

|               |                           |                             |
|---------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Battle Name:  | Alford                    | Council area: Aberdeenshire |
| Date:         | 2 <sup>nd</sup> July 1645 |                             |
| UKFOC number: | 340                       |                             |

## ***ALFORD***

### **1 SUMMARY**

#### ***1.1 CONTEXT***

The Covenanter government of Scotland negotiated an alliance with the English parliament and entered the war in England in early 1644. The Scottish army had a significant impact in the campaign for the north of England, culminating in the royalists' dramatic defeat at Marston Moor (Yorkshire, July 1644). In response, Charles I appointed the Marquis of Montrose as his military commander in Scotland. On 28<sup>th</sup> August 1644 Montrose raised the royal standard and, with little more than 2000 troops, fought a campaign in which he had won a series of dramatic successes in the Highlands against the Covenanter government forces. Heavily outnumbered, he effectively exploited the terrain to outmanoeuvre his enemy, defeating the government forces at Tippermuir, Aberdeen, Fyvie, Inverlochry, and in the major action at Auldearn.

But there were still significant government forces in the field, under the experienced commander General Baillie. He played a game of cat and mouse with Montrose in the weeks after Auldearn, marching across Moray and Aberdeenshire. Finally, at the end of June, finding Montrose's army as depleted as his own, Baillie considered he could face the royalists in open battle. But Baillie's actions were heavily constrained by government interference. Not only did they interfere in tactical matters, they transferred 1000 of his best troops to a separate army under Lindsay, which then acted independently instead of combining against the royalists. Montrose now marched south, towards the Lowlands, leaving Baillie no option but to follow in pursuit (8).

#### ***1.2 ACTION***

On the 1<sup>st</sup> July, having crossed the river Don, Montrose chose very strong ground on which to fight, and then quartered his army for the night, according to tradition possibly at Asloun, 2 miles south west of the crossing at the Boat of Forbes (12).

On the morning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> July, Montrose deployed his army to engage Baillie as soon as he had crossed the river. Montrose placed most of his forces on the reverse slope of a hill, out of sight so as to encourage Baillie to advance. He deployed in standard formation with cavalry on both wings, each supported by small bodies of infantry, a common tactic for a force whose cavalry were outnumbered. Most authors, following Simpson, now identify the hill as Gallows Hill, with Leochel Burn and Alford Muir providing protection from outflanking on the left (west) (3) (12).

It is suggested that Baillie believed Montrose to be retreating and so he intended an outflanking move beyond the royalists, sending his vanguard of cavalry forward to cut off Montrose's potential for retreat. But Montrose countered this, advancing all his forces to the crest of the hill. This forced Baillie to deploy close to the Don in an area of marshy ground, using hedgerows and wet ditches to strengthen his position. He too deployed in standard form with two cavalry wings and with his infantry in the centre.

Montrose's right wing cavalry opened the engagement, although after initial success the numbers of Covenanter horse proved decisive and the royalists were forced back. But the royalist horse were then seconded by their infantry and under this combined attack the Covenanter cavalry broke and fled. The royalist left wing of cavalry had even more rapid success, driving off Baillie's right wing of horse.

Meanwhile the royalist infantry had advanced and began slowly Baillie's infantry back towards the river, the ill trained levies being no match for the Highland charge. Baillie reports that to receive the charge he advanced the half ranks so that his infantry were only 3 deep, compared to Montrose's 6 deep, to ensure he was not overwinged - the one detail that might suggest that Baillie's claim of being outnumbered in infantry was in fact correct. When the royalist cavalry then hit the infantry in the rear, as they were already pressed to the fore by the royalist foot, the Covenanter infantry were soon routed. With their formations broken, they suffered heavy casualties as the royalist horse pursued them in the rout, which became a bloody execution. While the main action probably lasted no more than an hour, the pursuit and execution continued into the early evening. The only royalist setback was the death of Lord Gordon, in the cavalry attack on the infantry (3) (8).

#### **Figure 1: Alford (1645) - battlefield plan**

### **1.3 TROOPS**

Baillie's army had been significantly depleted by the transfer of 1000 experienced troops to Lindsay's army immediately before Alford, a loss far from made up for by the addition of 400 - 1000 inexperienced local levies. Indeed Baillie considered his army significantly outnumbered when the action finally took place, though this may represent justification by a defeated commander (8). In contrast Montrose, although still lacking Macdonald's forces, had been re-joined by Lord Gordon and he considered his army strong enough to engage Baillie on favourable terms. Gardiner suggests that the two forces were perhaps equal in foot but the Covenanters slightly stronger in horse but some more recent authors suggest a significant Covenanter advantage.

