The Inventory of Historic Battlefields – Battle of Alford

The Inventory of Historic Battlefields is a list of nationally important battlefields in Scotland. A battlefield is of national importance if it makes a contribution to the understanding of the archaeology and history of the nation as a whole, or has the potential to do so, or holds a particularly significant place in the national consciousness. For a battlefield to be included in the Inventory, it must be considered to be of national importance either for its association with key historical events or figures; or for the physical remains and/or archaeological potential it contains; or for its landscape context. In addition, it must be possible to define the site on a modern map with a reasonable degree of accuracy.

The aim of the Inventory is to raise awareness of the significance of these nationally important battlefield sites and to assist in their protection and management for the future. Inventory battlefields are a material consideration in the planning process. The Inventory is also a major resource for enhancing the understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of historic battlefields, for promoting education and stimulating further research, and for developing their potential as attractions for visitors.

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ALFORD
Alternative Names: None
2 July 1645
Local Authority: Aberdeenshire
NGR centred: NJ 567 162
Date of Addition to Inventory: 21 March 2011
Date of last update: 14 December 2012

Overview and Statement of Significance
The Battle of Alford is significant as one of Montrose’s most notable victories in his campaign within Scotland on behalf of Charles I. The victory for the Royalists against an experienced and well-prepared Covenanter force further enhanced Montrose’s reputation, and left the Royalists without any organised opposition in the Highlands. Montrose’s success also convinced Charles to continue the fight in England, in spite of how poorly the war was going for him south of the border.

The battle was fought between the Scottish Royalists and the Covenanter Government forces during the Wars of the Three Kingdoms. It was the fifth battle of the Marquis of Montrose’s Scottish campaign against the Covenanter army, on behalf of Charles I of England.

The battle ended in a victory for Montrose and opened the way to the lowlands for the Royalist army. The victory was a great boost for Charles I, whose cause in England was faltering badly after a crushing defeat at Naseby in June 1645. In Scotland, the effect of the battle was to expose the weakness in the Covenanter army, where the commander was subject to the orders of the powerful Committee of Estates.

Inventory Boundary
The Inventory boundary defines the area in which the main events of the battle are considered to have taken place (landscape context) and where associated physical remains and archaeological evidence occur or may be expected (specific qualities). The landscape context is described under battlefield landscape: it encompasses areas of fighting, key movements of troops across the landscape and other important locations, such as the positions of camps or vantage points. Although the landscape has changed since the time of the battle, key characteristics of the terrain at the time of the battle can normally still be identified, enabling events to be more fully understood and interpreted in their landscape context. Specific qualities are described under physical remains and potential: these include landscape features that played a significant role in the battle, other physical remains, such as enclosures or built structures, and areas of known or potential archaeological evidence.
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The Inventory boundary for the Battle of Alford is defined on the accompanying map and includes the following areas:

- The southern plains of the River Don, as the direction of the advance of the Covenanter army and their approach to Gallow Hill.

- The slopes and summit of Gallow Hill and the views out from the Royalist vantage point, as the position of the Royalists initial deployment and a key landscape feature in Montrose’s exploitation of the terrain to outmanoeuvre the Covenanter army.

- Lands to the east and north-east of Gallow Hill including Murray and Haughton Parks, as the probable direction of the Covenanter rout.
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Historical Background to the Battle

On the night of 1 July 1645, the Royalists quartered at Alford with the Covenanter army under Lieutenant-General William Baillie in pursuit about four miles away. In the morning, Baillie marched after the Royalists, who decided to deploy near Alford to engage him. While the Covenanter had the advantage in infantry, with perhaps 2,800 troops, it is possible that Montrose, with about 2,300 troops, had an advantage in cavalry for the first time in his campaign.

