The Inventory of Historic Battlefields

The Battle of Barra

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.

Designation Record and Summary Report Contents

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Inventory of Historic Battlefields – Battle of Barra

BARRA

Alternative Names: Inverurie; Oldmeldrum

22 / 23 May 1308

Local Authority: Aberdeenshire

NGR centred: NJ 796 265

Date of Addition to Inventory: 30 November 2011

Date of last update: 14 December 2012

Overview and Statement of Significance

The Battle of Barra is significant as it marks the end of any coordinated opposition to King Robert I (the Bruce) within Scotland. The Comyn's had been Bruce's most notable Scottish adversary up to this point, and with the destruction of their power base, both in the battle and the subsequent ravaging of Comyn lands in Buchan, they were no longer able to resist the King. With their demise, Bruce was able to turn his full attention to English garrisons, embarking upon his "scorched earth" campaign against their castles and leading to the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314. Barra thus marks the end of one phase of Bruce's military and royal career, and the beginning of the next.

The Battle of Barra was one of the many battles fought by Robert the Bruce in the period between his inauguration in 1306 and the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314. With the English distracted by events at home, Bruce turned to securing Scotland under his rule. At Barra, the King engaged an army led by John Comyn outside Inverurie and the battle quickly turned into a rout, with much of Comyn's army captured or slaughtered as they ran.

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.

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

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- Barra Hill, including the hillfort on the summit.
- The line of the modern B9170 between Oldmeldrum and Inverurie along which Bruce's army marched.
- The Bruce Field, which has traditionally been associated with the fighting and which is recorded as having silted trenches and an English billhook in 1845.
- The land west of the B9170 where the fighting is most likely to have taken place.
- Land to the south and north of the A920 that covers the likely route and killing during the pursuit.
- Land to the east of the battlefield that covers potential routes of escape along Meadow Burn.

Historical Background to the Battle

Accounts of the battle are sparse and offer little detail about the fighting. Following the death of Edward I in 1307, Bruce took the opportunity presented by a lack of attention from the new English King, Edward II, to reduce internal opposition to his rule and take full control of the kingdom. In the autumn and winter of 1307, Bruce attacked the strongholds of the Comyns and their supporters in the north-east, but fell ill at Christmas 1307. By May, he was still unwell and quartered outside Inverurie, with John Comyn, Earl of Buchan, mustering at Oldmeldrum. The first hostile action was in the early morning of 23 May (the more probable date of the battle), when Sir David de Brechin attacked a detachment of Bruce's men that were in Inverurie, although most of Bruce's men were outside the town. Bruce's army formed up and marched towards Oldmeldrum, where Comyn and Sir John Mowbray were drawn up below Barra Hill on the road between Inverurie and Oldmeldrum. Comyn and his men were aware of Bruce's illness and seem to have assumed that he would not be present in the fighting. However, as Bruce's army arrived, they could see Bruce on horseback in the midst of his army. According to the sources, this unexpected appearance of Bruce so discomfited Comyn and his supporters that they started to edge back; this small movement was enough to cause the levies to break and they scattered. Bruce's army charged what was left of Comyn's line, and the fighting very rapidly became a complete rout. Comyn fled towards Fyvie and then Turriff, finally making his way to England where he subsequently died.

Numbers of participants are hard to judge, but Barbour's nearly contemporary account gave Bruce 700 men against Comyn with 1,000 men. There is no record of the casualty figures, but the fact the battle quickly degenerated into a rout would suggest that there were numerous fatalities amongst Comyn's men and few on Bruce's side.

Events & Participants

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King Robert I of Scotland (Robert the Bruce) is one of Scotland's most famous historical figures. His grandfather was one of the claimants to the Scottish throne in the dispute following the death of Alexander III. Bruce was crowned King of Scots on 25 March 1306 at Perth, after murdering his rival John Comyn, Lord of Badenoch, also known as the Red Comyn, at Greyfriars Kirk in Dumfries. Although Bruce had authored his own inauguration, he would become the focus of Scottish resistance to the English occupation. However, his initial efforts were less impressive than his later accomplishments. He suffered defeat to an English army under Aymer de Valence at Methven in June 1306 and again by the forces of John of Lorn, a relative of John Comyn, at Dail Righ in August, and Bruce was forced to flee mainland Scotland, while many of his family were killed or imprisoned. While in hiding that winter, the legend of the spider spinning a web is said to have inspired him to return in 1307, where he met with more success. He won an important victory against de Valence at Loudoun Hill in May, and gained further advantage when Edward I died at Burgh-by-Sands, near the Scottish border, in July 1307. With the English threat now drastically reduced, Bruce turned to deal with his internal enemies. All of Comyn's supporters opposed Bruce, at least initially, and he faced a long struggle against them in the south-west and in the north-east. The Battle of Barra two years after his coronation was the critical victory of this campaign, leaving him a relatively free hand to deal with his last few Scottish enemies and then to pick off English garrisons one by one, destroying the captured castles in his wake to prevent the English returning to them. After his overwhelming victory in 1314 at Bannockburn, Bruce was able to turn onto the offensive, raiding into England until a settlement was finally signed in 1328 under the Treaty of Edinburgh-Northampton.

