

The Inventory of Historic Battlefields

The Battle of Dunbar I

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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NGR Centred	Archaeological and Physical
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Date of Last Update	Cultural Association
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DUNBAR I

Alternative Names: None

27 April 1296

Local Authority: East Lothian

NGR centred: NT 695 765

Date of Addition to Inventory: 14 December 2012

Date of last update: N/A

Overview and Statement of Significance

The first Battle of Dunbar is significant as the first major battle of the First Scottish War of Independence. The decisive English victory effectively destroys any organised resistance within Scotland to Edward I, although the Scots would not remain peaceful for long, and gives him effective control of the country, albeit briefly. It is also the only major battle fought on behalf of John Balliol as King, prior to his capture and forced abdication by Edward, although his supporters continued the fight in his name for many years after this.

Dunbar I was the first battle of the First Scottish Wars of Independence, in which Scotland and England engaged in a frequently violent struggle for control of the country over a period of over 30 years. Hostilities commenced in March 1296 when Edward I captured the Scottish border town of Berwick and then commenced the siege of Dunbar Castle in order to expand his footprint further north. This English incursion was itself a response to an attack on Carlisle Castle by the Scots under John Comyn. The siege at Dunbar was over-seen by John de Warenne, Earl of Surrey, who also took command on the field during the battle.

The battle took place several miles to the south west of the castle when a Scottish force, under Comyn, was intercepted by the English before they could intervene on the siege. The well-equipped English army secured a decisive victory over the Scots, the mounted knights in particular proving themselves to be more than a match to their Scottish counterparts. A large number of leading Scottish nobles were taken prisoner and their absence in coming encounters was to be keenly felt by the Scots.

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

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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 Dunbar I is defined on the accompanying map and includes the following areas:

- The area to the north of the Spott Burn, the Spott Burn to the south of Spott village and the defile through which it runs, where some of the fighting may have taken place .
- The area of flat ground to the south of the Spott Burn, a likely location for fighting.
- The summit of Brunt Hill where the Scots may have arrayed prior to their advance onto the low ground.
- The gentle slope of the addle to the west of Brunt Hill summit, the likely location of the Scots descent onto the low ground.
- The area around Highside Hill, through which the Scots army advanced into position on Brunt Hill.

Historical Background to the Battle

Attempting to catch the English army off-guard, John Balliol sent a relief force under John Comyn, the Earl of Buchan, to Dunbar to lift the siege of the castle. The Scots initially positioned themselves on the brow of the Lammermuir Hills, which is where they may have been sighted prior to the English advance from their siege works. The location seems to have been in the vicinity of the northern slope of Brunt Hill which rose to 600-700 ft behind Spott Burn. Surrey's advance was halted on the north side of the burn prior to a redeployment, which the Scots misinterpreted as a retreat. In response Balliol's force moved down off the high ground with the intention of taking advantage of disorder among the English ranks. It seems however that the English were advancing and not retreating, and had dropped down into the defile which accommodates the Spott Burn in order to cross it. Any disorder on the English side had been rectified by the time they came into view of the charging Scots. The ensuing encounter saw the breaking of the Scottish force, which was quickly put to flight by the more experienced English mounted troops. A number sought sanctuary at the castle but were handed over to the English by the warden, who surrendered the following day.

Events & Participants

John de Warenne, 6th Earl of Surrey, was an efficient military commander, and had served in Edward's Welsh campaigns in 1277, 1282 and 1283, for which he was well rewarded with estates and titles in Wales. He was also an able diplomat and had served as a negotiator for the treaties of Salisbury and of Bigham in 1298 and 1290 respectively, both of which ensured independent

