

BATTLEFIELDS TRUST

FEATURE: THE BATTLE OF BANNOCKBURN VISITOR CENTRE

Bringing medieval battle to life for 21st century audiences.

The new, state-of-the-art Battle of Bannockburn Visitor Centre opened on 1/3/14 at the historic heritage site in Stirling, in time for the 700th anniversary of the battle this year.

The new experience transports visitors back to the year 1314 to experience medieval battle like never before.

The National Trust for Scotland and Historic Scotland, the organisations responsible for promoting and conserving Scotland's heritage, joined in partnership to restore dignity to the site of one of the most significant battles in the nation's history.

A mix of talented and creative people were brought together in 2010 to undertake the challenge of bringing the historic battle to life for 21st century audiences, supported by £9.1m funding from the Scottish Government and the Heritage Lottery Fund.

A place of commemoration for centuries.

Located near the historic city of Stirling, the Bannockburn site evokes the landscape that would have been seen by medieval soldiers in 1314 when the area was a royal hunting park. People have visited the iconic site for centuries. The Category-A listed monuments there commemorate the thousands of men who fought and died during the battle.

Work to build the new Visitor Centre started in 2012, while significant works were also carried out to conserve and restore the historic monuments. This included restoration of the iconic equestrian statue of King Robert the Bruce by Pilkington Jackson, which after years of battling the Scottish weather had turned green. Bruce has now been returned to his original, striking bronze glory.

A replacement ringbeam at the 1960's Rotunda monument was inscribed with a new poem by acclaimed Scottish writer Kathleen Jamie, chosen by the public and a panel of experts including Scots makar Liz Lochhead. The designers of the original Rotunda planned for it to bear an inscription, and their vision was fulfilled by the Project half a century later. Jamie's poem concludes with the following lines, which express the 'view' of the deeply significant Scottish landscape:

*'Come all ye', the country says
You win me, who take me most to heart'*

A world's first experience.

Re-imagined and re-designed, the new Battle of Bannockburn Visitor Centre is innovative attraction. This is the only heritage attraction in the UK where state-of-the-art 3D technology and medieval armies meet, and the first in the world where motion capture has been used to immerse visitors into an authentic 3D medieval battle.

The Project's interpretative designers Bright White Ltd worked with the combination of an Academic Advisory Panel featuring some of the UK's top historians and state-of-the-art 3D technology to produce a new interpretation of the battle.

The Academic Advisory Panel, including historians Dr Fiona Watson, Prof. Michael Prestwich, Prof. Edward J. Cowan, Prof. Richard Oram, Dr Michael Penman, Scott McMaster and archaeologists Dr Tony Pollard and Derek Alexander, advised on the development of scripts, story boards and character profiles, playing a crucial role in authenticating the complex history of the battle for the production process.

Input from the Panel from the beginning of the Project has ensured an authentic experience, while the main exhibition space, surrounded by 270 degree, full size 3D 14th century conflict is truly breath-taking.

Bright White Ltd also worked with the Centre for Digital Documentation and Visualisation (CDDV), a joint partnership between the Glasgow School of Art's Digital Design Studio and Historic Scotland, to develop the knowledge of the Academic Advisory Panel to create the scenes of men-at-arms preparing for and engaging in battle using state-of-the-art motion capture technology, bringing the realities and brutalities of medieval battle to life for in the most realistic way possible.

This is the first time that motion capture technology, famous for creating characters in film such as Gollum in the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy, has been used for a visitor attraction. The Clanranald Trust for Scotland, who have worked on over 180 movie productions including Hollywood movies Gladiator and Robin Hood, provided authentic fight choreography, ensuring a degree of realism that could not be achieved using traditional filming methods. Stuntmen used replica weapons to engage real fight sequences provoking genuine reactions, and by means of digital digital enhancement the swords and lances are shown striking and penetrating armour and flesh.

Motion capture can only feature three or fewer people at a time, so for the more complex battle sequences featuring a cast of thousands, motion-capture data will be combined and post-production effects employed, to create the intense spectacle of a full-scale battlefield.

Lead your warriors to battle... who wins? YOU decide.

Focusing on the brutal mechanics of medieval warcraft, at the new Visitor Centre visitors witness medieval warriors and armoured knights trying, sometimes in vain, to find a weakness in the opposing forces. The sights and sounds and emotions of compelling and realistic medieval skirmishes play out around the visitor, complete with battle tactics, weapons and armour.

The events of 1314 and the reality of medieval warfare is presented to visitors in full-on, life-size 3D. Robert the Bruce and King Edward II feature as visitors witness the two sides preparing for battle. Iconic moments in the Bannockburn story dramatically play out, including when Bruce encounters Sir Henry De Bohun with his axe on the first day of the battle. Visitors also 'meet' life-sized digital characters who were involved in the two-day battle including a Scottish spy, an English Knight and a Welsh Archer.

The 3D Bruce is based on the iconic 1960s Pilkington Jackson monument at the Bannockburn site. For *The Bruce*, Jackson modelled his head on measurements of his skull following the re-discovery of his remains in Dunfermline Abbey in 1818. The statue was meticulously researched to enable the new Centre to present a consistent image of the Scots King throughout the site. His voice is portrayed by Scottish actor James Cosmo, known for past roles in Highlander, Braveheart and most recently, Game of Thrones.

Every visit culminates in the chance to lead a division of medieval soldiers from Robert the Bruce and Edward II's armies in the dramatic Battle Game, taking command of the knights and soldiers who fought in 1314.

