The Inventory of Historic Battlefields

The Battle of Alford

Designation Record and Summary Report

The Inventory of Historic Battlefields is a list of nationally important battlefields in Scotland. A battlefield is of national importance if it makes a contribution to the understanding of the archaeology and history of the nation as a whole, or has the potential to do so, or holds a particularly significant place in the national consciousness. For a battlefield to be included in the Inventory, it must be considered to be of national importance either for its association with key historical events or figures; or for the physical remains and/or archaeological potential it contains; or for its landscape context. In addition, it must be possible to define the site on a modern map with a reasonable degree of accuracy.

The aim of the Inventory is to raise awareness of the significance of these nationally important battlefield sites and to assist in their protection and management for the future. Inventory battlefields are a material consideration in the planning process. The Inventory is also a major resource for enhancing the understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of historic battlefields, for promoting education and stimulating further research, and for developing their potential as attractions for visitors.

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Inventory of Historic Battlefields

ALFORD

Alternative Names: None

2 July 1645

Local Authority: Aberdeenshire

NGR centred: NJ 567 162

Date of Addition to Inventory: 21 March 2011

Date of last update: 14 December 2012

Overview and Statement of Significance

The Battle of Alford is significant as one of Montrose's most notable victories in his campaign within Scotland on behalf of Charles I. The victory for the Royalists against an experienced and well-prepared Covenanter force further enhanced Montrose's reputation, and left the Royalists without any organised opposition in the Highlands. Montrose's success also convinced Charles to continue the fight in England, in spite of how poorly the war was going for him south of the border.

The battle was fought between the Scottish Royalists and the Covenanter Government forces during the Wars of the Three Kingdoms. It was the fifth battle of the Marquis of Montrose's Scottish campaign against the Covenanter army, on behalf of Charles I of England.

The battle ended in a victory for Montrose and opened the way to the lowlands for the Royalist army. The victory was a great boost for Charles I, whose cause in England was faltering badly after a crushing defeat at Naseby in June 1645. In Scotland, the effect of the battle was to expose the weakness in the Covenanter army, where the commander was subject to the orders of the powerful Committee of Estates.

Inventory Boundary

The Inventory boundary defines the area in which the main events of the battle are considered to have taken place (landscape context) and where associated physical remains and archaeological evidence occur or may be expected (specific qualities). The landscape context is described under *battlefield landscape*: it encompasses areas of fighting, key movements of troops across the landscape and other important locations, such as the positions of camps or vantage points. Although the landscape has changed since the time of the battle, key characteristics of the terrain at the time of the battle can normally still be identified, enabling events to be more fully understood and interpreted in their landscape context. Specific qualities are described under *physical remains and potential*: these include landscape features that played a significant role in the battle, other physical remains, such as enclosures or built structures, and areas of known or potential archaeological evidence.

Inventory of Historic Battlefields

The Inventory boundary for the Battle of Alford is defined on the accompanying map and includes the following areas:

- The southern plains of the River Don, as the direction of the advance of the Covenanter army and their approach to Gallow Hill.
- The slopes and summit of Gallow Hill and the views out from the Royalist vantage point, as the position of the Royalists initial deployment and a key landscape feature in Montrose's exploitation of the terrain to outmanoeuvre the Covenanter army.
- Lands to the east and north-east of Gallow Hill including Murray and Haughton Parks, as the probable direction of the Covenanter rout.

Historical Background to the Battle

On the night of 1 July 1645, the Royalists quartered at Alford with the Covenanter army under Lieutenant-General William Baillie in pursuit about four miles away. In the morning, Baillie marched after the Royalists, who decided to deploy near Alford to engage him. While the Covenanters had the advantage in infantry, with perhaps 2,800 troops, it is possible that Montrose, with about 2,300 troops, had an advantage in cavalry for the first time in his campaign.