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status for Scotland on the death of Alexander III, with the proviso that his heir, Margaret, the Maid of Norway, marry Edward's son (later to be Edward II). Following his success at both the battle and siege of Dunbar he was appointed Warden of the Kingdom and Land of Scotland by Edward. Alas, the Scottish climate did not agree with him and he returned to England just a few months later citing ill health caused by the damp climate. Much against his will, even to the point of initially defying the king's orders, he was back in early 1297 at the head of an army tasked with putting down Wallace's rebellion. He suffered defeat at Stirling Bridge on 11 September 1297 and fled to York. He was re-appointed for the next Scottish campaign in early 1298 and had better luck raising the siege of Roxburgh and retaking Berwick Castle. Edward joined the campaign and Warenne's return to form was further underscored by his role as a commander in the victorious English army at the Battle of Falkirk on 22 July 1298. He finally died in Kent in 1304, at the age of around 73.

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 Andrew 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 by Robert the Bruce at Barra in spring 1308, Comyn fled south and died in England before the end of the year.

Andrew Moray was from a baronial family in Morayshire, who fought against Edward I at Dunbar alongside his father. Both were captured in the battle, although the elder Sir Andrew was sent to the Tower of London where he eventually died. The younger Andrew was held at Chester Castle, but was able to escape in the winter of 1296. He made his way home to north-east Scotland, where he proclaimed his defiance of Edward at Avoch. He quickly gained support and brought open warfare to the north-east, taking control of many major castles in the area around his homeland. John Comyn, Earl of Buchan, was released from captivity to suppress Moray; when they encountered one another, Buchan made no attempt to attack him and allowed Moray to march away. His efforts soon brought Moray into contact with William Wallace, and Moray and Wallace would fight together at Stirling Bridge in September 1297. Moray was badly wounded in the battle however, and he appears to have died of these wounds before the end of the year.

Battlefield Landscape

The battle took place at the foot of the Lammermuir Hills south of Dunbar. The Scottish forces advanced at speed down the northern slope of Brunt Hill which rises behind Spott Burn then fought the English troops in what appears to have quickly become a running battle along the valley in front of the hill onto the lower ground below. The site of the battle remains largely undeveloped and it is possible that a rich body of material evidence from the battle remain *in-situ*.

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Archaeological and Physical Remains and Potential

No discoveries of human remains or battle-related archaeological material have been reported from the vicinity. However, given the nature of the fighting it is likely that metal objects dropped during the battle, including weaponry and personal equipment, will survive in the topsoil.

CFA Archaeology undertook a metal detecting survey on the site of Brandsmill, thought to be situated within the boundaries of the battle-field, to the south-east of Dunbar in 2007 in advance of the construction of an indoor horse-riding arena. The survey did not produce any finds relating to the battle and seven trial trenches revealed only reveal modern silo pits.

Cultural Association

There is no on-site commemoration or interpretation relating to the battle. There are some songs and ballads which make mention of the battle but none of them shed any light on its details.

Select Bibliography

Barrow, G. W. S. 1976. Lothian in the First War of Independence, 1296-1328. *Scottish Historical Review*. Vol. 55, 151-171

Beam, A. 2008. *The Balliol Dynasty, 1210-1364*. Edinburgh: John Donald

Sadler, J. 2004. *Border Fury: England and Scotland at War, 1296 - 1568*. Harlow: Longman/Pearson