Who wins the battle of Bannockburn? The visitor decides, as they put their wits against their fellow visitors on a virtual battlefield.

Visitors are allocated an army division which appears on a massive 3D map of the Stirling landscape, giving a birds-eye view of the battle. At the visitors call archers attack, shiltrons stand strong, cavalry advance, all with the aim to destroy the opposing army, protecting their King, and on Edward II's side, to relieve Stirling Castle.

Interpretation designers Bright White Ltd conceptualised the Battle Game, and then assembled a team to build it, starting with games console company D3T Ltd as software developers. An authentic representation of the terrain of Stirling was possible because of aircraft-borne laser scanning of the Stirling area, combined with data compiled by Dr Richard Tipping of Stirling University who conducted the first ever environmental reconstruction of the 1314 landscape. Experts in 3D technology from the CDDV filled in detailing to create a stunning visual of both Stirling's 14th and 21st century landscapes.

Chris Walker, Managing Director at Bright White Ltd said: "The strands that had to be woven together to create the Battle Game are remarkable, we could not have asked for more from those involved; we never dreamt that the experts could know so much about an area of land 700 years ago, from the types of trees, the extents of land usage, through the state of the settlements even down to the weather on 23rd June 1314. It's this kind of behind-the-scenes rigour that the National Trust for Scotland is so good at, and thanks must go to D3T for creating us this excellent simulator, and CDDV for the illustrative map background that pulls the terrain aspects together."

Each experience of the Battle Game differs on the tactical decisions made by the visitor using the landscape, manpower and weaponry available to their division. As troops move over the map and casualties are suffered, the bar beside a division goes down. Once all men in a division are wiped out, the visitor is out of action.

Visitors on the Scots side need to decide whether to take the battle to the English, like Bruce, or concentrate on defending the castle. Archery and longbow divisions are effective against a schiltrons of spearmen, whereas a heavy cavalry division can be stopped dead. The English must attempt to avoid traps set by the Scots, and elements of the landscape that Bruce used to his advantage, like dense marshland and burns.

Chris Walker continued: "After four years of testing, seeing the Battle Game come to life is incredibly exciting. I love the look on test visitors' faces when they are told that we are going to split them into two groups representing the armies, and get them to fight each other. What works so well is that we tell them, 'the more you absorb in the first part of the visit, the better you'll do in battle', and suddenly everybody is engaged, gleaning as much as they can from the displays. It's an exciting way to learn about the battle, what Robert Bruce faced, and how remarkable his victory was."

The Battlemasters, a character designed exclusively for the new experience, are on hand to flesh out historical details, and throw in tips and advice before declaring the successful side, summarising the results of the action with an overview of how the battle played out in 1314, and revealing the 21st-century version of the landscape and locations of conflict.

Battlemaster Ned Sampson, 48 from Kent has experience in combat fighting in movie productions, including with the Clanranald Trust for Scotland, who worked on the behind-the-scenes fight choreography. Describing standing in a real-life battle to re-living this in 3D at the new Centre, he said: “The mental and visual stimulation that audiences experience is as close as you can get to the real thing. You can leave the new Battle of Bannockburn Visitor Centre and describe the events of 1314 based on experience rather than just historical fact. As the Battle Game heats up and there is little time to manoeuvre, you can feel the adrenalin, pressure and fear involved in a real medieval battle.”

Battlemaster David Weinczok, 24 from Nova Scotia left his native Canada to pursue his passion for Scottish history, he said: “The new Battle of Bannockburn Visitor Centre is remarkable, this level of personal interaction with history you cannot get anywhere else in the world at this point in time. Meet the people written out of history books from a Scottish local woman to a young Page and emphasise with their personal stories. Experience being in the shoes of a medieval soldier in the Battle Game and appreciate first-hand the tremendous loss and gain felt on both sides.”

Battlemaster Amy Cassells, 24 from Glasgow, has experience as a costumed tour guide and in acting, she said: “The Battle of Bannockburn Visitor Centre is the new face of technology. The atmosphere felt in the Battle Game from the competitiveness to the pressure, with 3D battle effects playing out around the visitor provides a truly immersive experience.”

David McAllister, Battle of Bannockburn Project Director at the National Trust for Scotland said: “After a visit to the new Battle of Bannockburn experience, people can walk away not just with extra knowledge, but with the experience and emotions of medieval battle. Visitors witness first-hand the pressure of making decisions that affect an entire army. Seeing the action play out it will stay with you, and it can be appreciated visually the tremendous disadvantage that the Scots army had, and how the tactics of Robert the Bruce led his army to victory.”

The Battlemaster costume was developed by the Battle of Bannockburn project team led by Learning Officer at the National Trust for Scotland, Tania Dron, she said: “Originally we planned on dressing our Battlemasters in medieval clothing but realised that didn’t really work. The Battlemasters use futuristic equipment to involve visitors in the past and we wanted their costumes to reflect that. We wanted the costume to be authoritative, androgynous and ageless, something which hinted at the silks and armour of a medieval knight but with a modern feel. We worked with a designer, Robert Ballantyne of Unsung Heroes in Bonnybridge, who has made armour pieces in the past. It may have also helped that he’s a sci-fi fan. The costume definitely has a timeless feel and our Battlemasters were all thrilled when they first put them on.”

Meet the Battlemasters and experience the Battle Game at the new Battle of Bannockburn Visitor Centre – tickets are on sale NOW. Find out more at www.battleofbannockburn.com