground immediately downstream of the 15<sup>th</sup> century bridge is a Conservation Area, thus encompassing a small part of the area of potential survival of battle archaeology.

Martin identifies an oddly restricted area for conservation that excludes the whole area of relatively open ground in the loop of the river (7).

## **2.9 POTENTIAL**

The majority of the battlefield is so extensively developed that there have to be serious questions as to what significance the study of any surviving battle archaeology might have for the understanding of the action. This is however a very low lying area described in the geological mapping as post glacial 'raised beach deposits and associated marine and estuarine alluvium' with an additional small area of reclaimed inter-tidal flats in the loop of the river on the south of the battlefield. There may thus be potential for the survival of a buried battlefield surface in the area of the playing fields and immediately adjacent to the bridge, in the loop of the river. There is also the possibility of waterlogged deposits in such a low lying area. If such conditions exist then it could mean exceptional survival of both artefacts and burials. If information is not yet available from past watching briefs (reported in the NMRS (2)) on the chronology of the stratigraphy here then it would be appropriate to seek a location where trenching might test the stratigraphic relationship between the alluvial deposits and the medieval causeway from the bridge, to establish at what depth any battlefield deposits might exist. The small undeveloped area in the school grounds, if it has not been heavily disturbed, might contain some surviving battle archaeology as it is the one area that has not been built over in the broad zone where it is suggested that the main action took place. However given the difficulty of recovering medieval battle archaeology the potential on the latter may be very low although again the evidence might prove to be buried by alluvial deposits.

It is to be expected that significant action took place in the surviving undeveloped area adjacent to the east end of the bridge while the final destructive action of the battle took place beside the river to the south. Archers were involved in the action and so significant numbers of projectiles should have been deposited in at least some parts of the field, while men at arms involved in hand to hand fighting and then the final stripping of their bodies, should have provided the potential for the loss of a range of non ferrous items similar to those recovered from the Towton battlefield. Given that this is one of relatively few major battles in such a topographical location, if burial beneath alluvium or waterlogging was demonstrated then it would be a rare survival. Demonstrating such survival might be difficult but it would be important to establish if such a potential exists as it may only be in such conditions of burial that the true nature of medieval battle archaeology can be finally established. It may then be possible to better understand the battle archaeology, or lack of it, on other medieval battlefields where deposits have been affected by more destructive chemical and mechanical damage.

Physical evidence from this area may also assist in the understanding of the nature of the terrain at the time of the battle. This would include geological evidence for the width of the river and nature of the adjacent ground. Also, because the modern and the 15<sup>th</sup> century bridge took the crossing away from the 13<sup>th</sup> century location there is surviving archaeology of the 13<sup>th</sup> century bridge which, together with any immediately adjacent evidence of the nature of the causeway, may help in the understanding the terrain.

Despite its state of development, it is argued by Martin that the terrain can still be grasped very effectively, given that the bridge, river, valley floor and Abbey Craig are such distinctive features in the landscape. This is supported by Armstrong's description of the battlefield.

### **2.10 THREATS**

A range of threats, particularly of a piecemeal nature, are likely on the open ground given its location within the heart of the urban area. River erosion is also reported as a potential problem (7), as might be any remedial works to deal with this erosion. Martin reports vandalism as a problem with past interpretive schemes(7).

## **3 REFERENCES**

- (1) Kinross, John. *Walking & Exploring the Battlefields of Britain*. Newton Abbott: David & Charles, 1988.
- (2) NMRS
- (3) Smurthwaite, David. *The Complete Guide to the Battlefields of Britain*. London: Michael Joseph, 1993.
- (4) Matthews, Rupert. *England versus Scotland, The great British battles*. Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2003.
- (5) Reid, Stuart. *Battles of the Scottish Lowlands, Battlefield Britain*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2004.
- (6) Armstrong Pete. *Stirling Bridge & Falkirk 1297-98 : William Wallace's rebellion*. Oxford: Osprey, 2003.
- (7) Martin, David E. "The Battlefields of Scotland: A report on their preservation for Historic Scotland." Historic Scotland, 1997.

## **4 BIBLIOGRAPHY**

### **4.1 PRIMARY SOURCES**

Hamilton, H C (ed). "Chronicon domini Walteri de Hemingborough." 2 (1849): 136-8.

### **4.2 SECONDARY SOURCES**

Alexander Derek, and Steel Alan. *Wallace, Renfrewshire, and the wars of independence*.

Edinburgh: Renfrewshire Local History Forum, 1997.

