

BANNOCKBURN: THE FORGOTTEN BATTLEFIELD

The purpose of this note is to set down the topographic evidence that may account for the “traditional” site for the Battle of Bannockburn. It is not intended to make a fresh case for the traditional battlefield, or enter the battlefield debate. The object is to ensure the 19th century topographic evidence and accounts of battle related “finds” are kept on record.

Battlefield research often moves battlefields, but an unfortunate consequence is that all the evidence for the former location drops out of sight, when it might be useful to keep this information in mind. This writer has actively defended the “traditional” site for the Battle of Northampton in 1460. It was moved in 1995 on the grounds that as it was raining on the day of the battle, it couldn't have been fought on the meadows. The chroniclers who stated that it was fought on the meadows are now deemed unreliable, the 19th century “archaeology” is discounted, and the former battlefield, since extensively redeveloped, is unprotected.

The situation at Bannockburn is very similar to Northampton. At the time of the 600th anniversary of the battle in 1914 the entire battlefield shifted two miles north-east (but has recently shifted back west a bit). The chroniclers, fortunately, are still all on board, as the discrepancies have been “resolved”. The traditional site really was tactically unsound. And in the late 70s the M9 was ploughed right through the middle of it, destroying any likely evidence, were the file to be re-opened. After all, it wasn't a battlefield anymore.....

One obvious concern is whether it really was traditional, or a fabrication of 19th century Scottish historians trying to fit the story onto a map. A far greater worry though should be whether the locals tried too hard to cater for early 19th century heritage tourists: “some persons in the neighbourhood of St Ninians still act as Cicerones to curious strangers, and pretend to point out the spots on which the various events of the battle occurred” (1). But the Second Statistical Account avoids describing the battle, leaving this to the many published accounts. It may be that the gentry and other higher echelons were bored with battlefield tourists. That then raises the possibility that the landed gentry offered decoy sites to avoid trespass on their more sensitive lands.

Another problem was that the 19th century accounts relied mainly on Barbour, and only seemed to be concerned with the Scottish battlefield logistics. Where the English camped before the battle is left extremely vague. Moreover it seems to have been assumed that the English would never have entered the carselands: “the history of the battle of Bannockburn, gives sufficient evidence that the carses, in the reign of Robert Bruce, formed an almost impassable morass” (2). When the other chroniclers came into play, especially Gray, the emphasis shifted to the English camp on the carse, with the Scots left to run around after the English.

Hence the content of this note is limited to historical topography and reports of archaeological evidence in the 19th century. The important topographic element is the New Park, which formed the focus of 19th century accounts. However did 19th century commentators have a better understanding of the boundaries of the New Park, or were they just guessing, based on the location of the farmhouse of that name? The best known 19th century depiction of the battlefield is the 1st and 2nd edition Ordnance Survey 6 inch and 25 inch plans, which showed the battlefield alongside the road running west-south-west from St Ninians (Gateside Road), within four hundred metres north-west of New Park Farm.

New Park

The Rev Thomas Miller of Bonnybridge, near Falkirk, writing in 1914, got into great difficulties trying to define the New Park from documents (3). He was using abridged 18th century sasines, which sometimes help, if they describe ancient land units retained for legal reasons. Mostly they are either vague, or solely concerned with recent divisions. Miller's main difficulty was with the western boundary of the park, which in the 18th century may simply have been the boundary between New Park Farm and the wooded policies around Polmaise Castle, on Gillies Hill. White, writing in 1871 (4), based on several visits and no documents, postulated that the park encompassed the Gillies Hill woods. This speculation is actually quite sound.

There is a reference to the enclosure of all or part of the circuit of the park in 1289 (5) amounting to 400 perches. If we use a perch of 5.5 yards that is equivalent to 2200 yards (2012 metres). If that was the full circuit it would amount to about 32 hectares, but it may have been much larger, possibly not dissimilar to the King's (or old) Park, to the north (132 hectares, including later additions, in 1956 –note 6). In 1328 Robert I granted the old and new parks, Kokschote near Kirkcoun (St Ninian's) and Kepnmade to Adam Barbour, on a lease evidently for two lives, for the service of one archer. Kokschote is Coxet Hill, NS 789914. Kepnmade is less readily determined but is separate from New Park in several Murray of Touchadam deeds (7). Another grant by David II in 1370 (8) gave the New Park to Alexander Porter, reserving the venison to the King, but allowing him to cut down trees in the park for his buildings, which confirms it was wooded parkland.

