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Dunkeld Cathedral and battle site -  
Dunkeld And Dowally, Perth And  
Kinross



by R.W. Billings

Engraved by J.H.L.

## THE WEST FRONT OF DUNKELD CATHEDRAL.

Edinburgh. Published by William Blackwood & Sons.

### An Urban Battle and a Cathedral Under Fire

*We have arrived at August and the 'Age of Clans and Clearances' is upon us, so why do we find ourselves at a semi-ruinous medieval Cathedral? Nestled among the hills on the banks of the River Tay, this would have been a beautiful spot even before the creation of the designed landscape of which the cathedral is now part. Yet Dunkeld Cathedral was the site of a pivotal battle between Cameronian Regiment (the 26th Foot) and the Jacobite clans. This was an urban battle and that was perhaps key to the Cameronian regiment's success.*

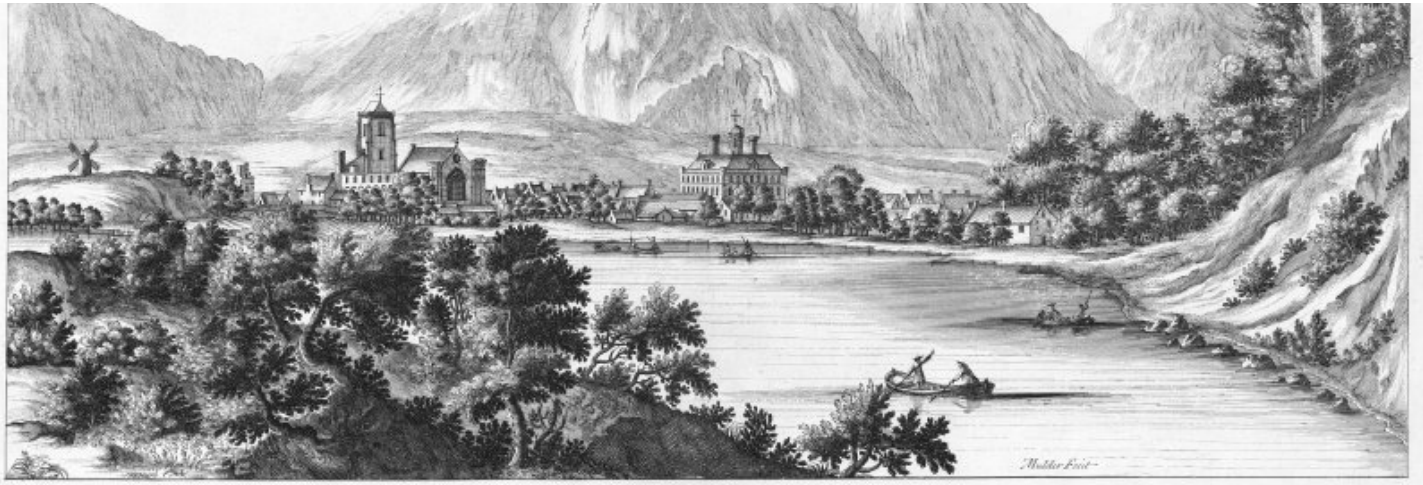
*Dunkeld was an incredibly important triumph for the Government forces. It occurred just a month after the Jacobites' decisive victory at Killecrankie on 27th July 1689. Had the Jacobites won at Dunkeld, the road to Perth would have been open to them, with Stirling beyond. This close-quartered and violent battle turned the tide in favour of King William, but it scarred the town, much of which was burned to the ground.*

*There are few indications at the site today of what took place here on 21st August 1689 - save the shot holes in the east gable of the cathedral and the initials 'I.G.' together with the date '1689' mysteriously carved into a reused grave marker. This is now displayed in the west tower. Lieutenant Colonel William Cleland, commander of the Covenanter regiment, is buried in the nave, while he and his regiment are also commemorated at the site.*

*We do have some idea of how the cathedral precinct and the town looked at around this time. Slezer's Prospect of the Town of Dunkeld, produced just a few years after the battle, shows the south side of the cathedral and buildings which are no longer extant, including the remains of the Bishop's Palace. The houses which occupy the site on either side of the High Street recall The Vicar's Close at Wells: tight rows of buildings, the plan of which is preserved to the present day; while Dunkeld House, demolished in the 1800s, stood to the north of the cathedral. Much of the town was destroyed during the battle, which was located around the north of the cathedral. Thereafter, a new town was built to the east, conveniently opening up the view from Dunkeld House to the cathedral and the river. Fortunately, the cathedral building itself appears to have fared rather better and looks much the same now as it does in Slezer's engraving.*

*The potential for the survival of archaeological evidence of the battle is high. The old town site has been surveyed by The University of Glasgow and traces of it have been located, while those who died during the fighting are probably buried near the cathedral.*





### 'These wretches in the fire'

*On 17th August 1689, the Cameronian Regiment under Cleland arrived in Dunkeld, newly formed and without battle experience. Cleland himself was a veteran of Drumclog and Bothwell Bridge, but his regiment had been formed only four months before. The men were enlisted from the United Societies, who had become known as 'Cameronians', after the Reverend Richard Cameron, a militant Covenanter, who had been killed at the battle of Airds Moss in 1680. They were expected to hold the town at all costs, a daunting task, as thousands of Jacobites were heading south from Killiecrankie. The latter had lost their commander, John Graham of Claverhouse, (known to history as 'Bonnie Dundee'), but had nevertheless won the battle. Their new leader, Colonel Cannon, with far superior numbers, had every reason to be confident, although his military skills did not match those of his predecessor.*

