

Battle Name:	Harlaw	Council area: Aberdeenshire
Date:	24th July 1411	
UKFOC number:	339	

HARLAW

1 SUMMARY

1.1 CONTEXT

In origin the battle of Harlaw was a feudal dispute but must be viewed in the context of growing conflict between Highland and Lowland. The situation was also complicated by the fact that King James I was imprisoned in England and thus royal authority was weak. Donald, Lord of the Isles, having fought for control of Ross, now planned to strike south east into Moray, towards Aberdeen. But there was substantial warning of the impending campaign and so defensive preparations were put in hand by the Earl of Mar in the spring and early summer of 1411.

In the medieval period the main road from Inverness to Aberdeen probably followed broadly the route of the A96. It appears that it was along this route that the Highland forces approached Moray. As soon as he was aware of the approach of the Highland forces, Mar marshalled his troops at Inverurie, which controlled the route. The exact line of the road to the north of Inverurie ran on the north side of the river Urie and it was 2km north west of the bridge over the river, just north of Inverurie, that the Highland forces camped on the night of the 23rd July, on high ground near Harlaw. On the morning of the 24th the Earl of Mar marched out of Inverurie to engage the Highland army.

1.2 ACTION

Mar approach from the south east. The action seems to have been fought on foot and with each army probably deployed in three ‘battles’, the infantry arranged in ‘schiltrons’, closely ordered ranks of spearmen. There is no reference to significant numbers of archers and it seems that Mar kept his knights as a cavalry reserve. It appears to have been an intense and close run fight but the sources provide little detail and there is even conflict over the outcome, with both sides claiming victory. What is clear is that Aberdeen was successfully defended and the Highland forces departed without causing significant destruction in the region.

Figure 1: Harlaw (1411) - battlefield plan

Figure 2: Harlaw conservation boundary suggested by Martin (red line)

1.3 TROOPS

Numbers:

Highland: 10,000 according to the ballads but probably far less.

Lowland: several thousand including significant numbers of armoured knights.

Losses:

The ballads claim 900 Highland and 600 Lowland losses.

1.4 *COMMEMORATION & INTERPRETATION*

A grave marker commemorating Sir Gilbert de Greenlaw, who was killed in the battle, is in the churchyard at Kinkell, to the south east of Inverurie. A substantial monument was erected on the battle field, unveiled in 1914. There are also cairns on the battlefield (Drum's and Provost Davidson's cairns) which are said to be associated with the battle, while two now lost standing stones also gained association with the battle: Liggars Stane and Donalds Tomb. All are marked on the Ordnance Survey 1st edition 6inch mapping, but it is unclear which if any have a genuine association with the battle.

2 ASSESSMENT

2.1 *LOCATION*

The general location of the battle is well established at the traditional site, but the primary sources provide very little detail as to the exact context, so accurately placing the troops and the action is not currently possible. Marren has made a reasonable interpretation based on the relief and the probable approximate alignment of the major medieval road from Inverness to Aberdeen, but the actual deployments shown are highly conjectural.

2.2 *PRIMARY SOURCES*

Harlaw is a poorly documented action for which much of the evidence is in the form of ballads, embroidered with legend. There are no significant contemporary chronicle accounts. Major's work of 1527 may have had oral tradition to draw upon but is very late. The primary sources are discussed by Marren, 1990 (p.212-3).

2.3 *SECONDARY WORKS*

The most modern account is that provided by Marren, 1990, which also reviews the other main secondary works (p.212-3).

2.4 *BATTLE ARCHAEOLOGY*

Human remains were found in 1837 to the north east of Mid Harlaw, the location marked on the 1st edition 6inch Ordnance Survey mapping. Though these need not actually relate to the action, if they did then they might give a more accurate indication of the centre of the action, for mass graves are frequently found to concentrate in the area of initial and most intense fighting. Artefacts including a battle axe have also been found on the battlefield.

2.5 *BATTLEFIELD HISTORIC TERRAIN*

The ballads give a picture of the battlefield as featureless moorland, but the area today is arable fields. Though not specifically referred to in the primary accounts, the action appears to have been fought on the line of the major road from Aberdeen to Inverness. Despite its importance for the understanding of the action, no reconstruction of the historic terrain, including the road network and the extent of moorland, has apparently been attempted.

2.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BATTLE

The battle represented a stage in the escalation of Highland / Lowland conflict during the early 15th century, but it saw the successful defence of the Aberdeen area.

2.7 CURRENT STATE OF DEVELOPMENT

The whole battlefield remains as agricultural fields. There is no modern development or evidence of mineral extraction or other modern disturbance.

2.8 CURRENT DESIGNATIONS

Balhalgady House and Harlaw House are both listed, as is the battle monument. There are no other designations.

The area defined by Martin for battlefield conservation seems to be too tightly defined, given the many uncertainties about the exact location of the action. It even excludes the location where the human remains have been found. (2)

2.9 POTENTIAL

The potential of the battlefield is largely undetermined, because of the paucity of the documentary record.

The geology of the battlefield is wholly boulder clay but the pH of the derivative soils have not been established in the present research, so it is not possible to indicate as to whether there is a good potential for preservation of ferrous artefacts. There is no indication in the primary sources that archery played a significant role in the action and so there may not have been significant numbers of projectiles deposited which could yield shot fall patterning, but this cannot be established for certain without archaeological survey. However, given the likely intensity of the hand to hand fighting it is probable that significant numbers of non ferrous artefacts will have been deposited during the action. Thus the site may be amenable to investigation through intensive metal detecting survey, which has been shown at Towton to be an effective approach to the exploration of late medieval battlefields.

The most practical approach to advance the understanding of the battlefield, as an essential prerequisite for effective conservation and interpretation, would be to reconstruct the historic terrain, including road network, land use and plan form. Then, in the light of this evidence and the detail of relief, the existing hypotheses as to the location and extent of the action can be refined. This could then be tested by metal detecting for surviving battle archaeology.

2.10 THREATS

There is the potential for damage to unstratified battle archaeology through treasure hunting or unrecorded/poorly recorded metal detecting survey.

Modern agricultural practices, including application of chemicals may also represent a substantial threat to the long term survival of unstratified metal artefacts, particularly if the longer term land use history was one of primarily pastoral use which will have protected the artefacts from mechanical damage.

3 REFERENCES

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- (2) Martin, David E. "The Battlefields of Scotland: A report on their preservation for Historic Scotland." Historic Scotland, 1997.

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