

The Inventory of Historic Battlefields

The Battle of Sark

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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SARK

Alternative Names: Lochmaben Stone

23 October 1448

Local Authority: Dumfries and Galloway

NGR centred: NY 314 663

Date of Addition to Inventory: 03/08/2016

Date of last update: N/A

Overview and Statement of Significance

The Battle of Sark is significant as the final pitched battle fought between Scotland and England during the period of the Hundred Years War, and the last battle of the Medieval period between the two countries. Sark is also significant because it clearly demonstrated the weakened authority of the kings of both Scotland and England in the mid-15th century. It was the first Scottish victory in battle over the English since the Battle of Otterburn over 60 years earlier. At this time, increasingly powerful members of the nobility were ignoring the authority of the monarchy and striving to control it for their own ends. Noble houses of the highest echelons in Scotland and England were engaged in dynastic manoeuvring, and political and sometimes physical conflict, and these internal struggles would overtake both countries for the remainder of the 15th century, leaving little capacity for major cross-border warfare.

In late 1448, the Earl of Northumberland led an army into Scotland, with the support of King Henry VI, breaking a truce between the two nations. Northumberland's army was met by a Scottish force under the Earl of Ormonde to the south-west of modern Gretna, on the north shore of the River Esk. The battle was a decisive victory for the Scots, with many of Northumberland's force captured or killed, and apparently very few Scottish casualties in return. The victory of the Douglases raised their profile in the Scottish power struggles at the time, while simultaneously damaging the Earl of Northumberland's in England.

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 position 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 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

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significant role in the battle, other physical remains, such as enclosures or built structures, and areas of known or potential archaeological sensitivity.

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

- The north bank of the River Esk, as the documentary sources are clear about the English being pushed back into the high tide, resulting in many of them being drowned.
- The flat, low-lying ground between the River Sark and the Kirtle Water, encompassing the Lochmaben Stone, where the English were encamped, the fields around Old Graitney where the Scots deployed into formation and advanced into the battle and the area between where the majority of the fighting occurred.
- The field to the west of the Kirtle Water, to include the former course of the river at the time of the battle, and its western bank, as the route by which some of the English force attempted to flee during the rout and where significant archaeological remains may be found.

Historical Background to the Battle

Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland, led around 6,000 men into Scotland in October 1448. His plan was to ransack Douglas lands, and to this end he made camp adjacent to modern Gretna, just inside Scotland, and dispatched scouting and raiding parties around the surrounding area. Word of Northumberland's invasion soon reached Hugh Douglas, Earl of Ormonde, who gathered an army of 4,000 men before marching to meet the invader.

The two armies met near the end of October at Northumberland's camp. Although the English force was warned of Ormonde's advance and was able to deploy for battle ready to meet the Scots, it would be in vain. At first Northumberland's archers pinned Ormonde's army down with a hail of arrows, but the Scottish right flank was then ordered to charge by their commander. The Scottish force was able to advance rapidly across the firm, flat ground, swiftly neutralising Northumberland's archers. With the bowmen out of the picture, the remainder of the Scottish force was able to rush forward as well and engage the main English force.

At this point the three watercourses, the Esk, the Sark and the Kirtle Water, which Northumberland had relied on to protect his flanks and rear, now became a deadly hindrance to his force. Hemmed in on three sides, the English were unable to retreat and the battle swiftly became a rout, with men fleeing both east and west, struggling past the rivers, and with many reported drowned in the Esk to the south. The Scots had won a crucial victory, with Northumberland's army destroyed. The Earl himself was able to escape, however, and the battle did little to alter the tumultuous landscape of internal conflict in the kingdoms on both sides of the border.

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Events & Participants

Although the wider context of the cross-border warfare in 1448 and 1449 is widely documented, the precise series of raids and attacks, of which Sark was the most significant battle, is less certain. The uncertainty arises from one of the primary sources, the Auchinleck Chronicle, and the existence of different versions of this work. The older version of the Chronicle has the conflict beginning with Henry Percy, the son of the Earl of Northumberland, sacking and razing the town of Dunbar in May of 1448. In June, Richard Neville, Earl of Salisbury and the Warden of the West March, sacked and razed the castle and town at Dumfries. The marcher Earl of Douglas, with the Earls of Angus, Orkney, and Ormonde, retaliated promptly and brutally, marching south and burning Warkworth and Alnwick, both situated deep in Percy lands, and ripped a path of destruction through Cumberland and southern Northumberland. These raids then spurred Northumberland to retaliate with a major invasion, culminating in the Battle of Sark. This version of the sequence of events is also given by Buchanan, Pitscottie and others. However, the alternative version of the Auchinleck Chronicle gives a very different sequence, in which the invasion which ends at Sark is the opening event of the war in October 1448, and the raids and the destruction of Dunbar, Dumfries, Warkworth and Alnmouth all take place in 1449 instead of 1448. This second version of events appears to be the correct one, as it fits with English sources that they sought to restore the truce between the two nations in 1449 in order to end the conflict. This coincided with renewed hostilities between England and France, with whom the Scots had renewed their alliance in late 1448. This suggests that all the other historic sources, such as Buchanan and Pitscottie, may have based their version of events on the incorrect version of the Auchinleck Chronicle, as they all report the former sequence of events.