*Dunkeld, for all its beauty, is not obviously defensible. It sits in a dip between hills from which it is readily overlooked and the town had no walls. Nevertheless, Cleland ordered his men to fortify the cathedral precinct and Dunkeld House.*

*The battle began at seven o'clock on the morning of 21 August. The Jacobites attacked the town from all sides. Cleland was mortally wounded within the hour and command passed to Major James Henderson, who was killed almost immediately. Captain George Munro then took overall command, while his position at the Cross was taken by Lt. Henry Stewart of Livingstone, who was killed when this position was rushed. The Cameronians were forced back to the cathedral, Dunkeld House and three houses. Pikemen and halberdiers were attacked by Jacobite swords, but their method of fighting was not effective in an urban setting and the bodies of fallen soldiers hindered their advance. Cameronian musketeers entered the houses and fired on them. The buildings were set alight by both sides - the Cameronians to kill the Jacobites hiding within and the Jacobites to push back their assailants. Thick smoke engulfed the town but as the Cameronians were pushed back to the point where they would be forced to make a last stand, the Jacobites retreated. Whether this was due to exhaustion, fear of reinforcements, or terror of their opponents is not clear.*

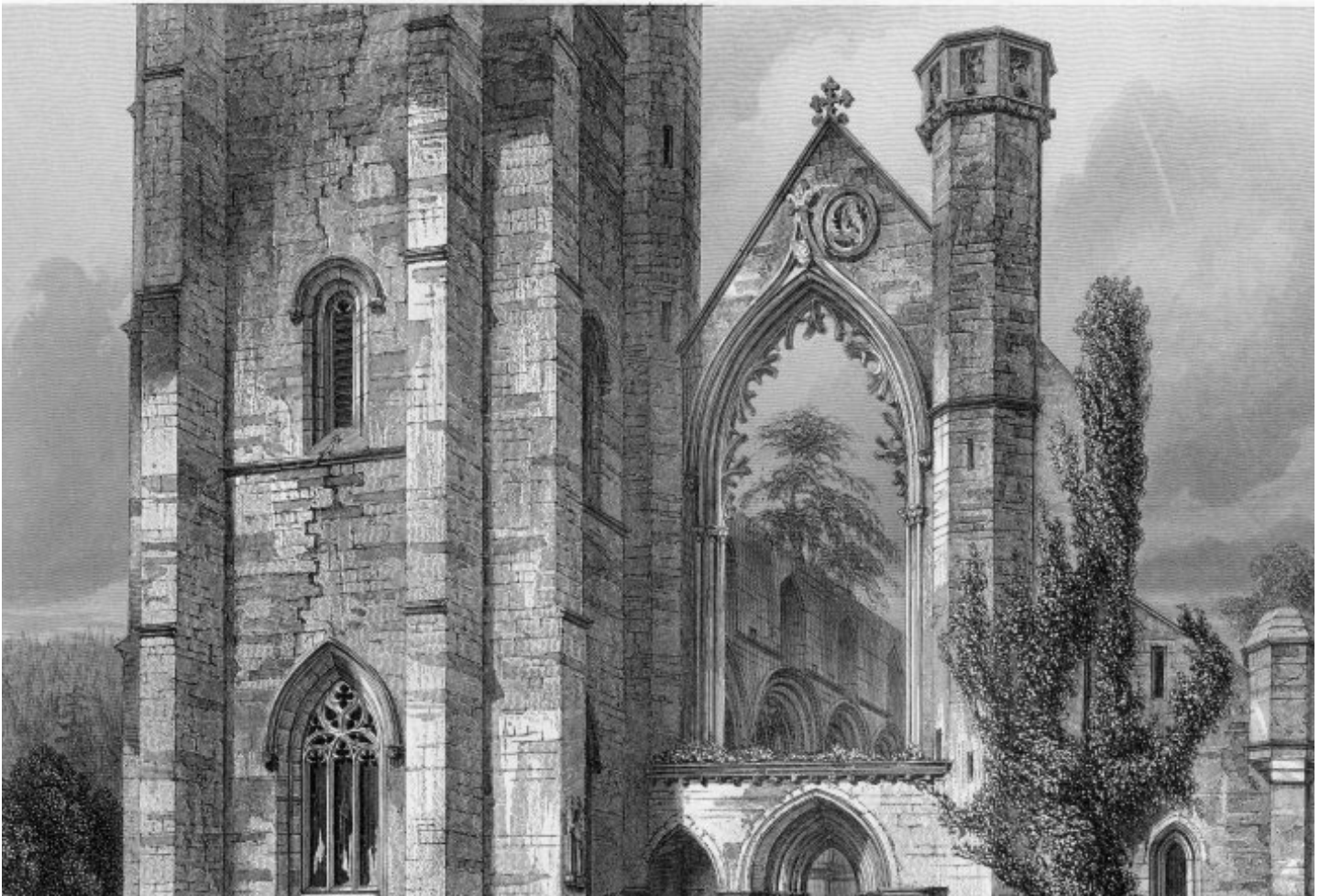
*Today many of the houses in Dunkeld are cared for by The National Trust for Scotland. The eastern part of the former cathedral is roofed and remains an active church, while the western nave and tower are cared for by Historic Environment Scotland. Much of the description above is taken from Historic Environment Scotland's Battlefield Inventory, but there has been no rigorous modern assessment of the battle in recent times. However, it is documented in primary and secondary sources; while also being recalled in poetry, song and oral history.*

Kirsty Owen - Senior Archaeology Manager



<https://canmore.org.uk/site/27156/dunkeld-cathedral-street-dunkeld-cathedral>  
<http://maps.nls.uk/view/91169168>

<https://www.historicenvironment.scot/advice-and-support/listing-scheduling-and-designations/battlefields/>





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