Full Bibliography

Information on Sources and Publications

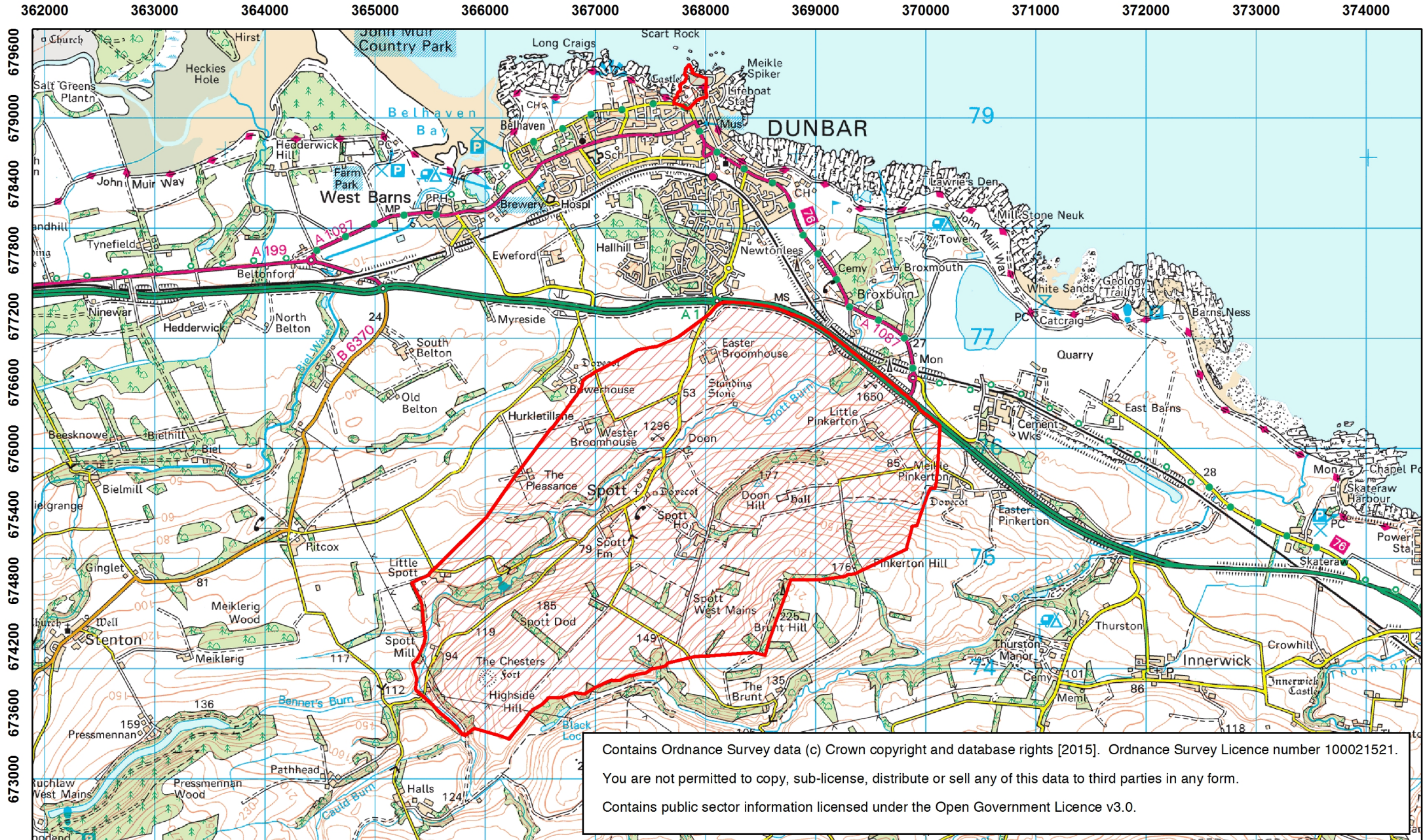
The Battle of Dunbar I is documented in both primary and secondary sources, though the reliability of details such as the unfeasibly high numbers of combatants mentioned in the primary sources obviously casts some doubt on their overall quality. The background to the conflict is well illustrated by contemporary sources. As to reports of the battle action, there are letters and songs written by interested parties including John of Fordun. These particularly deal with the events immediately prior to and after the battle. French poems were written about the engagement, passed on through oral tradition and transcribed by later antiquarians and scholars. These, however, have been embellished with details and speeches of dubious veracity (e.g. The Chronicles of Peter Langtoft and *Lanercost*).


The Inventory of Historic Battlefields - Boundary

Dunbar I

27 April 1296

Local Authority: East Lothian



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