Regardless of the precise sequence of events, we know that in autumn 1448 Northumberland led an army into Scotland, and this incursion ended in the Battle of Sark. Shortly before this, Henry VI travelled north to Durham, partly as a show of strength in the hope this would deter further trouble along the border, and at the same time seemingly to endorse Northumberland's planned invasion. Northumberland subsequently marched through the Western March to enter Scotland in October that year, following one of the same invasion routes used by English armies since time immemorial. Percy marched north with approximately 6,000 men, bivouacked on the river plain of the Esk, south of Gretna, and immediately began raiding, burning and pillaging the local area, probably intending to provoke the Scottish forces to engage. Hugh Douglas, the Earl of Ormonde, seems to have been well informed of Northumberland's movements, and was already marching south to engage the English raiding party. One of Northumberland's raiding parties or patrols—which certainly implies he had some cavalry—spotted the Scottish forces, and withdrew to their campsite on the plain of the Esk, close to the Lochmaben Stone. It seems likely that Northumberland had deliberately chosen this terrain because of its constrained approach, which would have allowed him to hammer the Scottish forces with archery as they were funnelled towards his battle lines. Northumberland would have been able to anchor his flanks from any sweeping encirclement tactics, and punish any approaching forces with his quite likely high numbers of archers. However, he failed to account for the

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likelihood of a Scottish charge into his archers, and did not provide his archers – who appear to have been thrown ahead of his main battle line similar to skirmishers – with adequate support from heavy infantry or cavalry. Consequently, things very quickly began to go badly wrong on the 23rd of October on the banks of the Esk and the Kirtle Water.

Henry Percy was the second Earl of Northumberland, and the Warden of the Eastern March at the time of the Battle of Sark. Percy was the son of Henry 'Hotspur' Percy, who was an initial supporter of Henry Bolingbroke—who would become Henry IV. However, by AD 1403 Hotspur was in rebellion against Henry IV over a host of grievances, including lack of payment for serving as Warden of the Marches. He died at the Battle of Shrewsbury on the 21st of July 1403, was subsequently declared a traitor, and his lands were forfeited to the Crown. As a result of his father's rebellion, Henry Percy spent much of his life trying to reclaim the lands and authority that had been his family's ancestral holdings until they were stripped by the Crown.

Percy reconciled with Henry V and was made the second Earl of Northumberland in 1416. He served Henry V well and faithfully, acting as Warden of the East March, and was raised to a host of other Crown offices and served in wars on the Continent and against Scotland. With the accession of Henry VI in 1422, Northumberland became a member of the ruling council during the young king's minority, but his family and political fortunes quickly began to slide. He provided troops and aid to the Scottish rebel George de Dunbar in 1436 in an attempt to regain the latter's forfeited castle of Dunbar. This ended in military and political disaster at the rout of Piperdean, when Dunbar's expedition was ambushed en route to the castle by William Douglas, second Earl of Angus and Warden of the Scottish Marches, and resulted in high English casualties and the imprisonment of numerous Percy liegemen. Northumberland retained his wardenship after this misadventure, and indeed, after the Battle of Sark, but the Percys' position on the border was quickly becoming precarious, as Northumberland's never-ceasing ambition to regain the lands of his father and grandfather began to conflict with the ambitions of his northern neighbour, Richard Neville, the Earl of Salisbury. Through a combination of influence at court and smart marriages, the Nevilles were eclipsing the Percys in power and influence, and the conflict of interests and ambitions between the two houses quickly turned into physical conflict between the hot-tempered scions of both houses in the 1450s, as armed and liveried retainers waged a blood feud across the north. The weakness of Henry VI allowed these northern houses essentially to wage war against each other. Furthermore, Henry VI's recurring bouts of incapacitation allowed for powerful magnates to jockey for power and position in influencing the Crown, specifically the Yorkist contingent led by Richard, Duke of York, and the Lancastrian contingent led by the Duke of Somerset, who had great control and influence over Henry VI. As the Nevilles tied themselves through marriages and alliances to the Yorkists, the Percys chose the Crown and the Lancastrians. This flashpoint of feuding allies roared to life with a vengeance on 22 May 1455 in St Albans, where the Yorkist party intercepted Henry VI's procession to a great council at Leicester. The personal grudges, rivalries and hatreds flared into a sudden, violent and deadly conflagration. By the end of the day, the intensive rivalry between the Nevilles and the Percys ended in the

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death of Northumberland by the sword of the Earl of Salisbury, and saw the start of the War of the Roses.