Armstrong Pete. *Stirling Bridge & Falkirk 1297-98 : William Wallace's rebellion*. Oxford: Osprey, 2003.

Black, C. Stewart. *Scottish battles*. Glasgow: Brown Son & Ferguson, 1936.

Brander, Michael, and Jimmie Macgregor. *Scottish and Border battles and ballads*. London: Seeley, 1975.

- Brotchie, T. C. F. *The battlefields of Scotland : their legend and story*. New York: Dodge Publishing, 1913.
- Brunton, Alexander, William Sir Wallace, and Alexander Scrymgeour. *A new work in answer to the pamphlet, "Wallace on the Forth", proving the stratagem at Stirling Bridge, and that the bridge was at Kildean, &c., also, the history of the famous battle of Stirling Bridge*. Dunfermline: W. Clark, 1841.
- Burns, W. *The Scottish War of Independence Its Antecedents and Effects*. Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1874.
- Cauldwell, David H. *Scotland's wars and Warriors: Winning against the Odds*. Edited by Alexandra Shepherd, *Discovering Historic Scotland*. Edinburgh: The Stationery Office, 1998.
- Chandler, David. *A Guide to the Battlefields of Europe*. reprint of 1989 edition. ed. Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1998.
- Channel Four, Schools, and Clements Wark. *Chuck Wallace's middle age spread*. Warwick: Channel 4 Schools, 1998.
- Cook, W B. *Stirling Antiq* 4 (1906): 116-140.
- Cook, William B., and James Ronald. *The Battle of Stirling Bridge : the Kildean myth : a lecture delivered to Logie Parish Guild in the Parish Mission Hall, Causewayhead, on Thursday evening, 26th January, 1905*. Stirling: Cook & Wylie, 1905.
- Dunbar, Archibald H. *Scottish Kings: A Revised Chronology of Scottish History 1005-1625*. Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1899.
- Fergusson, James Sir. *William Wallace, guardian of Scotland*. Stirling: E. Mackay, 1948.
- Forbes, George. *Scottish battles : 86 A.D. to 1746*. Glasgow: Lang Syne, 1996.
- Guest, Ken, and Denise Guest. *British battles : the front lines of history in colour photographs*. London: HarperCollins 1996, 1996.
- Hamilton, J. *Scottish Battles*. New Lanark: Geddes & Grosset, 2004.
- Kinross, John. *Discovering Scottish battlefields, Discovering series ; no.174*. Aylesbury: Shire, 1986.
- . *Walking & Exploring the Battlefields of Britain*. Newton Abbott: David & Charles, 1988.
- Marix Evans, M. *The Military Heritage of Britain & Ireland*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1998.
- Martin, David E. "The Battlefields of Scotland: A report on their preservation for Historic Scotland." *Historic Scotland*, 1997.
- Matthews, Rupert. *England versus Scotland, The great British battles*. Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2003.
- McNeill, Peter G B, and Hector L MacQueen. *Atlas of Scottish History to 1707*. Edinburgh: The Scottish Medievalists & Department of Geography, University of Edinburgh, 1996.
- The New statistical account of Scotland*. Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1845.
- Nimmo, John. *Bannockburn followed Stirling Bridge. [On the history of Scotland, 1272-1332.]*. Glasgow: Douglas & Douglas, 1965.
- Nimmo, William, and Robert Gillespie. *The history of Stirlingshire*. London ; Glasgow: Hamilton Adams & Co. : Thomas D. Morison, 1880.
- Ramsay, James H. Sir. *The dawn of the constitution : or, The reigns of Henry III and Edward I (A. D. 1216-1307)*. London ; New York: S. Sonnenschein & co. lim : The Macmillan co, 1908.
- Reid, Stuart. *Battles of the Scottish Lowlands, Battlefield Britain*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2004.
- Saddler, John. *Scottish Battles: From Mons Graupius to Culloden*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 1996.
- Seymour W. *Battles in Britain and their political background 1066-1746*. London: Book Club Associates, 1979.
- Shearer, John Elliot. *The battlefields around Stirling*. Stirling: R. S. Shearer & Son, 1913.
- Smurthwaite, David. *The Complete Guide to the Battlefields of Britain*. London: Michael Joseph, 1993.
- Traquair Peter. *Freedom's sword : Scotland's wars of independence*. London: HarperCollins, 1998.

Waddie, Charles. *Wallace : The battle of Stirling Bridge*, 1890.  
Warner, Philip. *Famous Scottish battles*. London: Cooper, 1995.