It appears that Montrose decided to stand and engage Baillie before the latter could be joined by any other forces. The Royalists probably deployed on the slopes above Alford church close by the main road, while Baillie crossed the river by a ford further to the east near Montgarrie. It is suggested that the Covenanter believed Montrose to be retreating and so advanced too quickly. They found themselves within just half a mile of Montrose when they discovered he had in fact deployed to fight. The Royalist forces stood largely out of sight on the top or back slope of the hill, and so Baillie halted in the valley and took advantage of a strong defensive position amongst enclosures on the low ground. The two armies deployed in a standard formation with two cavalry wings and infantry in the centre. The Royalist cavalry charge, seconded by detachments of infantry who had also been positioned on the wings to strengthen the cavalry deployment, soon drove off the Covenanter horse. In contrast, the Covenanter infantry stood and fought until they were outflanked and attacked simultaneously to the rear by the Royalist cavalry, and to the fore by infantry. According to Baillie, they had had to deploy just three ranks deep, instead of the more normal six deep, to avoid being over-winged by the wider formation of the Royalists. As a result they were unable to respond to a simultaneous attack at both front and rear. Baillie’s infantry broke and ran, the rout soon turning into a bloody execution as the Royalist cavalry pressed home the pursuit. While the Covenanter suffered perhaps 700 killed, the Royalist casualties were very light but did include the death of their cavalry commander Lord Gordon.

The Armies

The addition of 400 – 1,000 inexperienced local levies (who included Thomas Watt, great-grandfather of James Watt) to Baillie’s army just before Alford did little to make up for the loss of the 1,000 experienced troops from the army to the separate forces under Lindsay. Indeed, Baillie considered his army significantly outnumbered when the action finally took place, though this may represent justification by a defeated commander (Baillie 1775). Baillie claimed he was slightly weaker in horse but had just half the infantry that Montrose commanded (Baillie 1775). In contrast, Montrose, although still lacking Mac Colla’s Irish 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 Covenanter slightly stronger in horse, but more recently authors have suggested a limited Covenanter advantage in foot but not in horse. The most detailed description of the royalist forces is given by Gordon (Gordon & Dunn 1844).
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**Numbers**

**Covenanter:** The Covenanters had a small numerical advantage, but a substantial proportion were unwilling recent recruits. The army appears to have been around 2,400 infantry and 380 cavalry (Reid 2003); Baillie reckoned himself outnumbered 2:1 in foot and very slightly in horse, which may reflect his opinion of his new troops.

**Royalist:** Current estimates for the size of Montrose’s force are around 1,800 infantry and 500 cavalry (Reid 2003).

**Losses**

**Covenanter:** There is a wild variance in the figures given for the Covenanter dead, from 700 in some modern accounts (Marren 1990), to contemporary accounts that claimed all the infantry with their officers were killed, except a few stragglers and 12 officers who were taken prisoner. The lower figures are far more likely.

**Royalist:** All of the accounts suggest very low Royalist casualties, with contemporary accounts putting the Royalist dead in single figures. It is likely that there was a higher mortality rate than this for Montrose’s troops, but certainly their casualties were light; Montrose could not afford heavy casualties.

**Action**

On the morning of 2 July, the Covenanter army marched after the Royalists. Montrose, knowing that Lindsay was bringing additional troops to join Baillie, decided he must defeat the latter before the reinforcements arrived. He was riding out to watch the fords when news arrived that the Covenanters were marching quickly to a ford about a mile from Alford, aiming to cut off the Royalist’s retreat, believing Montrose to be fleeing. He therefore sent out detachments of cavalry to that ford to skirmish with the enemy and slow their advance, and to bring news of the enemy approach. Montrose himself personally placed his main force in order on the hill overlooking Alford, where he intended to take the enemy attack. The ground to his rear was a marsh and ‘intersected by ditches and pools’, providing protection from cavalry attack, while in front was a steep hill, concealing his deployment. The enemy saw Montrose’s troops manoeuvring and thought they were retreating, so Baillie sent a vanguard, comprising all the Covenanter horse, across the river Don, supported by some musketeers detached from the individual infantry regiments. The latter was a common tactic of the period as the musket delivered far more effective firepower, in both range and stopping power, than the cavalryman’s pistol or carbine. These troops drove Montrose’s cavalry detachments from the ford, but Balcarras the cavalry commander rashly advanced to within half a mile of the main Royalist deployment, forcing Baillie to advance faster then intended.
Montrose then advanced quickly on the enemy with his whole army, forcing the Covenanter cavalry to retire to their infantry. The Royalists now stood little more than musket shot from the enemy, perhaps about 300m away. Montrose had deployed in standard formation with the infantry in the centre and cavalry on both wings; the latter were supported by small bodies of infantry. However, Montrose’s forces ‘beeing upon a little swelling hight’ were invisible to Baillie, who was unaware of their numbers or disposition until they came close to action. In response, Baillie, who was still bringing up his infantry and had not fully deployed in battle array, took to the ‘dykes and advantages of ground’ to strengthen his position. He also deployed with two cavalry wings, flanked by musketeers, with his infantry in the centre within the dykes (anon, 1645). This ground lay in a hollow, a marshy area with ‘ditches and pools’, difficult terrain into which the royalists did not wish to descend, but they found Baillie equally unwilling to attack them up the hill.

