

The Inventory of Historic Battlefields

The Battle of Fyvie

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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FYVIE

Alternative Names: None

28-30 October 1644

Local Authority: Aberdeenshire

NGR centred: NJ 771 390

Date of Addition to Inventory: 30 November 2011

Date of last update: 14 December 2012

Overview and Statement of Significance

The Battle of Fyvie is significant as one of Montrose's string of victories on behalf of Charles I in aid of the Royalist cause, and one of only two of his victories won without the aid of his Irish ally Alasdair Mac Colla. It is also notable as one of very few battlefields within the British Isles with surviving field fortifications. The failure of Argyll also leads the Covenanter government of Scotland to withdraw some of their experienced forces from England, where they were aiding the Parliamentary cause, to deal with Montrose's force.

Fyvie was a scrappy encounter between the 1st Marquis of Montrose and the Covenanter army of the Marquis of Argyll. It came after a period of campaigning by Montrose in the north-east, with Argyll being sent to bring him to battle to bring an end to the Royalist cause in Scotland. The two armies met at Fyvie Castle in Aberdeenshire, where Montrose was entrenched on high ground above the castle. Argyll attacked Montrose's position repeatedly over the course of several days, before withdrawing due to supply shortages and giving Montrose the opportunity to escape.

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 Fyvie is defined on the accompanying map and includes the following areas:

- The River Ythan and the valley it has formed.

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- Fyvie Castle, in whose grounds the fighting took place.
- The high ground to the east of the castle where Montrose was camped and which was defended by the ditches and banks in the woodland.
- The small gorge running E-W down to the Ythan from the high ground, where the trap was to be sprung on Argyll's cavalry.
- The area around Bairnsdale, where lead shot that may relate to the battle was found and where Argyll may have based his force for their attacks.
- The area north of Fyvie Castle, through which Montrose retreated after the battle.

Historical Background to the Battle

The action took place on the high ground to the east of Fyvie castle. Montrose decided not to use Fyvie Castle, which was poorly fortified, and instead occupied the higher ground to the east of the castle, which included ditches and dykes that could be used as entrenchments.

Argyll's men attacked the hill and took the lower dykes, but Montrose ordered Colonel O'Cahan to drive them out. O'Cahan pushed back superior numbers of foot and supporting cavalry, capturing some much needed bags of black powder. Lothian, one of the Covenanter commanders, then sent five troops of horse in, but they fell back under musket fire. Argyll then mounted a cavalry attack, but Montrose withdrew his men to ground where they could not be seen by the horsemen, intending to lure them into a trap. However, the Atholl men fired too early before the cavalry had been fully drawn into the trap; the cavalry retreated, pursued by the Royalists who killed Lord Keith and at least forty officers. A third charge took place involving both a regiment of infantry and some troops of horse, and the Royalists were forced to retire back to the main body of the army, whom Argyll did not dare engage because they were on the high ground. That evening, Argyll withdrew about two miles. Skirmishing continued for at least another two days before shortage of feed for his horses caused Argyll to pull back two miles to Crichtie. Montrose took this opportunity to withdraw, first to Turriff and then west into Badenoch and, from there, into Atholl (Reid 2003).

Events & Participants

Having won a victory at Tippermuir, Montrose went on to soundly defeat the Covenanter forces under Burleigh at Aberdeen on 13 September 1644. Aberdeen was sacked, and the civilian population was badly treated by the Royalists, with widespread theft, beatings, rapes and murders. Montrose then withdrew his forces on 16 September to Rothiemurchus near Aviemore. The Marquis of Argyll, chief of Clan Campbell, and commander of the Covenanter forces, pursued them with three regiments of Highland levies and two regular regiments from Ireland, a force of some 4,000 infantry. His cavalry numbered about 900 in all. One troop was detached shortly afterwards and replaced by a third regiment of regular infantry (Reid 2003).