#### **Numbers:**

Covenanter: 1800 foot, 800 horse (1); 2400 foot, 380 horse (3); but Baillie reckoned himself outnumbered 2:1 in foot and very slightly in horse (10); 2000 including 600 horse (11)

Royalist: 1800 foot, 400 horse (1); 1800 foot, 500 horse (3); 2000 including 250 horse (11).

#### **Losses:**

Covenanter: The figure of 1600 killed (2) seems too high a percentage of the total 2600 on the field. A figure of 700 is suggested in some modern accounts (12)

Royalist: light.

#### **1.4 COMMEMORATION & INTERPRETATION**

According to Martin there is a battlefield memorial on the hillside beside the cemetery, which is called the Gordon Stone, on the site where the royalist cavalry commander Lord Gordon died in the battle (4). In fact this un-inscribed stone has been lost beneath a modern rubbish tip on the edge of Alford (12). The stone might in fact be a prehistoric standing stone of earlier date, for such associations are seen on other battlefields such as Homildon Hill, and there are certainly other prehistoric standing stones in the area (13).

## **2 ASSESSMENT**

### **2.1 LOCATION**

There is considerable uncertainty as to the exact location where the battle was fought. Two main alternative locations are given:

#### Traditional site

Already by 1869, presumably reflecting local tradition although possibly based on the analysis by Napier, the site of the battle was placed to the north of the present Alford village, in what is now Murray Park (10). Gardiner followed this interpretation, placing the hill on which Montrose deployed as lying immediately west of the modern A944, on and beneath what is now the northern edge of Alford village. Baillie is said to have crossed the Don via Mountgarrie ford immediately north of Alford (8). Gardiner, who visited the battlefield with a local guide, provides a map showing an area of wet ground with a causeway visible crossing it which he identified as he marshy ground where Baillie deployed. Gardner saw the problem for his interpretation of Wishart's description of a second marsh behind Montrose. Subsequently and quite unreasonably, Lang (1903) claims, in support of the Gardiner site, that Wishart was wrong.

Gardiner's location is followed in general terms by Reid, who places the action between Gardiner's site and Gallows Hill (3). He is followed by Saddler (5).

#### Gallows Hill

In 1919 Simpson reviewed the topographical evidence and contradicted Gardiner, concluding that the battle was in fact fought on and to the north of Gallows Hill, between it and the Boat of Forbes. He has Baillie crossing the river Don at the Boat of Forbes. He also identifies the 'village' of Alford with the kirk of Alford, to the west of the Leochel. The steep hill overhanging Alford, mentioned by Wishart as where Montrose deployed, poses a problem for the Gardiner/traditional site, for the only hill in the area which overlooks the buildings around Alford kirk, is Gallows Hill. Moreover only this hill seems to provide sufficient of a back slope, in the headwaters of the Knowehead Burn, to have enabled Montrose to hide the majority of his deployment from Baillie's view.

Montrose's position was on rising ground with a 'marsh, intersected by ditches and pools, which secured him in the rear from the cavalry. This was quite separate from the marshy area, including pools and ditches, which Baillie had to cross immediately south of the river and where he halted to deploy. The latter was clearly a strong position for with Baillie 'intrenched among deep ditches and marshes' Montrose was not willing to attack, while Baillie was equally unwilling to storm the hill. Simpson identifies the former marsh with the Muir of Alford immediately west of Gallows Hill at the bottom of a steep slope. Thus Simpson places Montrose on the Gallows Hill and has Baillie crossing the Don at Forbes, following the Suie Road (9).

Simpson is followed broadly by Rogers, Brander, Seymour, Fairbairn, Marren, Guest & Guest, and Bennett. Today the Ordnance Survey map also shows a battlefield location on the Gallows Hill site. Though Gallows Hill has become associated with the battle in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and is identified as an alternative name on the battlefield database, there is in fact no earlier use of the name in association with the battle.

#### Re-assessment

The mapping from Skinner and Taylor in 1776 shows the Suie Road, which both armies surely used in their march south, following a clear route across the Don via the Boat of Forbes, while there is no evidence of a significant road approaching the present Mountgarie crossing. This does not preclude Baillie having used a subsidiary crossing but it makes it far less likely. According to local information the river was not easily fordable, even in reasonable conditions, other than at a few fording places and so the potential crossing places are likely to be few (8).

Also, although it is true that modern Alford was a creation of the railway from the late 1850s, Alford on the 1776 road map is what is now known as Balflugh Castle (14), just to the south east of the modern settlement of Alford. This might in part resolve the problem with which Simpson undermines Gardner's interpretation.