Montrose’s right wing cavalry under Lord Gordon opened the engagement, although after initial success the numbers of Covenanter horse proved decisive and the royalists were forced back. However, the Royalist horse were then seconded by their reserve, under Napier, who had been hidden behind the hill, with Macdonnell’s Highland archers ‘running down’ the horse (Fraser & Mackay 1905). The Covenanter musketeers fired a salvo at them and then retired behind their cavalry who, attacked in the flank and rear, broke and fled, together with their supporting musketeers. The Covenanter right fared no better against Aboyne’s cavalry on the Royalist left, for when Balcarras engaged the enemy cavalry, his reserve failed to second him, despite being ordered by Baillie to charge the Royalist cavalry in the flank. As a result, the Covenanter right wing of cavalry were also broken.

Meanwhile the Royalist infantry had advanced. The inexperienced Covenanter infantry, under Baillie himself, held firm against them, refusing quarter, until charged in the rear by the Royalist cavalry and in front ‘overcharged’ by the Royalist foot. If Baillie is to be believed, the fate of his infantry was sealed by lack of numbers, for while he says that the Royalists had enough troops for two bodies of reserves, he had to double the files of his infantry to deploy 3 deep in order to avoid being overwinged when they received the royalist charge. If this is true, then they will have been unable to about face the rear ranks to meet the charge of the horse from the rear.

The routed Covenanters army, with its formations broken, suffered further casualties as the Royalist horse pursued them in a bloody execution. While the main action probably lasted no more than an hour, the pursuit by the cavalry, for some 9 miles, continued into the early evening. The only Royalist setback was the death of Lord Gordon in the cavalry attack on the infantry, though in the long run this was perhaps to prove the most significant outcome of the battle.

Aftermath and Consequences

This was the first victory that Montrose achieved against an able, highly experienced Covenanter general, though there is some uncertainty as to whether it was he who had the advantage of numbers in the battle. It brought
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the Highlands more securely within Royalist control, and left the way open for him to march south, recruiting a yet larger force to challenge the government in the Lowlands. However, perhaps the most significant outcome was the death of Lord Gordon. This was a substantial blow to Montrose's campaign, as Gordon was a key supporter in both political and military terms, and the man best able to rally the Gordons and other important forces to the royalist cause in what was in some ways a very shaky alliance.

Another Montrose victory in Scotland was the only good news for an increasingly beleaguered king, for the Royalist cause south of the border had collapsed following the defeat at Naseby and the subsequent destruction of the last substantial Royalist field army in England, at Langport. The victory at Alford encouraged Charles I to continue the fight, against the better guidance of Prince Rupert and others of his close supporters. It kept alive the King's unrealistic hope that he could somehow unite with Montrose to snatch victory against all the odds in England, on the back of the successes in Scotland. In some senses, Montrose's success could have been a contribution to the chain of events that led Charles to the executioner's block in 1649.

Events & Participants

The Covenanter government of Scotland had allied itself with the English parliament as the initial successes of Royalist armies suggested that Charles would soon be able to turn his attention to Scotland. Troops were sent south to support the Parliamentarians and a Scottish army had a significant impact in the campaign for the north of England in 1644. In response, in August 1644 the Marquis of Montrose raised the royal standard in Scotland.