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Montrose's forces split when Montrose's major-general, Alasdair Mac Colla of the Clan MacDonald, took 500 of his men to the West Highlands, apparently to relieve his garrisons there. Argyll took advantage of this to split his own forces, one part garrisoning and fortifying Inverness, the other pursuing Montrose, who first went south past Perth and then north, back towards Aberdeen. His route was blocked by Ramsay at Brig o' Dee, and he was forced to cross at the Mills of Drum from where he marched north to Strathbogie, where he recruited some hundreds of Highlanders. On 24 October Argyll reached Aberdeen and recommenced his pursuit the next day (Reid 2003). Montrose moved towards Fyvie, near Turriff, Aberdeenshire, on 26 October, either because he had heard Argyll was in pursuit again (Spalding 1851), or because he needed to seek provisions for his forces (Wishart 1893), or from the twin desires of saving the lands of Huntly from ravage by Argyll and finding food for his army (Ruthven 1844). Whatever his reasons, his intelligence was poor and Argyll took him by surprise at Fyvie on Monday 28 October (Reid 1990).

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

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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.

Archibald Campbell, 1st Marquis of Argyll, was one of the leading Covenanters in Scotland. He had been opposed to Charles I's absolutism but had not been particularly in favour of Presbyterianism until 1638, when his refusal to support Charles led the King to send the MacDonnell Earl of Antrim to invade Argyll and raise the MacDonalds against the Marquis of Argyll. Although this was a failure, the Earl of Antrim was to later send his kinsmen Mac Colla and O'Cahan to support Montrose. Argyll became the most influential of the Covenanter lords, and was instrumental in the Solemn League and Covenant that sent Scottish Covenanters into England in support of the Parliamentarians. He was present at several of the battles fought by Montrose, being personally defeated by him at Fyvie and at Inverlochy, but was also the head of the Commission of Estates that had such a deleterious effect on Baillie at Alford and at Kilsyth. In later years, he led the Parliament that crowned Charles II as King of Scotland in 1651, but had lost control of events in Scotland and was reluctantly dragged into the invasion of England. He was imprisoned several times under the Protectorate for debt, and arrested for treason on the Restoration in 1660. He was cleared of any involvement in the execution of Charles I, but letters he had sent to Monck showed the extent of his cooperation with Cromwell and he was executed even before Charles had signed the death warrant.

Battlefield Landscape

The area is relatively unaffected by modern development. The area is still predominantly rural and has undoubtedly benefited from being part of the castle's environs. The trees on the high ground have had the effect of protecting the ditches and banks from weathering and ploughing, although undoubtedly the roots will have been less beneficial. The approaches from the south and east are still open and the few houses built since the battle do nothing to alter the understanding of the battlefield.

Archaeological and Physical Remains and Potential

There are extensive remains of banks and ditches (NJ73NE 10) in the woods that cover the hill to the east of Fyvie Castle, centred on NJ 771 392. These cover the west-facing slopes and the approaches from the east. According to the contemporary sources, these were pre-existing agricultural features which the Royalists were able to re-use. No artefacts relating to the battle have reported. However, there was hand to hand fighting in the enclosures formed by the ditches and banks, and it is likely that there will be some material relating to the battle in them. There should be some evidence of both musketry and the use of cavalry pistols, but, since the numbers involved were small the quantity of such remains is probably not large. There is no record of artillery being used by either side. Given that there was some close quarter fighting one might expect to find small items of personal and military clothing

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and gear amongst the dykes. None of the sources mentions disposal of the dead, of whom there should be at least 40. The only known artefacts relating to the battle are in the collection of Fyvie Castle, consisting of musket and pistol balls that are recorded as having been found at Bairnsdale; these are said to have been from Argyll's camp prior to the fighting at Fyvie. There is no date given for their discovery, and no indication of the evidence used to ascribe them to Argyll's troops. However, they are the only artefacts currently known that potentially relate to the battle.

Cultural Association

There is no recorded onsite commemoration or interpretation relating to the battle. However, the traditional Scottish folk song '*The Bonnie Lass of Fyvie O*' probably harks back to this period. There are a number of versions of this song, but in the one quoted below the soldier who falls for the lass is a Captain of Irish dragoons, and 'Ythanside' is mentioned in one of the other verses.

First verse;

*'There once was a troop of Irish dragoons
Come marching down through Fyvie o
And their captain's fa'en in love
Wi' a very bonnie lass
And her name it was cried pretty Peggy o'*

Last verse:

*'Green grow the birks on bonny Ythanside
Low lie the lowlands of Fyvie o
Our captain's name was Ned and he died for a maid
He died for the chambermaid of Fyvie o'*

The song is not a record of historical events, but it is clear that the characters in the song are intended to be linked with Montrose. The only reason for a troop of Irish dragoons to have been in the vicinity of Fyvie was Montrose's campaigning, and the song talks of the Irish dragoons heading for Aberdeen; the troops at Fyvie had been in Aberdeen the previous month.

