



The Inventory of Historic Battlefields – Battle of Carbisdale

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.

Designation Record and Full Report Contents

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NGR Centred	- Condition
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CARBISDALE

Alternative Names: None

27 April 1650

Local Authority: Highland

NGR centred: NH 574 944

Date of Addition to Inventory: 30 November 2011

Date of last update: 14 December 2012

Overview and Statement of Significance

Carbisdale is significant as the last battle of James Graham, the 1st Marquis of Montrose, in support of the Royalist cause. Widely thought to be one of Scotland's finest ever military commanders, Montrose is a highly significant figure within Scottish history. After Carbisdale, he was finally apprehended by the Covenanters and unceremoniously executed. Carbisdale also marks the end of the internal struggles within Scotland as part of the Wars of the Three Kingdoms, as with the Covenanters' subsequent agreement with Charles II, they come into open conflict with Oliver Cromwell and the Protectorate, rather than Royalist supporters in their own lands.

Following his defeat at Philiphaugh in 1645, Montrose had fled abroad, only to return in 1650 as the Captain-General of the forces of Charles II. The battle was a decisive victory for the Covenanter forces arrayed against Montrose, with his forces routed almost without firing a shot. Montrose himself escaped the field but he was handed over to the Covenanters a few days later and taken to Edinburgh for his trial and subsequent execution.

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.

The Inventory boundary for the Battle of Carbisdale is defined on the accompanying map and includes the following areas:

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- The low passage between the river and the high ground to the north of the area along which Montrose entered onto the flood plain from the north. This also takes in the craggy peak which accommodates Carbisdale Castle and the southern portion of the craggy ground known as Creag a' Choineachan, which has been translated as Lamentation Hill, a place name which may be related to the battle.
- The eastern side of the area runs along the western bank of the river, in which numbers of troops are reported to have drowned during the rout.
- The southern limit of the area takes in the pass of low ground along which Strachan's men advanced, continuing to the south of Balinoe. It also takes in the higher ground to the west which may have provided a less obvious line of advance for at least some of his men.
- The western limit of the area takes in the slope which bounds the western edge of the flood plain and accommodates the area of woodland to the north-west into which Montrose's men fled. The boundary joins with the northern boundary at the eastern end of the lochan from which the Culrain Burn flows.

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Historical Background to the Battle

Following the execution of Charles I in 1649, his son Charles II became the leader of the Royalist cause. In 1650, he appointed James Graham, the Marquis of Montrose to be Lieutenant – Governor of Scotland and Captain – General of the Crown's forces. Montrose's first task was to gain support for an invasion from the other crowned heads of Europe, but he only had limited success in this area.

Undeterred by this, in March 1650 Montrose headed to Orkney, where he took command of a force of Danish troops who had been deployed there since the previous September, along with local levies raised from the islands, giving him a total force of at most around 1500 men. Montrose and his army crossed to the mainland at John O' Groats on 12 April, possibly after sending a vanguard of around 500 men to secure the landing. Once on the mainland, Montrose moved swiftly, besieging and taking Dunbeath Castle and within six days Montrose had advanced as far as Strathoykel in Sutherland. He subsequently moved south to Carbisdale where he made camp and awaited reinforcements, although none were forthcoming.

As Montrose waited, he would once more be let down by the inadequate scouting and poor intelligence which were so characteristic of many of his battles, and he failed to determine the presence nearby of a Covenanter force under the command of Colonel Archibald Strachan. Strachan, upon learning of Montrose's position, quickly advanced upon Ferne, a mile and a half from Montrose's camp, with his own force of around 200 cavalry, along with a small troop of around 30 musketeers and about 400 infantry from local levies of the Monro and Ross clans (although sources indicate these levies may not have been wholly committed or even sympathetic to Strachan's cause).

Once the Covenanters had reached Ferne, Strachan's scout, Captain Andrew Monro, reported back that Montrose had deployed 40 horse on patrol and suggested Strachan send a small force forward while keeping the remainder hidden, in an attempt to draw Montrose to battle and set an ambush. As some evidence suggests Montrose had his forces within a fortified camp in a strong position, it would seem that Strachan wished to draw him out into the open rather than risk assaulting his defences.

Whether or not Montrose's camp was well defended, the ruse by Strachan appears to have worked, with Montrose deploying a vanguard to the field under Sir John Hurry and taking command of the remainder of the army himself. When the remainder of the Covenanter force sprang their ambush and began advancing on Montrose, he appears to have attempted an orderly withdrawal towards the wooded and rocky slopes at his rear, which would have been ill-suited to Strachan's cavalry. Seeing this, Strachan attacked with around 200 of his cavalry, overtaking the Royalists just as they reached the woods and turning the retreat into a rout. Montrose's Danish troops appear to have been the only elements of his force to play any part in the fighting, managing to fire a single volley of musket fire before they too were driven off. While Montrose himself escaped with a few others, the remainder of his force was not so lucky. The pursuit of his army was a brutal affair and the slaughter in the wood continued for another two hours, with around 200 Royalists

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drowned while trying to cross the Kyle of Sutherland in a desperate bid to escape the massacre and another 400 captured.

The Armies

The Royalist forces were commanded by James Graham, the Marquis of Montrose, and the government forces by Colonel Archibald Strachan. Sallagh's account is alone in assigning joint command of the Covenanters to Strachan and Hackett (Sallagh 1813).