According to tradition, in the Feight Faulds many of the Covenanters were cut down, while the Buckie Burn is said to have flowed red with blood (9). There is also the Gordon Stone which is taken as representing the location where Lord Gordon fell. These locations, if they are to be accepted as genuine battle associations, pose some problems for the Gallows Hill site, unless the action is seen as flowing not northward but north eastward towards modern Alford, and this is where Raid places the action, with these features broadly in the area of the rout.

However, it is extremely difficult from the available geological mapping, to locate an area of potentially marshy ground on the Simpson site, which would accord with that described in the contemporary accounts of the action. The alluvial cover in this area appears extremely narrow, with rising ground reaching quite close towards the river. In contrast, although the geological mapping provides little support, there is the impression from the contours and the stream courses, that there may be a palaeochannels of the Don running east-west through Murray and Haughton Parks, which might provide the marshy ground of

the traditional site, where Baillie would have deployed. It is here that, with local advice, Gardiner identified the marshland.

But in fact there are even greater uncertainties. A great deal actually hangs upon which of the two roads from the Bridge of Forbes the royalist army was marching, if the roads were the same in 1645 as are shown by Skinner & Taylor in 1776. Most accounts since Simpson have assumed that it was along the Suie road to Brechin. But a very different interpretation might be placed upon the accounts if it was actually to the south east along the Aberdeen road, which is where Montrose was to march immediately after the victory and where Gordon's funeral was held. If it was this route then Knowehead does provide a hill with a backslope facing north westward and cutting across to the Aberdeen road. Here Montrose could perhaps have deployed with most of his forces out of Baillie's view. This hill overlooks the Alford location of 1776. This would place Baillie to the north of modern Alford with the Gordon Stone and Feight Faulds in the right place, within the potential marshland immediately north of Alford, where Gardiner identified it. With Montrose making the attack it would have been in just that area in and to the north of modern Alford, in the area of the Feight Faulds, that the engagement would have taken place. That is on the traditional site of the battle.

While the crude foregoing re-interpretation may prove wrong, it demonstrates that there are a number of different ways of interpreting the battle, in the absence of detailed reconstruction of the historic terrain and investigation of the battle archaeology.

## **2.2 PRIMARY SOURCES**

Alford is a reasonably well documented action, with three main contemporary or near contemporary accounts. Wishart, although not present at the battle, was Montrose's chaplain and so had access to detailed information on the battle and battlefield from the key combatants on the royalist side. He provides the most detailed description of the terrain of the battlefield and the way in which deployments and action fitted into that terrain. Baillie provides an important Covenanter perspective on the battle, though his account may inevitably be coloured by this need to justify his defeat. A third account providing detail is that by Gordon. A brief assessment of the primary sources is provided in Marren, 217-8 (12).

## **2.3 SECONDARY WORKS**

Gardiner provides an unusually detailed account for Alford, having visited the battlefield, providing a map of the terrain with local information and discussing the reliability of troop numbers in the primary accounts. In 1919 Simpson reassessed the Gardiner interpretation, from both a detailed examination of the ground and a reworking of the primary sources. He moved the action to the west of the modern village of Alford, onto the northern slopes of Gallows Hill. Most authors follow Simpson, with the exception of Reid, who broadly follows Gardiner.

Marren's analysis, which follows Simpson, is by far the most detailed and well referenced of the modern discussions of Alford, providing a good assessment of the primary evidence

and of the problems of the Gardiner and Simpson interpretations, even if there is still far more doubt over the exact location of the action than Marren allows.

The battle still needs a single modern account which reproduces in full all the primary accounts, reassesses all the secondary discussions, and places the events within the historic terrain.

#### **2.4 BATTLE ARCHAEOLOGY**

There are no modern reports of archaeological evidence related to the battle. The only potential link is the report in the *Statistical Account* that a skeleton was discovered with a sword and an Elizabeth shilling bogged in a marsh at the foot of the Green Hill near Bogloustler beside the Bloody Faulds (9). However Bloody Faulds lies four miles to the south east of Alford (at 362470,813780), and although it could potentially be related to scattered action in the rout, it cannot with any security be related to the battle of Alford at all.

#### **2.5 BATTLEFIELD HISTORIC TERRAIN**

The battle was fought on the lower slopes of a hill in what appears to have been in part open ground but with the Covenanter army exploiting enclosures and ditches in a boggy area.

The Ordnance Survey 1<sup>st</sup> edition six inch mapping of 1869 provides clues as to various potentially boggy areas, to the north and north east of Gallows Hill, which are not clear from the geological mapping, but two broad areas of potentially boggy land are around Balfluig Castle and north of Alford village. It is likely that Roy's mapping of the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century (not consulted in this assessment) would provide far more detail prior to more modern drainage.

In the present mapping, the location of Feight Faulds is taken from the Ordnance Survey first edition 6 inch mapping, while the Gordon Stone is very approximately located from a plan in Brander 1993.