Miller also mentions a 1533 charter for Torbrekkis (Torbrex), which gives the lands surrounding it: Cammysbarroun (Cambusbarron), Newpark, Lovylandis, lie Kirkland and Southfield. Southlands lay south of the road to Cambusbarron (Laurel Hill NS 789925 and Clifford Park NS 794924), and Lovylandis (Livilands) were east, along the old road to Stirling, including where is now the infirmary and as far south as Town Burn NS 800915 (9). Although Coxet Hill isn't named here, if it is also excluded from the New Park, the park is clearly south-west of Torbrex, that is, towards Gillies Hill.

New Park Farm at NS 789907 may be a relatively modern name. On Grassom's Map (1817) and Thomson's of 1832 it is just named "Park", and situated north-west of the mills of Park; on Roy's Map of 1747-55 the general area is labelled "Parks". The farmstead location is old, but it need not have any relation to the "New Park".

Halberts and Milton's bogs – some possible archaeology.

White first saw these in 1830, when they were covered and glistening with water, and fringed with reeds and sedges (10). According to the First Statistical Account in the 1790s "some catthrops, or sharp-pointed irons, have been found in Milton-bog". Campbell, before 1845 (11), describes something closely akin to Barbour's waxcomb of pits at Halbert's Bog, when the bog was being drained, given below:

"We were also present while the drainers were throwing open the pits, mentioned by Barbour, at the west end of the Halbert marsh. I have no doubt that the whole space in front of the line, from that marsh to the syke, was covered with these pits; at least they were found to extend as far in that direction as the drain had been carried".

“The pits consisted of circular holes about eighteen inches deep, very close to one another, with a sharp pointed stake in the centre of each. The stakes were in a state of decomposition, and offered no resistance to the spade; but the bark was sufficiently intact to enable us to see that they had been made chiefly of hazel. There were some swords, spear-heads, horse-shoes, horse hair (the latter generally mixed with a whitish animal matter resembling tallow) found in them.”

Lt Donald Campbell disputed Patrick Tytler’s 1828 account, causing him to modify it for the third edition in 1845. He pointed out the weaknesses in Tytler’s configuration, which was close to the Bannockburn between Greystale and Borestone, as this was too vulnerable to an English cavalry charge across the burn, and exposed at the right and left flanks. But also he describes a deep syke on the west side of Coxet Hill passing west of Halbert Bog, which at the same time was being filled in and levelled. He suggested that this could break up the line during a cavalry attack.

Campbell seems to have been the first person to shift the battlefield east, arguing that it should be east of the marshes, but this created too narrow a space for the Scottish forces to assemble, and left the passage towards Cambusbarron, as a route to Stirling Castle open, bar the effect of any pits and other evils. But Campbell’s information about the pits suggests they may have extended westwards towards Graystale, luring Edward’s forces to cross the shallower stretch of the Bannockburn and ride into a trap.

Granted, what he interpreted as the pits might just be old fence posts, and the iron objects something mediocore, as also applies to the sharp-pointed irons mentioned in the First Statistical Account. But two such claims together is some degree of corroboration, and the Milton Bog finds are alluded to in other texts. It also demonstrates that these finds were fairly common knowledge, and possibly contributed to traditional ideas about the battlefield. Morris in 1914 recounts this story (12), but was quite agitated about the description of the pits: “Were no Scots a century ago keen enough to follow up the question and see if Campbell was right? But the account is suspicious, for we know nothing of Campbell, and, though he may have honestly believed he had found the pits, he has no warrant”.

Torwood

According to the First Statistical Account for St Ninian’s (p405) “the boundaries of the Torwood are much contracted, and that part of it which lay in this parish, is almost entirely removed”.

The distance of Torwood Forest from the battle site is quite critical to interpretations of the chroniclers, and some modern texts refer to it as six kilometres away. Was it closer in Bruce’s time? This writer has searched for clues in a few documentary sources, without getting an extent, but it may be worth pursuing; likewise place-name evidence could be examined.

The English camp

Although apparently implying an overnight camp the night before day 1, Nimmo places it about Upper Bannockburn and the moor of Plean, and refers to broken pottery and marks of fire on rocks near the Roman road (13) . Of course these finds are meaningless, and may have been wishful thinking.

Much debate has arisen over Sir Thomas Grey's reference to "outr Bannockburn", in Maxwell's translation, that Edward's army "had debouched upon a plain near the water of Forth beyond Bannockburn, an evil, deep, wet marsh" (14). It has led to attempts to convey the English forces northwards across Bannockburn and onto the carse, where they spent the night.

It may be mere coincidence, but Upper or Over Bannockburn, towards Plean, is referred to in some medieval documents as "Ouchterbannoch alias Bannockburn" (15). The location could be towards Bannockburn Muir, rather than across the Bannockburn, or towards Skeoch as Miller suggested. This could still be described as towards the Forth, which after all meanders south-east.