James Graham was the fifth Earl of Montrose and the first Marquis of Montrose. He was the chief of Clan Graham. Montrose had been a supporter and signatory of the National Covenant in 1638, but had then become a Royalist, although he was driven by motives other than a desire to impose the Divine Right of Kings upon Scotland. He and Archibald Campbell, the eighth Earl of Argyll, were bitter rivals, and Montrose believed that the Covenant had become nothing more than a vehicle for Argyll's ambition. Always a moderate among the Covenanters, Montrose considered that the agreement in 1641 with Charles that had removed episcopacy from Scotland had fulfilled the demands of the Covenant and that to continue in opposition to him would be breaking that agreement. Following the signing of the Solemn League and Covenant in September 1643, Montrose presented himself to Charles I service at his headquarters in Oxford. On behalf of the King, he then fought a campaign intended to draw Covenanter forces away from supporting the Parliamentarians in England, and in this it was a success. Montrose fought a series of seven battles against Covenanter armies across the Highlands in 1644 and 1645, beginning with Tippermuir and ending at Philiphaugh, where he suffered his only defeat He attempted to do the same on behalf of Charles II in 1650, but on this occasion fought only a single battle at Carbisdale. After his defeat there, he was captured and brought to Edinburgh for trial. On 21 May 1650, he was hanged and then beheaded. His head was fixed to a spike on Edinburgh's Tollbooth, his body quartered, and his limbs were displayed in Stirling, Glasgow, Perth and Aberdeen. Following the Restoration of Charles II
as king in 1660, Montrose's remains were collected together once more and were interred in the High Kirk of St Giles in Edinburgh in May 1661.

Manus O'Cahan was the colonel of the Irish regiment that fought in all of Montrose's battles and which was the backbone of all his victories. He was a cousin of Mac Colla, and came over from Ireland with him. He and his regiment were sent to Scotland to ease pressure on the Irish Confederacy, who were fighting Scottish Covenanters and English Parliamentarians in Ireland. As Mac Colla had a recruiting role for the Royalist cause throughout 1644-5, he was occasionally absent in the west seeking fresh troops, but O'Cahan remained with Montrose throughout and was with Montrose for the Battle of Philiphaugh. He was captured after the defeat, his men were executed and he was taken to Edinburgh where he was hanged without trial. He was responsible for the invention of the Highland charge along with Mac Colla, although it is Mac Colla who is generally given sole credit.

William Baillie was the commander of the Covenantant army recalled to Scotland after the destruction of Sir John Hurry’s army at Auldearn. Baillie was a veteran soldier who had led a regiment under Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden on the Continent in the 1630s. He had also commanded the Scottish vanguard at Marston Moor. He spent May and June manoeuvring after Montrose and trying to bring him to battle, only to be defeated by the Royalists at Alford. Baillie continued to pursue Montrose after this, however, facing him a second time at Kilsyth, although he had actually tendered his resignation to Parliament on 4 August 1645 as a result of the earlier defeat. By the time of Kilsyth, Baillie was still in command of the army because his successor had not yet been appointed. He was therefore in the difficult position of being both in command of the army but with all of his officers aware that he had already resigned under a cloud.

Lord George Gordon was the son of the Royalist commander, the Earl of Huntly, who was beheaded in 1649 in Edinburgh. He was an effective and well considered cavalry commander, who fought with distinction at the Battle of Auldearn in May.