Select Bibliography

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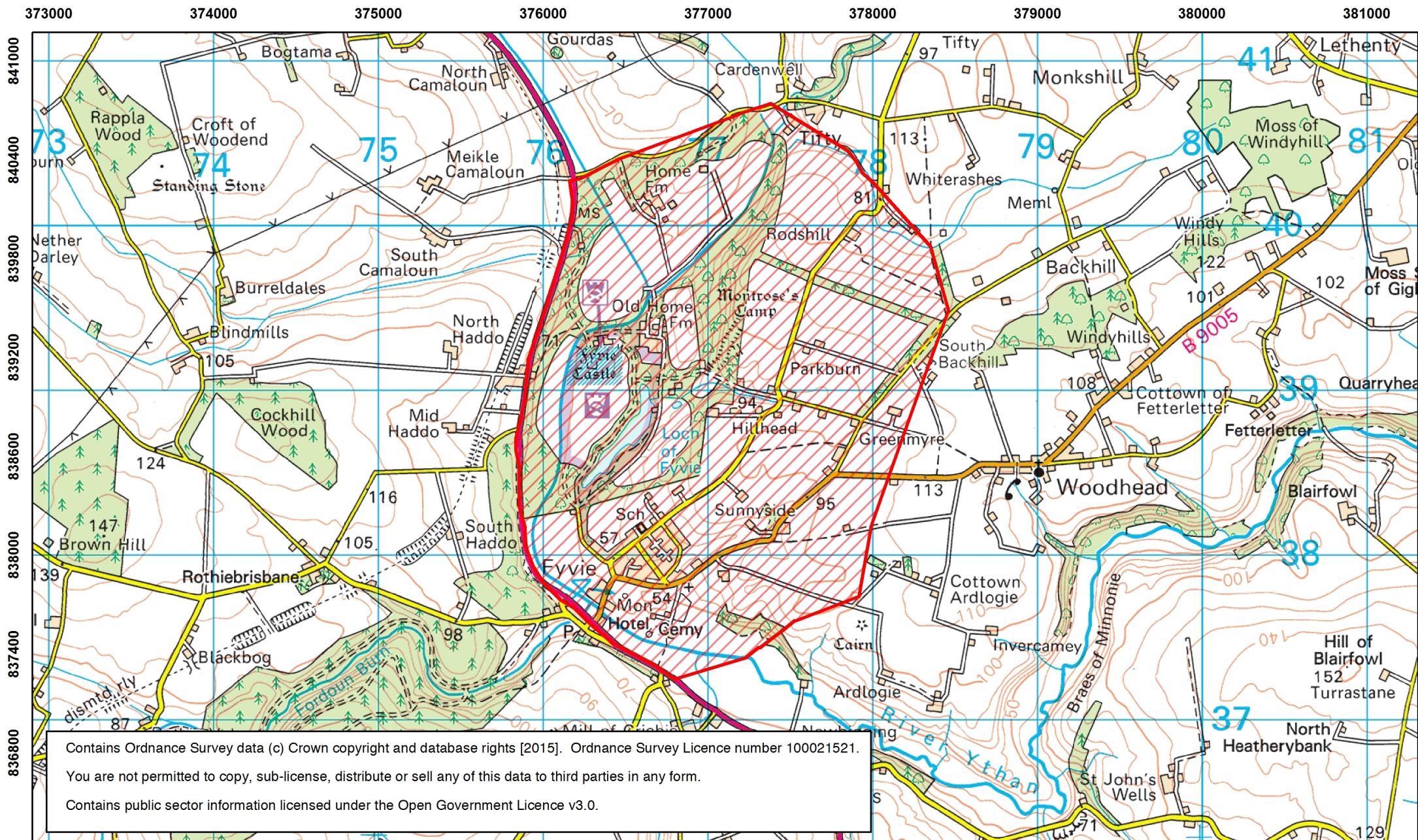
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The Inventory of Historic Battlefields - Deployments

Fyvie

28 - 30 October 1644

Local Authority: Aberdeenshire



 Inventory of Historic Battlefields boundary

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