

Battle Name:	Aberdeen II	Council area: Aberdeen, City of
Date:	13 th September 1644	
UKFOC number:	336	

ABERDEEN II

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.

Montrose began a campaign intended to present such a threat to the Covenanter government that they would have to recall Leven's army from England and thus swing the balance of the war there back in the royalist favour. In Scotland he might even, in the long run, manage to topple the government and install a regime favourable to the king. Montrose's first objective was to establish a secure territorial base upon which he could sustain a long campaign. Though outnumbered, his forces achieved their first victory at Tippermuir. This forces the government to recall some but not the bulk of the army from England, and other troops from Ireland.

From Tippermuir the royalists marched east towards Dundee. There they wererebuffed and so pressed on towards the government controlled city of Aberdeen. (1)

1.2 ACTION

Various local forces had been called to Aberdeen in early September to counter the threat from Montrose. Though not all turned out, the government army was substantially stronger than the royalists. They held the Bridge of Dee, forcing Montrose on the 11th September to ford the river near the Mills of Drum (7). First he called the government forces to surrender but they would not. Instead the they deployed south west of the city, in a strong location adjacent to Justice Mills. The troops deployed astride the main road (the Hard Gate) approaching from the south west, along the top of a steep scarp overlooking the point at which the main road crossed the the How Burn or Justice Mills Burn.

The government deployment is not clear from the documentary sources (7) but Raid suggests Balfour deployed the bulk of his cavalry on the left flank where the scarp was far less steep, with the remainder on the right flank, adjacent to Justice Mills, with musketeers holding the Justice Mills itself (1). They also placed several light artillery pieces in front of the infantry and held several buildings and walled yards on the sloping ground. The royalist

deployed to the west of the burn with infantry in the centre and cavalry on the wings, each supported by about 100 musketeers. A few light artillery pieces were placed to the fore (7).

After an artillery exchange the government cavalry made ineffective, poorly coordinated attacks on either flank. An outflanking infantry move by the covenanters, via a sunken lane, on the royalist left was effectively countered. The well drilled royalist infantry used good tactics to defeat the right wing covenanter cavalry attack. In the centre the royalist infantry attack now cleared the buildings held against them and after a hard fight for some time, they followed up the firefight with a charge that in hand to hand fighting soon broke the inexperienced Covenanter infantry in the centre. The Covenanter reserve was also then broken. In all the action had lasted less than two hours (7).

While the covenanter cavalry escaped, in the rout a significant number from the broken infantry regiments were killed. There was then extensive plundering and far worse atrocities by the royalist troops in the town itself.

But the royalist forces soon had to retreat north westward towards the Highlands because the Marquis of Argyll with substantial forces was advancing to counter the royalist threat. (1)

Figure 1: Aberdeen II (1644) - battlefield plan

1.3 TROOPS

Numbers:

The royalist army under Montrose comprised mainly Irish troops for following Tippermuir many of the Highland forces had dispersed. But they were more experienced and under a very capable commander. The Covenanters under Lord Balfour, who had limited experience, combined two regiments of regular troops with a substantial number of local levies, the latter lacking battle experience.

Royalist: less than 1600 foot; up to 80 horse (1); 1500 foot; 70 horse; several light artillery pieces (7).

Covenanter: up to 2000 foot (of which 1100 were local levies); about 300 horse (1); 2000 foot and about 500 horse; several light artillery pieces (7)

Losses:

There is limited evidence of the losses both on the battlefield and in the town but Marren suggests that the losses on the covenanter side tend to be overemphasised while the royalist losses are underplayed (7)

Covenanter: 520 killed (1)

Royalists: light (1)

1.4 COMMEMORATION & INTERPRETATION

There is no memorial to the battle.

2 ASSESSMENT

2.1 LOCATION

The battle was otherwise known as Justice Mills or Crabstane Rout.(7)

2.2 PRIMARY SOURCES

There are several contemporary accounts of the battle. Spalding provides little detail. Wishart is unreliable in some details. Gordon gives the most useful and detailed account. Extracts of all three are given in Brown (8). The sources are assessed briefly by Marren, making clear that none is sympathetic to the Covenanter cause (7).

2.3 SECONDARY WORKS

The discussion by Gardiner provides a good brief overview, including a plan which uses in large part Milne's 1789 map for its topographical base, although Gardiner shows the royalist deployment on the rising ground to the north east of the burn whereas all others show their initial deployment to the south west of the burn (9).