It appears that Montrose decided to stand and engage Baillie before the latter could be joined by any other forces. The Royalists probably deployed on the slopes above Alford church close by the main road, while Baillie crossed the river by a ford further to the east near Montgarrie. It is suggested that the Covenanters believed Montrose to be retreating and so advanced too quickly. They found themselves within just half a mile of Montrose when they discovered he had in fact deployed to fight. The Royalist forces stood largely out of sight on the top or back slope of the hill, and so Baillie halted in the valley and took advantage of a strong defensive position amongst enclosures on the low ground. The two armies deployed in a standard formation with two cavalry wings and infantry in the centre. The Royalist cavalry charge, seconded by detachments of infantry who had also been positioned on the wings to strengthen the cavalry deployment, soon drove off the Covenanter horse. In contrast, the Covenanter infantry stood and fought until they were outflanked and attacked simultaneously to the rear by the Royalist cavalry, and to the fore by infantry. According to Baillie, they had had to deploy just three ranks deep, instead of the more normal six deep, to avoid being over-winged by the wider formation of the Royalists. As a result they were unable to respond to a simultaneous attack at both front and rear. Baillie's infantry broke and ran, the rout soon turning into a bloody execution as the Royalist cavalry pressed home the pursuit. While the Covenanters suffered perhaps 700 killed, the Royalist casualties were very light but did include the death of their cavalry commander Lord Gordon.

Events & Participants

The Covenanter government of Scotland had allied itself with the English parliament as the initial successes of Royalist armies suggested that Charles would soon be able to turn his attention to Scotland. Troops were sent south to support the Parliamentarians and a Scottish army had a significant impact in the campaign for the north of England in 1644. In response, in August 1644 the Marquis of Montrose raised the royal standard in Scotland.

James Graham was the fifth Earl of Montrose and the first Marquis of Montrose. He was the chief of Clan Graham. Montrose had been a supporter and signatory of the National Covenant in 1638, but had then become a Royalist, although he was driven by motives other than a desire to impose the Divine Right of Kings upon Scotland. He and Archibald Campbell, the eighth Earl of Argyll, were bitter rivals, and Montrose believed that the Covenant had become nothing more than a vehicle for Argyll's ambition. Always a moderate among the Covenanters, Montrose considered that the agreement in 1641

with Charles that had removed episcopacy from Scotland had fulfilled the demands of the Covenant and that to continue in opposition to him would be breaking that agreement. Following the signing of the Solemn League and Covenant in September 1643, Montrose presented himself to Charles I service at his headquarters in Oxford. On behalf of the King, he then fought a campaign intended to draw Covenanter forces away from supporting the Parliamentarians in England, and in this it was a success. Montrose fought a series of seven battles against Covenanter armies across the Highlands in 1644 and 1645, beginning with Tippermuir and ending at Philiphaugh, where he suffered his only defeat He attempted to do the same on behalf of Charles II in 1650, but on this occasion fought only a single battle at Carbisdale. After his defeat there, he was captured and brought to Edinburgh for trial. On 21 May 1650, he was hanged and then beheaded. His head was fixed to a spike on Edinburgh's Tollbooth, his body quartered, and his limbs were displayed in Stirling, Glasgow, Perth and Aberdeen. Following the Restoration of Charles II as king in 1660, Montrose's remains were collected together once more and were interred in the High Kirk of St Giles in Edinburgh in May 1661.

Manus O'Cahan was the colonel of the Irish regiment that fought in all of Montrose's battles and which was the backbone of all his victories. He was a cousin of Mac Colla, and came over from Ireland with him. He and his regiment were sent to Scotland to ease pressure on the Irish Confederacy, who were fighting Scottish Covenanters and English Parliamentarians in Ireland. As Mac Colla had a recruiting role for the Royalist cause throughout 1644-5, he was occasionally absent in the west seeking fresh troops, but O'Cahan remained with Montrose throughout and was with Montrose for the Battle of Philiphaugh. He was captured after the defeat, his men were executed and he was taken to Edinburgh where he was hanged without trial. He was responsible for the invention of the Highland charge along with Mac Colla, although it is Mac Colla who is generally given sole credit.

William Baillie was the commander of the Covenanter army recalled to Scotland after the destruction of Sir John Hurry's army at Auldearn. Baillie was a veteran soldier who had led a regiment under Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden on the Continent in the 1630s. He had also commanded the Scottish vanguard at Marston Moor. He spent May and June manoeuvring after Montrose and trying to bring him to battle, only to be defeated by the Royalists at Alford. Baillie continued to pursue Montrose after this, however, facing him a second time at Kilsyth, although he had actually tendered his resignation to Parliament on 4 August 1645 as a result of the earlier defeat. By the time of Kilsyth, Baillie was still in command of the army because his successor had not yet been appointed. He was therefore in the difficult position of being both in command of the army but with all of his officers aware that he had already resigned under a cloud.