#### **2.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BATTLE**

This was the first victory that Montrose achieved against an able, highly experienced Covenanter general. It brought the Highlands more securely within his power, and left the way was open for him to march south, recruiting a yet larger force to challenge the government in the lowlands. However the battle was also important for the loss of Lord Gordon. This was a substantial blow to Montrose's campaign, as Gordon was a key supporter in both political and military terms - the one best able to rally the Gordons and other important forces to the royalist cause (12).

Another Montrose victory in Scotland was the only good news for an increasingly beleaguered king, as the royalist cause south of the border collapsed following the defeat at Naseby, followed soon after by the destruction of the last substantial royalist field army in England, at Langport. The victory encouraged Charles's will to continue the fight, against

the better guidance of Rupert and other of his close supporters, with the continued hope that he could somehow unite with Montrose to snatch victory against all the odds in England, on the back of Montrose's success in Scotland.

## **2.7 CURRENT STATE OF DEVELOPMENT**

The village of Alford has developed close to the battlefield since the arrival of the railway in the late 1850s. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the settlement has expanded across a wide area and has encroached significantly upon the traditional site of the battlefield. The Gordon Stone has also been buried beneath a rubbish tip and part of the Feight Faults has been built over.

In contrast the northern part of the traditional site lies within parkland and has not apparently been substantially affected by land use change. However no data on the extent of any mineral extraction has been collected for this assessment, a limitation that needs urgent resolution.

## **2.8 CURRENT DESIGNATIONS**

There are no designed landscapes on the Scottish Natural Heritage data set. However a substantial part of the traditional site does lie within the what appears to be parkland associated with Haughton House, where parkland already existed by 1776.

There are no Conservation Areas or SSSIs on the battlefield, but one scheduled monument, a prehistoric stone circle, lies immediately north of Greystone. There are a number of listed buildings in the general area but none appears directly relevant to the battlefield.

Martin does not define an area for conservation suggesting the battlefield is poorly preserved (4). This is clearly not a valid assessment.

## **2.9 POTENTIAL**

The uncertainties about the exact location of the action at Alford are substantial, yet the documentary record and the topographical detail they provide are exceptionally good. They should enable a resolution of many uncertainties and, when viewed within exactly the correct historic terrain they offer the potential for a detailed and clear understanding of the battle and battlefield.

What is required is detailed research to reconstruct the historic terrain, not only of marsh and enclosures but also the communication network of 1645. There will then be the need to place the detailed accounts of the action within that terrain, using the topographical clues in the accounts. There is also a need for reasonably accurate calculation of the frontages of the armies to facilitate such re-interpretation. The frontages shown by most authors on their plans are far greater than the figures suggested in the texts, with for example Marren suggesting 800 yards for Baillie's frontage but his plan showing double that. Once this work has been carried out the resulting hypotheses can then be tested by systematic sampling of the battle archaeology, using the rapidly developing methodology for battlefield study.

If the Gallows Hill site is correct then the greater part of the battlefield is intact and it may be expected to have a very high archaeological potential, both in terms of battle archaeology and historic terrain. If however the traditional site is correct, in one form or other, then the potential will have been substantially compromised by the development of Alford in the later 19<sup>th</sup> and especially late 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, in those parts of the site which have not yet been developed, given there was a substantial firefight, there should be a great deal of well preserved battle archaeology in the form of unstratified lead bullet distribution, which can accurately position aspects of the fight and unlock much of the detail of the action. Exceptional survival of battle archaeology may also be expected in very restricted areas of the battlefield, assuming that modern destruction through development and 18<sup>th</sup> century and later drainage has not been too effective, for there must be high potential for waterlogged deposits as Baillie's forces were deployed in and/or pushed back through boggy ground. To refine the potential of survival it will be important that all landfill, mineral extraction and other ground disturbance is mapped.

## **2.10 THREATS**

The level of the threat to the battlefield is highly dependent upon which is the correct location of the battlefield. The traditional site is close to Alford village, where there has been substantial development and that pressure continues. If the action was concentrated on and to the north or north east of Gallows Hill then the development pressures are far more distant. Yet even in this scenario the route is likely to have taken the action through the 'Feight Faulds' and the area of potential development around Alford.

There is therefore an urgent need to resolve the uncertainties, through detailed investigation using the developing methodology of battlefield archaeology. Until such work is done there is inadequate information available to enable the archaeological impact of any planning decisions in and around the village of Alford to be determined. Given the difficulties in battle archaeology of interpreting small, isolated areas of investigation in the absence of an overall study, it is essential that the battlefield is not lost through piecemeal development with small scale evaluation restricted to the development sites themselves.

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