Context

In 1638 the National Covenant was signed by many in Scotland, pledging opposition to the reforms proposed by Charles I, the King of the two separate nations of England and Scotland. Amongst other proposals Charles wanted to replace the democratic Presbyterian system with a hierarchy of bishops and create a church modelled on High Anglican lines, and to finance his reforms by re-possessing the former land holdings of the Catholic Church which had been sold on at the Reformation and now formed the basis of many landowners' status and wealth. In 1639 and 1640 Charles was defeated in the two Bishop's Wars. Desperately short of finance, Charles was forced to recall the English Parliament, the so-called Long Parliament, and they reached a peace with the Covenanters in the Treaty of London in 1641. However, Charles and the English Parliament remained at odds over who should control the army, and the first English Civil War began in 1642. Initially the Royalists and the Parliamentarians were relatively evenly matched, and
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the Parliamentarians opened negotiations with the Covenanters for their assistance in breaking the deadlock. In 1643, under the terms of the Solemn League and Covenant, the Covenant government of Scotland allied itself with the English Parliament and entered the war in England in early 1644, marking a major turning point in the war. Charles attempted unsuccessfully to foment rebellion in Scotland and the Scottish army went on to make a major impact in the campaign for the north of England. Following crushing defeat at Marston Moor on 2 July 1644 the King tried again, appointing James Graham, the 5th Earl of Montrose, as his military commander in Scotland. Montrose had been part of the abortive rebellion and was a former Covenant himself who had joined the King in 1643. On 28 August 1644, Montrose raised the royal standard and embarked on a campaign against the Covenant forces in the Highlands (Reid 2003).

Over the next two years, Montrose, with forces which changed constantly in size and composition, won a series of victories over the Covenanters under a number of different commanders, including: Tippermuir (1 September 1644), Aberdeen (13 September 1644), Inverlochy (2 February 1645), Auldearn (9 May 1645), Alford (2 July 1645) and Kilsyth (16 August 1645) and was elevated to 1st Marquis of Montrose by Charles as reward. However, he was defeated at Philiphaugh near Selkirk on 13 September 1645 by much superior Covenant forces commanded by Lieutenant-General David Leslie. He endeavoured to carry on his campaign in the North-East, and also tried to threaten Glasgow, but lack of co-operation and poor relations between the leading Royalist commanders meant that they achieved little success and Montrose’s campaign petered out in early May when his forces besieging Inverness were taken by surprise by Major-General Middleton’s advance and fled without a fight. Although Huntly, another Royalist commander, stormed Aberdeen on 14 May, a few weeks later Charles, who had surrendered at Newark on 5 May, ordered his forces in Scotland to lay down their arms. Although Montrose was reluctant to do so, he finally disbanded his forces at Rattray on 30 July after agreeing terms with Middleton and then fled abroad (Reid 2003).

Battlefield Landscape

The general location of the battle is well established by a series of primary and secondary sources. However there are a number of alternative locations for the specific actions of the battle. It is clear that the Covenanters were crossing the River Don from the north when the fighting took place. Two alternative crossing points have been proposed at Mountgarie and to the north of Alford Old Parish Church (located over a mile west of the modern Alford town). The main fighting appears to have taken place to the north and east of Gallow Hill, with Montrose using the topography to form a natural defence. An important aspect of the battlefield’s landscape was the pattern of enclosures on the valley floor situated within boggy ground which was the focus of the Covenanters’ defensive action. The position of these
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enclosures and marshland is not currently known, but may be traceable through survey or excavation.

According to primary sources the pursuit of the Covenantter army by the Royalist cavalry continued until the early evening for a distance of up to 9 miles. It is likely that the Covenanters fled northwards, back over the River Don.

The battle was fought within open ground on the lower hill slopes on the south side of the River Don. The Howe of Alford occupies the middle reaches of the River Don and is characterised by the flat river plain with hills rising up from water on the north and south. The landscape of the battleground has been altered by the development of Alford town in the 19th century, the enclosure of the land and the construction of roads. However, its overall character, key landscape features and strategic views have survived well. The topography of the hill slope, which appears to have played a key role in the deployments and manoeuvres of both armies, is well preserved as open farmland and it is possible to visualise Montrose’s troops on the top or back slope of the hill, overlooking the Covenant army at its base. The spatial relationships and views between significant landscape elements such as the summit and slopes of Gallow Hill, the southern bank of the river and its crossings survive intact and the entire area still gives a reasonable impression of the landscape that the troops would have seen.

The western half of the defined area is presently mainly farmland and small areas of forestry plantation with the town of Alford and designed parkland on the east. The spread of Alford has so far had a relatively minor impact on the battlefield, which may survive well as a result.

Location

The exact location of the battlefield is subject to considerable dispute. Two main alternative locations are given in secondary works, though the words of Fraser, discussed below, may suggest that a third, more westerly location should also be considered, where Seymour shows the action.