Lord George Gordon was the son of the Royalist commander, the Earl of Huntly, who was beheaded in 1649 in Edinburgh. He was an effective and well considered cavalry commander, who fought with distinction at the Battle of Auldearn in May.

Battlefield Landscape

The general location of the battle is well established by a series of primary and secondary sources. However there are a number of alternative locations for the specific actions of the battle. It is clear that the Covenanters were crossing the River Don from the north when the fighting took place. Two alternative crossing points have been proposed at Mountgarie and to the north of Alford Church at the river's confluence with Leochel burn.

The Royalists were drawn up on a hill that is most likely to have been Gallow Hill to the south-east of Alford Old Parish Church (located over a mile west of the modern Alford town). The main fighting appears to have taken place to the north and east of Gallow Hill, with Montrose using the topography to form a natural defence. An important aspect of the battlefield's landscape was the pattern of enclosures on the valley floor situated within boggy ground which was the focus of the Covenanters' defensive action. The position of these enclosures and marshland is not currently known, but may be traceable through survey or excavation.

According to primary sources the pursuit of the Covenanter army by the Royalist cavalry continued until the early evening for a distance of up to 9 miles. It is likely that the Covenanters fled northwards, back over the River Don.

The battle was fought within open ground on the lower hill slopes on the south side of the River Don. The Howe of Alford occupies the middle reaches of the River Don and is characterised by the flat river plain with hills rising up from water on the north and south. The landscape of the battleground has been altered by the development of Alford town in the 19th century, the enclosure of the land and the construction of roads. However, its overall character, key landscape features and strategic views have survived well. The topography of the hill slope, which appears to have played a key role in the deployments and manoeuvres of both armies, is well preserved as open farmland and it is possible to visualise Montrose's troops on the top or back slope of the hill, overlooking the Covenanter army at its base. The spatial relationships and views between significant landscape elements such as the summit and slopes of Gallow Hill, the southern bank of the river and its crossings survive intact and the entire area still gives a reasonable impression of the landscape that the troops would have seen.

The western half of the defined area is presently mainly farmland and small areas of forestry plantation with the town of Alford and designed parkland on the east. The spread of Alford has so far had a relatively minor impact on the battlefield, which may survive well as a result.

Archaeological and Physical Remains and Potential

No artefacts or archaeological features associated with the battle are known to have been recovered. There is a 19th century account of a skeleton with a sword and an Elizabethan shilling being found at Bloody Faulds, some 4 miles to the south-east of the battleground. These artefacts appear to have been lost and their provenance is unclear.

Given the nature of the fighting, there could be large numbers of lead bullets and items of personal apparel such as buttons within the defined area. There may well be burials associated with the battle given the high numbers of casualties recorded. These are likely to extend over a considerable area because of the rout; while the main action only lasted around an hour, but the rout and pursuit lasted into the evening.

The report of the discovery of a skeleton with a sword and an Elizabeth shilling bogged in a marsh at the foot of the Green Hill near Boglouster, beside the Bloody Faulds was in the *New Statistical Account* (an account of each parish complied by the local minister in the 1830s – see Simpson 1919). However, Bloody Faulds lies four miles to the south-east of Alford, and although it could potentially be related to scattered action in the rout, it cannot be connected to the battle of Alford with any certainty.

The single reference, in Fraser, to some Highland troops using bows instead of muskets may provide a useful opportunity to examine the issue of survival and distribution of arrowheads once the spread of action is understood from the bullet distributions, but unlike Auldearn there is no clear information as to where the archers were deployed or how they engaged.

Because the battle involved a substantial infantry firefight, a large part of the battlefield, where not yet developed or affected by mineral extraction or landfill, should contain a great deal of well preserved battle archaeology in the form of unstratified lead bullets. Even in the cavalry action, which is believed often to leave a very low density of bullets, and those normally of smaller calibres, the presence of supporting musketeers means that more substantial bullet scatters may exist there. The distribution of these bullets should allow accurate positioning of the principal deployments and of aspects of the fight. Exceptional survival of battle archaeology may exist if waterlogged deposits survive, given that Baillie's forces were deployed in and/or pushed back through boggy ground.

Cultural Association

The Battle of Alford has drawn little popular attention and left no trace in popular culture outside of the district. The Gordon Stane, a natural boulder located within Murray Park to the north of the town, has a traditional association with the site of the death of Lord Gordon. A commemorative plaque is located close to the stone and a battlefield walk has been created. Another memorial stone is located by the War Memorial in the town cemetery, which has an inscription giving brief details of the battle and commemorating the death of Lord Gordon.