John Comyn, 3rd Earl of Buchan, was a cousin of the Red Comyn. He was Constable of Scotland in 1293 under John Balliol, and after Balliol's removal by Edward I, became one of the leaders of the Scottish resistance to Edward. Following the Battle of Dunbar in 1296, Comyn was required to submit to the English Crown and was dispatched home to deal with William Wallace's ally Moray in the north-east, but showed little enthusiasm for the task. With the murder of his cousin in 1306, Buchan became one of the leading representatives of the pro-English party in Scotland. After his rout at Barra, Comyn fled south and died in England before December 1308.

Sir David de Brechin was another Scottish noble fighting for the English after 1296. He fought for Edward I in the Battle of Methven in 1306, Bruce's heaviest defeat, and continued to oppose Bruce's claim to the throne. After his involvement in the Battle of Barra, he retired to his castle in Brechin from where he made peace with Bruce and later even became his brother-in-law; the peace between the families was short-lived, however, as David's son (also David) was executed in 1320 for his part in the plot to put William de Soulis on the throne.

Edward Bruce was Robert the Bruce's younger brother and a companion throughout his campaigns. He was probably in command of the army during Bruce's period of illness, and was certainly present at Barra during the fighting. He played a prominent role in Bannockburn, allegedly agreeing the truce with the governor of besieged Stirling Castle that acted as the *casus belli* for the English invasion and also commanding one of the schiltrons

during the fighting. He went on to claim the throne of Ireland, intending to drive the English out and create a Scotto-Irish kingdom in Ireland, but was killed at the Battle of Faughart in County Louth in 1318.

Battlefield Landscape

The landscape within which the battlefield took place is reasonably well preserved and can be reasonably well understood, though there has been a wholesale change in land boundaries and Oldmeldrum has increased dramatically in size since 1308. There is a field known as The Bruce Field where the English billhook is supposed to have been found prior to 1845. There has been remarkably little development along the B9170 between Inverurie and Oldmeldrum, and it is likely that the location of the fighting is still largely undeveloped. From the Hill of Barra, the Comyn line can be envisioned coming down onto the ground in front of Oldmeldrum. It is likely that the Comyns were aligned roughly NW-SE, anchoring their left flank on the slopes of the Hill of Barra. Bruce's army will likely have come along what is roughly the line of the B9170 from Inverurie, as this is the natural route through the landscape. The rout is likely to have been back towards Oldmeldrum behind the Comyn line, and north-west in the direction of Fyvie and Turriff.

Archaeological and Physical Remains and Potential

A local landmark is known as Bruce's Seat, and is supposed to be the place from which Bruce directed his troops; this unfortunately cuts across the tradition that Bruce (much like El Cid) was held on his horse and his presence was enough to put the enemy to flight. It is in rough ground adjacent to the roundabout on the B9170 outside Oldmeldrum; it has been moved here from its original position higher up the Hill of Barra. The Groaner (also known as the Groaning Stone, the Granage Stone, the Grenegle Stone or the Chronicle Stone) at grid reference NJ 8217 2760 on Oldmeldrum golf course is where Comyn is supposed to have sat behind the stone during the flight from the battle, groaning over the loss of his men. The *New Statistical Account* contains a series of elliptical trenches that were visible in the field prior to 1845, from which an English billhook had been recovered. However, there is no information about the trenches, and neither they nor the billhook necessarily relate to the battle. It should be noted that the events of the battle make it unlikely that any trenches were dug. No other artefactual material associated with the battle has been recorded.

The Barra Hill fort (NJ82NW 4) is traditionally the site of Comyn's camp before the battle. It is a multi-vallate hillfort at a height of 185 m OD 1.5 km to the south of Oldmeldrum. Material found on the site includes Iron Age, Bronze Age and Neolithic pottery, together with flint arrowheads etc. No artefacts related to the battle have been found within the hillfort. It is traditionally the location of Comyn's camp prior to the battle, but while the site gives a good view of the surrounding countryside, there is no reason to consider that the

Comyn army was camped up on this site, and there are alternative records that state the Comyns were in Oldmeldrum. It may have been used to provide surveillance of the surrounding countryside, but this will have left little or no archaeological trace. There is also a glacial erratic within the fort called Wallace's Putting Stone (NJ82NW 107), which tradition has it was thrown by William Wallace from the top of Bennachie.

There is no indication in the brief accounts of the fighting that archery was a significant feature of the battle, so there are unlikely to be significant quantities of arrowheads in the soil. The fighting consisted of a limited amount of hand to hand fighting, which may have caused the loss of personal items and pieces of armour, while the rest was a rout and pursuit. This will again have led to the loss of personal items and pieces of clothing and equipment. There is a possibility of encountering human remains in the area because the sources give an impression of the Comyns having lost many of their men.