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 town of Alford, in what is now Murray Park (Ordnance Survey 1st Edition 1:10560 mapping). Gardiner, writing in 1884, followed this interpretation, identifying the hill on which Montrose deployed as that straddling the modern A944, on the very northern edge of the modern settlement. In this interpretation, Baillie is said to have crossed the Don via Mountgarrie ford, immediately north of modern Alford (Gardiner 1893). Gardiner, who visited the battlefield with a local guide, provides a map showing an area of wet ground to the north of modern Alford with a causeway crossing it. This he identified as the marshy ground where Baillie deployed. Gardiner saw the problem for his interpretation of Wishart’s description of a second marsh behind Montrose but he, and subsequently also Lang, quite unreasonably claim that Wishart was simply wrong (Lang 1903).

In 1919, Simpson reviewed the topographical evidence and contradicted Gardiner, pointing out that modern Alford was in fact a creation of the railway
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from the late 1850s onwards and that thus Gardiner’s site is not below Alford, as the primary accounts indicate. He identifies Alford in those accounts with the kirk of Alford, over a mile to the west of the present settlement and adjacent to the River Leochel. The steep hill overhanging Alford, mentioned by Wishart as where Montrose deployed, is then seen as Gallow Hill. This he claims is the only hill which provides 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, and this Simpson identifies as the former marsh called the Muir of Alford, immediately west of Gallow Hill at the bottom of a steep slope. This was quite separate from the marshy area, including pools and ditches, which Baillie had to cross immediately south of the River Don, where he halted to deploy. Simpson therefore concludes that the battle was fought on and to the north of Gallow Hill, between it and the river, with Baillie crossing the Don at the Boat of Forbes (Simpson 1919). Most authors now follow Simpson, identifying the hill where Montrose first deployed as Gallow Hill, with Leochel Burn and Alford Muir providing protection from outflanking on the west, with the Ordnance Survey showing a battlefield location to the north-east of Gallow Hill (Rogers 1968; Seymour 1979; Fairbairn & Cyprien 1983; Marren 1990; Bennett 1990; Brander 1993; Guest & Guest 1996).

Reid, in contrast, chooses an intermediate site between the two contending interpretations, with Montrose’s initial deployment on Gallow Hill but with Baillie crossing the Don at Mountgarie ford. In the final stage of the manoeuvres, he then has Montrose advancing north-east towards the Gardiner site and the action close by. This seems to fit far better the evidence in the contemporary accounts (Reid 1990).

Although Simpson pointed out some details of the landscape at the time of the battle, the historic terrain at Alford has never been adequately reconstructed, yet the cursory examination of 18th century mapping undertaken here reveals problems for all the current interpretations. The 1776 map and that by Roy both name Balfluig Castle, just to the south-east of the modern town, as Alford. In addition, there is a possible former marsh area, recognisable from both the alluvial and the contour evidence, immediately to the north of Balfluig, while Knowehead is an adjacent hill with a back slope. A great deal actually hangs upon which of the two main roads the Royalist army was marching along when Balcarras was attempting to cut off their retreat. 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. In the Balfluig area, Montrose could have deployed with most of his forces out of Baillie’s view. Baillie would still be 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, but part of the battlefield would then lie beneath modern Alford.

However, there is very strong evidence against such an interpretation, for Wishart specifies that it was on the hill above Alford church that Montrose
deployed, which can only be Gallow Hill. Fraser, who appears the most accurate of all primary sources for the Montrose battles as regards topographical details, provides very specific information that strongly supports Simpson’s interpretation. He says that the battlefield lies

‘in a brave plain near the river of Done, below the church [emphasis added], a common pass where they had conveniency of burials.’ (Fraser & Mackay 1905).

This confirms the association with the church of Alford, but seems to pull the action further west than Gardiner or even Reed would allow.