Sir John Pennington and Sir John Harrington were both English commanders at the Battle of Sark, each leading one of the three battles of the army. They were both captured by the Scots in the battle and removed to Lochmaben Castle. The few available sources provide no further information as to either's fate after capture, though presumably they were ransomed during the peace negotiations that occurred in 1449.

Hugh Douglas, the Earl of Ormonde, was one of the leading magnates of the Black Douglasses. A fourth son of James the Gross, seventh Earl of Douglas, he was tied by blood or marriage to some of the most powerful families in Scotland during the mid-15th century. Ormonde, who was the younger brother of Archibald Douglas, Earl of Moray, and the nephew of Henry Sinclair, second Earl of Orkney, represented a portion of the massive hegemony of Douglas power and influence in the community of the realm of Scotland during the reign of James I and II. After the Battle of Sark, as James II came into his authority as king after the end of his minority in 1449, he began to do everything in his power to shatter the incredible power and influence on the Crown that had been accumulated by the Black Douglasses, which by this point represented a growing threat to the authority of James II's kingship. Ormonde was among the Douglasses who rose in rebellion against James in 1452, and he was captured after the Battle of Arkinholm in 1455 and executed. His lands were forfeited to the Crown, the same fate as his brothers and the rest of the Black Douglasses, and his victory over the English at Sark was overshadowed by this subsequent taint of rebellion and treason.

Sir John Wallace of Craigie was another of the Scottish nobles at the Battle of Sark. He was the Lord of Craigie Castle in South Ayrshire, and served as Lieutenant – General to James II. He also seems to have served as the Sheriff of Ayr. He died at Craigie around 3 months after Sark, as a result of wounds taken at the battle.

Battlefield Landscape

The landscape of a battlefield usually plays a significant role in the events of the battle itself. Seemingly small features of the terrain can have a substantial impact upon the deployment, movement and cohesion of a military force. Making best use of the landscape can often mean the difference between victory and defeat in battle. Understanding the battlefield landscape can help us analyse what happened during the conflict and inform our assessment of the archaeological potential of the battlefield.

Features in the terrain which may affect the course of a battle can be divided into five main categories: **Observation** and **fields of fire**; **avenues of approach and retreat**; **cover** and **concealment**; **obstacles**; and **key terrain**.

- **Observation** and **fields of fire**: **Observation** refers to places in the landscape from where the enemy force(s) can be seen; while **fields of fire** is the area or areas where an enemy can be fired upon by your weapons. Features which can provide good

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observation include hills, level ground, open fields and landscapes.

- **Avenues of approach and retreat:** These are the routes by which an army can advance and retreat to, from and around a battlefield, some more effective than others. These may be man-made or natural features, such as tracks and roadways, river valleys and open ground. Most battlefields would have had a combination of types of **avenues of approach**.
- **Cover and concealment:** These are features which can hide you from the enemy (**concealment**) or provide protection from their weapons (**cover**). Often, a feature can provide both **cover** and **concealment**, such as a wall. Other features which may provide **cover** and / or **concealment** include trees, bushes and ditches, while larger landscape features, such as valleys, hills and forests, can help cover or conceal a large force .
- **Obstacles:** **Obstacles** are landscape features which can slow or stop the movement of an army, break its cohesion, or force it to change route. **Obstacles** to an army can often be relatively small landscape features from the perspective of an individual, but can have a significant impact on the rate of advance or retreat of an army. Common examples of **obstacles** include rivers and streams, marshes, cliffs and steep or high hills, and walls and buildings.
- **Key terrain:** Certain areas of a battlefield can have a very significant effect upon the outcome of the conflict. These areas are considered **key terrain** and include areas of high ground, bridges and river crossings, junctions of roads and tracks, and fortifications. In some cases, the **key terrain** is so important that it can determine the outcome of the battle: it is then known as **decisive terrain**.