Reid gives an order of battle with troop numbers and shows deployments against a very small scale and basic plan of terrain. His depiction of the initial deployment is the most detailed graphic representation, and the general location appears likely to be broadly correct, based on the relief and the line of the Hardgate, though the detail of the order of battle is conjectural. However the frontages shown may be somewhat too great for the numbers of troop specified, perhaps by as much as 40% if one assumes for the infantry a 6 deep deployment at order. (1).

The discussion by Marren is short but more detailed, making fuller use of the primary sources for the action. He also provides a useful discussion of the primary sources and the landscape as it is today. His plan is however very generalised (7).

Brown is the only modern book devoted solely to the battle of Aberdeen. He provides a useful background to the war and the campaign, and describes the character of Civil War armies in Scotland.

2.4 BATTLE ARCHAEOLOGY

A substantial fire-fight appears to have taken place in the infantry centre and so substantial quantities of lead bullets may be expected. Case shot might also be expected from the artillery pieces. It seems highly improbable in this urban context that anything structural will survive with shot impact scars, but the potential for any walling surviving from the yards and buildings held during the action should be considered.

2.5 BATTLEFIELD HISTORIC TERRAIN

The action was fought along the line of the Hardgate, the main road from the SW into Aberdeen. It was fought across mainly arable fields, partly in oats, where the road crossed the How Burn and climbed Clay Hill towards the Crabstane. However Marren suggest the slopes to the east of the burn may have been partly gardens even in 1644. On the sloping

ground there were several buildings with walled yards which were held as strong points by the government pikemen.(7) Unfortunately Gordson's map of 1661 shows very little detail of the area concerned, other than a prospect from the Crabstane towards the town, which shows a very open landscape (5).

2.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BATTLE

Aberdeen was one of a series of victories that Montrose's heavily outnumbered army won over government forces, but, as with most of the others, it did not have a significant long term outcome. They failed to secure any substantial territory or major towns upon which to base a sustained campaign. What it did do was to add to the reputation of Montrose as a commander and strengthen the pressure on the government to withdraw forces from England. The greatest effect of the battle was the way on which the atrocities perpetrated in the sack of Aberdeen ensured that Montrose would gain few recruits and little support from the region for the rest of his campaign.

2.7 CURRENT STATE OF DEVELOPMENT

Most of the battlefield is intensively developed. However a transect across what is probably the centre of the infantry action, which probably encompassed the main action, is preserved as a public park, most of which has never been developed.

2.8 CURRENT DESIGNATIONS

There are a number of listed buildings in proximity to the battlefield, but none of direct relevance.

2.9 POTENTIAL

According to Reid it is still relatively easy to read the terrain, despite the level of development.(1) What is possibly the Craibstone still survives built into a wall within the developed area, with a plaque affixed and may lie close to the centre of the covenanter infantry position (7). Further work on the documentary sources would also be useful as it may enable the exact location of the buildings and yards held by the covenanters to be established.

At first sight it might be concluded that the whole of the battlefield is destroyed and that no useful archaeological evidence might exist. However, a small area of parkland (circa 1.7 ha) lies undeveloped immediately to the east of the old Hardgate straddling the former course of the Justice Mills Burn. This land was garden and field land in 1789 & 1828, was still undeveloped in 1869, apart from some allotments or gardens at the north eastern side and it was still undeveloped in 1912 (2-6). It seems likely that archaeological evidence for the battle could survive in this area relatively undisturbed. Though such evidence is unlikely to convey a great deal about the action, it could be sufficient to confirm the location of the central infantry action, thus enabling a more secure interpretation of the documentary accounts.

2.10 THREATS

None identified.

3 REFERENCES

- (1) Reid, Stuart (2003) *Auldearn, 1645: the Marquis of Montrose's Scottish campaign*, Osprey, Oxford.
- (2) Ordnance Survey 1st edition 6" mapping, 1869
- (3) Milne, 1789, Map of Aberdeen
- (4) Wood, 1828, Map of Aberdeen
- (5) Gordon, 1661, Map of Aberdeen
- (6) Bartholomew, 1912, Map of Aberdeen
- (7) Marren, P. (1990) *Grampian battlefields: the historic battles of North East Scotland from AD84 to 1745*, Aberdeen University Press 1990, Aberdeen.
- (8) Brown, C. (2002) *The battle for Aberdeen, 1644*, Tempus 2002, Stroud, Gloucestershire.
- (9) Gardiner, S. R. (1893) *History of the Great Civil War: 1644-45*, Windrush, Moreton-in-the-Marsh.

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