Some clarification of the issues is provided by the 18th century evidence for the road network. In 1776, the Suie Road, from Huntly to Brechin, which most authorities assume Montrose used when approaching Alford, crossed the Don at the Bridge of Forbes and ran on southwards halfway between the church and the present settlement (Taylor & Skinner 1776). However Roy’s mapping shows that in the 1750s, and presumably therefore in 1645, the road ran on a course much further west, crossing the Don north of Alford church about 500m upstream from the Boat of Forbes, which did not then exist (Roy 1747-1755). The True Relation also states that Baillie camped about four miles from Montrose, ‘upon the left hand’. This implies that he was following a route somewhat to the east of the main road that Montrose had followed. This would tend to support Gardiner’s claim that Baillie crossed by the Montgarie ford. The latter is just over a mile downstream from the 1750s crossing by the main road, and significantly Wishart says that on the morning of the battle, while Montrose was examining the fords of the Don by Alford, he was informed that the enemy were hastening to ‘a ford a mile distant from Alford, to cut off his retreat in the rear’ (Wishart, 1720).

In contrast, the local tradition that Feight Faulds was where many of the Covenanters were cut down, would seem to support Gardiner’s and Reid’s interpretation, as would the location of the Gordon Stone, said to be the location where Lord Gordon fell. However, another tradition has the Buckie Burn flowing red with blood, which might suggest action even further to the south-east (Simpson 1919), though one could argue that the rout and execution of the Covenant infantry spread over some distance and so all these traditions might still be compatible with the battle occurring much closer to Alford church. It is extremely difficult from the available geological, contour and historic mapping to locate an area of potentially marshy ground on the Simpson site, which would accord with that described for Baillie’s position 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, a probable palaeochannel of the Don runs east-west through Murray and Haughton Parks, which provides suitable marshy ground on the Gardiner site where Baillie ‘intrenched among deep ditches and marshes’.

It is possible that further research on the historic terrain may assist in resolving these problems, but on present evidence a definitive answer cannot be given, and it is most likely that the problems will only be finally resolved through survey for the archaeology on the contending sites, where they remain undeveloped. Currently therefore it is not possible to accurately place
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the action in the zone between Alford church and the Mountgarie river crossing.

**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 1st Edition six inch mapping of 1869 provides clues as to various potentially boggy areas, to the north and north east of Gallow 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 adjacent to Feight Faulds.

Unusually, Roy’s mapping of the mid 18th century does little to clarify this issue. It does, however, provide important other terrain information. It shows that in the 18th century this was a landscape of single farms and small hamlets, with the name Alford associated with both the Kirk of Alford on the west and Balfluig Castle on the east. The modern town of Alford was a creation of the 19th century on a virgin site, following the arrival of the railway. The road network shown by Roy is particularly instructive, demonstrating that the modern road and even the major roads and river crossing at Bridge of Forbes that are shown in 1776 were not in existence earlier in the century. In the 1750s, the main north-south road crossed the Don near the confluence with the Leochel and ran south beside the Kirk of Alford and continued southward close to the Leochel. The east-west road similarly ran past the church and on via Haughton. Unfortunately, it does not show lesser crossings of the Don, though to the south-east of Mountgarrie, there is a settlement called Foulfoord.

In the present mapping the location of Feight Faulds is taken from the Ordnance Survey 1st Edition 6 inch mapping, while the Gordon Stone has been located following field inspection.

**Condition**

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. Most of the alternative locations are such that artefacts relating to the battle are likely to survive in good condition, and hence it should be possible in the future to resolve the uncertainties about the location and extent of the action. Most, if not all, of the Gallow Hill site proposed by Simpson is intact and it may be expected to have a very high archaeological potential. However in the late 19th and 20th centuries, the town of Alford expanded across a wide area and has encroached significantly upon the Gardiner and Reid sites for the battlefield, while part of the Feight Faulds has been built over. In contrast, the northern part of this site lies within parkland and has not apparently been substantially affected by land use change.
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Archaeological and Physical Remains and Potential

No artefacts or archaeological features associated with the battle are known to have been recovered. There is a 19th century account of a skeleton with a sword and an Elizabethan shilling being found at Bloody Faulds, some 4 miles to the south-east of the battleground. These artefacts appear to have been lost and their provenance is unclear.