The Landscape of the Battle of Sark

The Battle of Sark took place in the flat terrain southwest of the modern village of Gretna. The open, level nature of the landscape of the battlefield and surrounding area would have provided clear **observation** and **fields of fire** for both armies, and seems to have offered nothing in the way of **cover** or **concealment**. The battle occurred in the area around the Lochmaben Stone (scheduled monument 3378), a remnant of a prehistoric stone circle which has been mostly ploughed away. This 2.3m tall standing stone was one of the traditional meeting and muster points on the West March and made a widely known and easily identifiable location for Northumberland to base his force. This was also a strong defensive position as it was protected by **obstacles** to its west, east and south – namely, the River Sark, the Kirtle Water and the River Esk. The River Sark and the Kirtle Water protected the flanks of the English army and the Esk protected its rear from any Scottish attempt to manoeuvre around them. The English army's **avenue of approach** brought them across the English-Scottish border, either by fording the River Esk at low tide or by crossing the Sark to the east. The Scots **avenue of approach** to the battlefield was from the north, where the gently rolling ground prevented any

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effort at surprise on their part and gave Northumberland ample time to deploy his force.

Advancing from the north, the Scots' avoided the serious obstacles presented by the rivers, and the lack of any other significant obstacles in this direction allowed them to advance rapidly along their **avenue of approach** towards the English force. Ormonde deployed his force into three battles while outside of the **field of fire** of the English force before advancing into range. At first Northumberland's archers held the Scots back, but before long they were able to charge rapidly forward across the good ground and nullify this disadvantage. Once the Scots had gained the upper hand in the fighting and the English had begun to break, Northumberland's formerly strong position became a deadly site for his troops. As they broke and tried to escape, the Rivers Sark, Kirtle and Esk proved lethal **obstacles** for them instead of the Scots. There were heavy English casualties as they attempted to cross the rivers as the Scots pursued and attacked the fleeing men.

Archaeological and Physical Remains and Potential

No artefacts relating to the battle have yet been reported, though it is important to note that it is clear metal detecting has occurred in the area of the battlefield and the battle site may already have been impacted by this. (A flanged axe-head was found in the area of the battlefield in 2006 and is believed to have been associated with a mound which was levelled in 1851. This mound was suspected to be a Viking boat burial, but no evidence of this was found during its removal, and it also does not have any known connection to the battle.) Small scale archaeological investigations were conducted around the Lochmaben Stone in 1983, in advance of its re-erection after collapsing the previous year. No archaeological evidence related to the battle was noted in the report of this work.

Given that the primary sources specifically mention heavy archery being used by the English, it is highly likely that remnants of archers' equipment and arrows survive in the soil. Additionally, as mentioned in the primary sources, the charge and subsequent heavy hand-to-hand combat that occurred as the Scottish right flank drove into the English on the left is also likely to have left a substantial archaeological signature. The archaeological assemblage from the site would probably be quite similar to the slightly later Battle of Towton in England in 1461, though obviously on a much smaller scale.

The supposedly high number of drowned men on the English side would be expected to leave a variety of material culture littering the banks and bottom of the Esk, even if the bodies were removed for burial. To the west of the area, the troops fleeing across the Kirtle Water are likely to have deposited a wide range of equipment and material on the banks and the river bed during their escape. As the line of the Kirtle Water has significantly shifted since the battle, these remains may well survive within and around the former line of the river, and remains such as organic material may have been protected particularly well by these conditions. In addition, the rout of some of Northumberland's force to the east across the River Sark, which today marks the border of Scotland and England, is likely to have resulted in similar archaeological

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remains existing on the English side of the river. As this area lies outside Scotland, it is beyond the remit of Scotland's Inventory of Historic Battlefields, but it is important to note that remains of the Battle of Sark may also be located on the English side of the border.

There is no information in the primary sources as to the burial site or sites of the battlefield dead, of whom there may have been as many as 2,000. However, as there is evidence that medieval battlefield casualties were sometimes buried in nearby areas of consecrated ground, there are several possible locations nearby. Firstly, the parish church at Gretna may have already been the location of a church at the time of the battle and, if so, is a likely candidate for burials. Other possibilities include the deserted medieval settlement of Solum, presumed to be in the area of the modern farm at Floshend, or the lost church and burial ground to the west at Redkirk, which was washed into the sea in AD 1675 due to coastal erosion.

Alluvial accumulation from flooding and high tides from the Solway Firth may prove a 'double-edged sword' for the archaeological potential of the battlefield: it may be preserving a considerable quantity of material, but there may also be a significant overburden of accumulated silt which would inhibit the efficacy of a metal-detecting or other survey in the vicinity of the banks of the Kirtle and Esk.