Barra Castle, which survives as a much altered fifteenth century tower house, had a predecessor that was apparently extant in the thirteenth century. It stands on the route between Oldmeldrum and Inverurie. However, it appears to have played no role in the battle and was not mentioned in any of the sources.

Cultural Association

The only commemoration of the battlefield is a small plaque at Bruce's Seat, which provides some information about the battle; it sits on the other side of the B9170 from a field that is traditionally called The Bruce Field. In literature, the battle is recorded in Barbour's *Bruce*, which is part historical record, part hagiography and part fiction. The Groaner, a large stone on the fourteenth hole of the Oldmeldrum golf course, is the emblem of the golf club because of its association with the battle. Beyond this, like most of Bruce's battles, it appears to have been entirely overshadowed by Bannockburn and has left little imprint on Scottish culture.

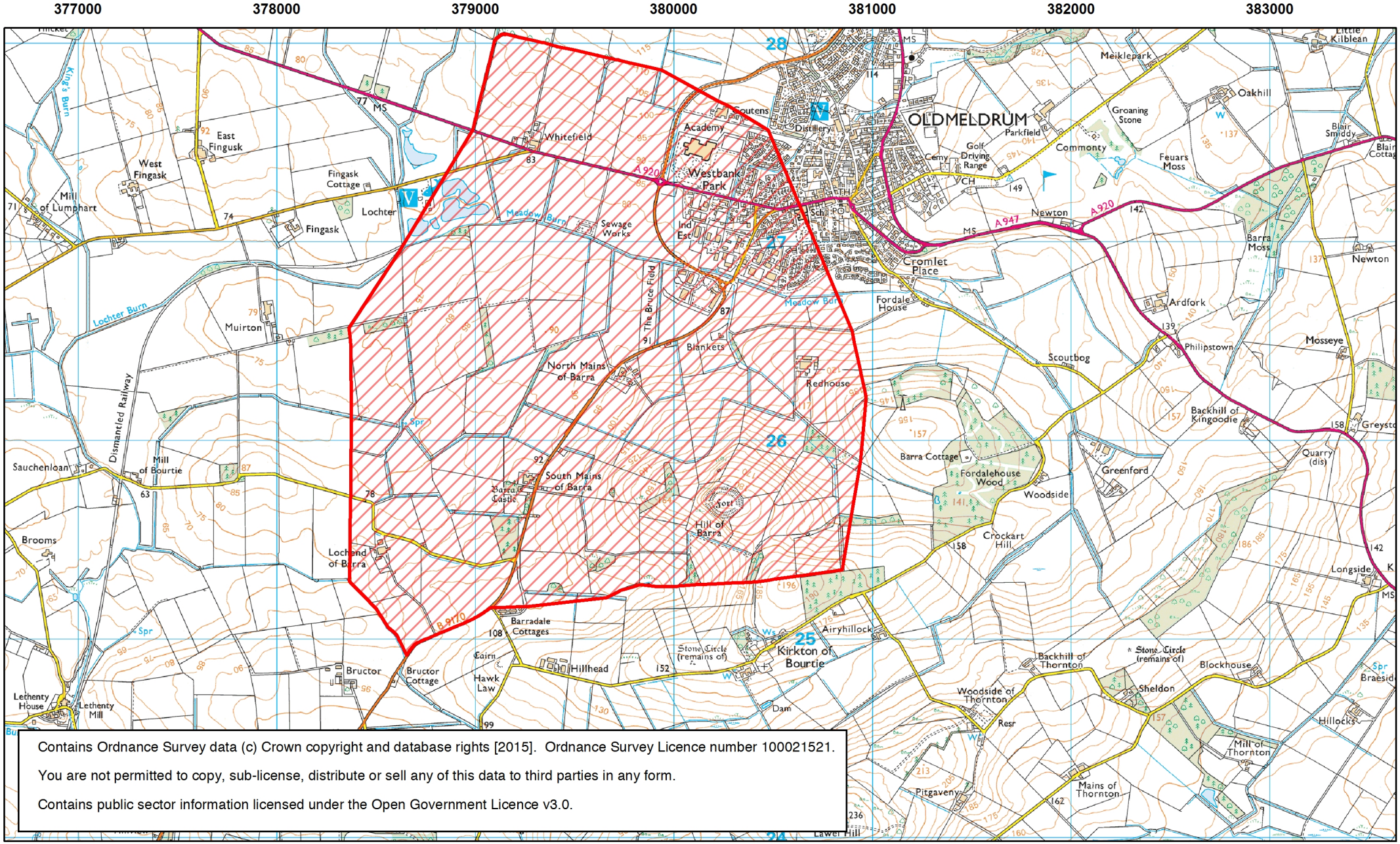
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The Inventory of Historic Battlefields - Boundary

Barra 22 / 23 May 1308 Local Authority: Aberdeenshire



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Inventory of Historic Battlefields boundary

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