Carse

In the context of the traditional site, it was assumed the English wouldn't try to reach Stirling over the carse. It has not been easy to find useful descriptions of what they might have been like before 18th century reclamation.

A footnote to the second edition of Nimmo's History of Stirlingshire, p579-80 (16), quotes Lt Gen Fletcher-Campbell in 1793 saying "from the name of Dryfield we may suppose that the carse ground was subject formerly to floods, before the streams were confined and the waters led off." He recounts a meltwater flood some years before, when "a great part of the carse became a lake; in the midst of which trees and farmhouses were just distinguished".

The "dryfield" according to both the First and Second Statistical Accounts for St Ninians is the middle division of the parish," which rises suddenly and considerably above the level of the carse" (raised beach), and "occupied by much the most extensive part of the parish". There seems to be a misunderstanding in some texts, attributed to the Statistical Accounts, that dryfield only refers to the raised beach.

The First Statistical Account for St Ninian's mentions the areas prone to flood, such as Bolfofnought (NS 823936), while the New Statistical Account says "one great object is to carry off all stagnant water, and keep the land dry. To accomplish this, not only large and clear ditches are necessary, but wedge or ridge draining is very extensively practiced". The procedures are explained at length. Also it is stated "a few patches of moss still remain in this parish, but in general, the corses are in a state of high culture, and produce abundant crops".

We cannot readily surmise from how they appear now, what they looked like in the 14th century.

Conclusions

The purpose of this account is to put on record information that might have influenced the perception of a traditional battlefield. Especially in heritage databases, when events or lost antiquities are attributed new locations, the old location is dropped from the database along with all the related records, or else the records are appended to the new site, even when contradictory.

No attempt has been made to postulate battle tactics in relation to the traditional battlefield, except where mentioned in references, and this note is not intended to propose a new battlefield or reinstate the traditional one.

However it is hoped that this information is kept on record, wherever applicable, to ensure the traditional site is not forgotten. In particular “archaeology” such as Campbell’s pits, should be kept on record. Despite many metal detecting surveys, investigations of geophysical anomalies, sections and test pits throughout the modern battlefield, scarcely anything from the time of Bannockburn is turning up. Can we afford to ignore Campbell’s claims?

The signs are that the location and extent of the New Park and other land divisions were well known to people in the Stirling area. Therefore it is proposed that there is sufficient evidence that this was a traditional battlefield site in the true sense. It is accepted that such traditions can still be erroneous.

There is scope for further research on all the aspects discussed. In particular it should be possible to fully define New Park. Modern representations of the battlefield have the New Park including Coxet Hill and Borestone, and extending to the A872 and beyond. Unless there is evidence to substantiate that the New Park extended this far, this shouldn’t be happening.

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6th August 2014

Notes

1 Kerr, Robert (1811) “History of Scotland during the reign of Robert I” vol 1 p496

2 First Statistical Account, St Ninians Parish p388

3 Miller, Rev T (1914) “The site of the New Park in relation to the Battle of Bannockburn” Scottish Historical Review” vol XII p60-75.

4 White, Robert (1871) “A History of the Battle of Bannockburn AD 1314” p31

5 This is in Exchequer Rolls Vol I (1289, p38) cited in Miller and elsewhere; can never seem to find a copy of Volume I.

6 CERWG Final Report on Kings Park, Stirling

7 NAS RH 1/2/910 on-line abstract of document in Stirling Archives; Reg Mag Sig II No1195 (in 1475); Reg Mag Sig VIII No 636 (in 1624)

8 NAS RH 1/2/913 on-line abstract of document in Stirling Archives

9 Reg Mag Sig III No 1317 (1533); Ronald, James (1899) Landmarks of Old Stirling, p130; Charters & Documents Relating to Stirling

10 White, R (1871) as note 4, Appendix A

11 Campbell, D (1845) “Position of the Scottish Army at the Battle of Bannockburn”, note BB in Tytler, Patrick F (1828) 3rd Edition (1845) only: “History of Scotland” p483-487

12 Morris, John E (1914) “Bannockburn” Cambridge University Press

13 Nimmo, Rev William (1817) 2nd edition “History of Stirlingshire” p211

14 Maitland Club (1836) “Scalacronica” by Sir Thomas Gray, p141-2; Maxwell, Sir Herbert (1907) Translation of Scalacronica, p 54.

15 Reg Mag Sig II no 3363 (in 1509); Reg Mag sig VI No 1243 (in 1601)

16 Nimmo, Rev William (1817) as note 13, page 579-580