Cultural Association

There currently exists no on-site commemoration or interpretation relating to the battle. There is also no known contemporary commemoration in song or verse, though Robert Burns references the Battle of Sark, and the death of Sir John Wallace of Craigie, in his 1786 poem "The Vision".

*"His Country's Saviour, mark him well!
Bold Richardton's heroic swell,
The chief, on Sark who glorious fell,
In high command;
And he whom ruthless fates expel
His native land."*

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The Inventory of Historic Battlefields - Boundary

Sark 23 October 1448

Local Authority: Dumfries and Galloway



HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND

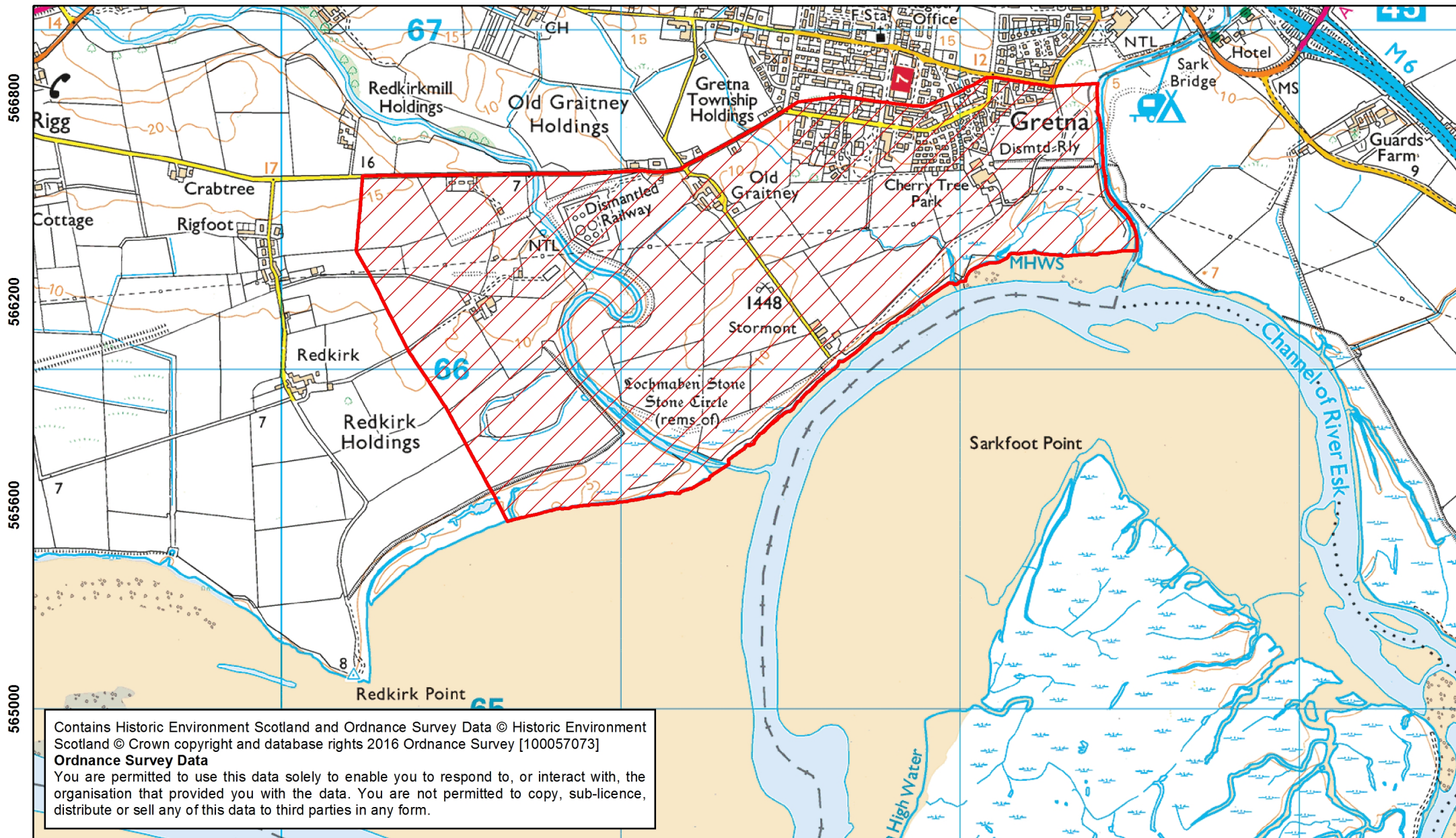
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