There is a fragment of a ballad relating to the battle, but the surviving verses relate to the march to Alford and not to the fighting. The name of Feight Faulds, a field to the south of the Gordon Stane, has long been locally associated as the location of a Covenanter massacre although there is no physical evidence to substantiate this.

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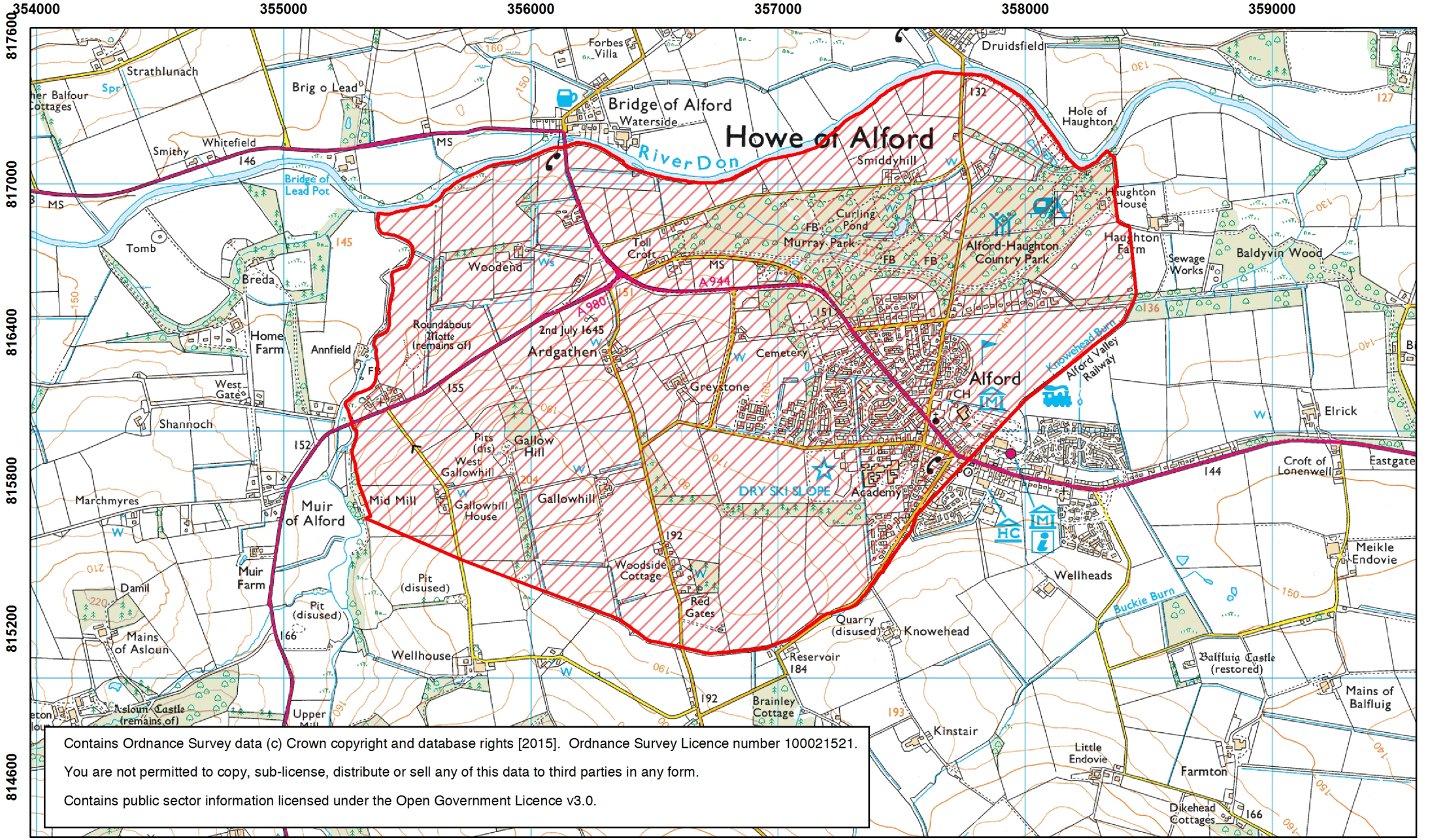
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The Inventory of Historic Battlefields - Boundary

Alford 2 July 1645 Local Authority: Aberdeenshire



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