Given the nature of the fighting, there could be large numbers of lead bullets and items of personal apparel such as buttons within the defined area. There may well be burials associated with the battle given the high numbers of casualties recorded. These are likely to extend over a considerable area because of the rout; while the main action only lasted around an hour, but the rout and pursuit lasted into the evening.

The report of the discovery of a skeleton with a sword and an Elizabethan shilling bogged in a marsh at the foot of the Green Hill near Boglouster, beside the Bloody Faulds was in the New Statistical Account (an account of each parish compiled by the local minister in the 1830s – see Simpson 1919). However, Bloody Faulds lies four miles to the south-east of Alford, and although it could potentially be related to scattered action in the rout, it cannot be connected to the battle of Alford with any certainty.

The single reference, in Fraser, to some Highland troops using bows instead of muskets may provide a useful opportunity to examine the issue of survival and distribution of arrowheads once the spread of action is understood from the bullet distributions, but unlike Auldearn there is no clear information as to where the archers were deployed or how they engaged.

Because the battle involved a substantial infantry firefight, a large part of the battlefield, where not yet developed or affected by mineral extraction or landfill, should contain a great deal of well preserved battle archaeology in the form of unstratified lead bullets. Even in the cavalry action, which is believed often to leave a very low density of bullets, and those normally of smaller calibres, the presence of supporting musketeers means that more substantial bullet scatters may exist there. The distribution of these bullets should allow accurate positioning of the principal deployments and of aspects of the fight. Exceptional survival of battle archaeology may exist if waterlogged deposits survive, given that Baillie’s forces were deployed in and/or pushed back through boggy ground.

Cultural Association

The Battle of Alford has drawn little popular attention and left no trace in popular culture outside of the district. The Gordon Stane, a natural boulder located within Murray Park to the north of the town, has a traditional association with the site of the death of Lord Gordon. A commemorative plaque is located close to the stone and a battlefield walk has been created. Another memorial stone is located by the War Memorial in the town cemetery, which has an inscription giving brief details of the battle and commemorating the death of Lord Gordon.
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There is a fragment of a ballad relating to the battle, but the surviving verses relate to the march to Alford and not to the fighting. The name of Feight Faulds, a field to the south of the Gordon Stane, has long been locally associated as the location of a Covenanters massacre although there is no physical evidence to substantiate this.

Commemoration & Interpretation

The Gordon Stane is said to be the site where the Royalist cavalry commander Lord Gordon died in the battle as he pressed the pursuit too rashly and was shot by a fleeing musketeer. However, it is interesting that the fragmentary ballad *The Battle of Alford* gives another version of events

Lord George Gordon the left wing guarded,
Who well the sword could ply
There came a ball shot frae the west,
That shot him through the back;
Although he was our enemy,
We grieved for his wreck.
We cannot say 'twas his own men,
But yet it came that way;
In Scotland there was not a match,
To that man where he lay.

Select Bibliography


Full Bibliography

*Information on Sources and Publications*

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’s *Vindication*, though short and inevitably coloured by his need to justify his defeat, provides an important Covenanters perspective on the battle. The other main Royalist account is that by Gordon, though this is largely a eulogy for
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Lord Gordon and provides only limited detail on the battle itself. A brief assessment of the primary sources is given in Marren (Marren 1990).

Gardiner provides an unusually detailed account for Alford, having visited the battlefield, providing a map of the terrain which drew upon 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 Gallow Hill. Most authors follow Simpson, with the exception of Reid, who broadly follows Gardiner and provides one of the most useful and detailed of modern discussions of the battle. Marren’s account, which follows Simpson, is also well referenced and provides a good assessment of the primary evidence and of the problems of the Gardiner and Simpson interpretations. It should be noted that 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.

Primary Sources
anon 1645 Here is the true Relation of the Happy Victory received by the Marques of Montrose… at Alfoord.


Wishart: Wishart, G. (1720) A complete history of the wars in Scotland; under the conduct of the illustrious James Marquis of Montrose, [London?].

Cartographic and Illustrative Sources
Roy, W. 1747-1755 unpublished.

Secondary Sources

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Rogers, H. C. B. 1968 Battles and Generals of the Civil Wars 1642 - 1651.


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