Numbers

Royalists: Sallagh does not give numbers for Montrose's forces (Sallagh 1813). Balfour quotes Royalist prisoners as saying they had 1200 men (Balfour 1825). Gardiner claims that Montrose had 1200 foot and 40 horse (Gardiner 1903). Reid uses the same figures adding, that some of the foot were Danish mercenaries but most of them Orcadians (Reid 1990). Cowan states that the charters of Kirkwall show that the town supplied 60 fully armed men, and 800 from the rest of Orkney travelled south. He believes the force could barely have exceeded 1600 and adds that the slowness of the march south was dictated by the speed of transporting cannon (Cowan 1977). No mention is made of Royalist artillery in other sources. Williams says the original expeditionary force numbered 1500, of whom nearly 1000 were Orcadians (Williams 2001). Roberts says he had 1600 men at most with hardly any cavalry (Roberts 2000).

Covenanters: Sallagh says that the Covenanters had five troops of cavalry; Strachan's, Montgomerie's, Cullace's Irish troop, Ker's and Hackett's, plus Monro and Ross foot 'not passing four hundredth' (Sallagh 1813). Balfour has the same five troops, which he numbers as 230 horse, and also mentions 36 musketeers of Lawers' regiment and 80 Ross foot (Balfour 1825). Williams gives the same composition for the cavalry, but calculates the number of horse at 256, and the number of musketeers at 36. He emphasises that Strachan's forces were experienced, well mounted and under competent officers. They were also joined by 400 Rosses and Monros, who may have been on their way to join Montrose but decided to throw in their lot with the government forces when they encountered them. Strachan did not mention this large force in his despatch following the battle (Williams 2001).

Reid differs significantly, saying that Strachan had only three troops of cavalry; Colonel Gilbert Carr's two troops of cavalry under his personal command, and a third troop under Lieutenant Colonel Robert Hackett. In addition he had 36 musketeers of Campbell of Lawers' regiment under Captain Collace, and a force of 400 local levies (Reid 1990). Cowan gives the same composition, specifying that the 400 were Monros and Rosses (Cowan 1977). Roberts says Strachan had 200 cavalry but does not give the make-up of this number. He also has 36 musketeers and 400 levies raised by the Monros. He comments that it is believed that the Monros waited to see the likely outcome of any fighting before declaring their allegiance (Roberts 2000). Gardiner records that Strachan had 220 horse and 30 musketeers 'to say

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nothing of 400 Rosses and Monros upon whom no dependence could be placed.’ (Gardiner 1903).

Losses

Sallagh gives no total figure for Royalists killed, but says 200 were drowned, 400 were taken, and only a few escaped. The only Covenanter casualty was one trooper drowned in pursuing the Orcadians who were trying to escape by swimming the Kyle (Sallagh 1813).

Balfour on Royalist losses says ten of their best commanders were killed and most of their officers and 386 common soldiers taken. He says only 100 were not killed, drowned or captured from a total of 1200. The only Covenanter casualties were the drowned trooper and two wounded. He also lists the Royalist officers killed and captured (Balfour 1825).

Other, secondary, sources say that 400 Royalist troops were killed, and another 450 were captured, while 200 Orcadians drowned, trying to swim the Kyle (Cowan 1977; Roberts 2000). Two other sources put the number of killed at 450, and the captured at 400 in addition to the 200 drowned (Stevenson 1977; Williams 2001). There is no advance in these sources on the one dead Covenanter.

Action

Although the sources differ on whether Montrose was on the march or encamped, and on the precise sequence of events, they all agree, other than Balfour, that Montrose was successfully ambushed by Strachan, in part at least, because his scouting and intelligence was poor, as it had been many times in the past. His army was shattered and he fled, only to be handed over to the Covenanters a few days later.

Balfour, a contemporary source, says that Strachan, on learning that Montrose was marching to Carbisdale, divided his forces into three parties; the first of 100 horse led by himself, a second of more than 80 horse led by Lieutenant Colonel Hackett and a third of about 40 horse led by Captain Hutcheson along with 36 musketeers of Lawers’ regiment to be led by Quartermaster Shaw. After prayers they marched at about 3pm towards the enemy who were drawn up near a hill of ‘Scrogie Wood’ to which they quickly retired. Strachan pursued them into the wood and at the first charge ‘made them all to rune’. Two Ross officers joined in with 80 foot and gave good service (Balfour 1825).

According to Sallagh, another contemporary source, the Covenanters marched to Ferne, where they hid in the broom a mile and a half from the Royalists. Their scout, Captain Andrew Monro, reported that Montrose had sent out 40 horse on patrol and he suggested that Strachan send out one troop to be seen and keep the rest hidden so that Montrose would not realise the size of their force. Upon getting this information Montrose put Hurry in charge of the vanguard and took command of the remainder. He then ordered a retreat to ‘a wood and craggie mountain which was not far distant’. Strachan and Cullace then attacked with a vanguard of 200 horse, with

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Hackett and the rest close behind, trying to prevent the Royalists reaching the wood and the craggy rocks. Strachan overtook the Royalists just as they were entering the woods. The Danish mercenaries stood and delivered a volley which did very little harm, then began to flee to the woods, but were intercepted by Hackett's force and entirely dispersed. The Monro and Ross foot entered the wood and the killing went on for two hours. Two hundred Royalists were drowned while trying to escape across the river and about 400 prisoners were taken, although Montrose and a few others escaped (Sallagh 1813).

Gardiner gives a shorter but similar account, but also points out the difference between Sallagh's view that Montrose was at Carbisdale for some days, and Balfour's, who claims Montrose only arrived there on the day of the battle. Gardiner is inclined to believe Balfour, whose account is based on a despatch, believed to be Strachan's (Gardiner 1903).

Cowan also takes this line, arguing that, although Sallagh's account states that Montrose camped for some days at Carbisdale, a newspaper, 'The True Relation', probably based upon Strachan's own report of the battle, says the Royalists had marched from Strathoykel to Carbisdale. He believes that this is more likely, as if Montrose had been camped he would have had entrenchments which would have allowed him to mount a stronger resistance to Strachan's attack. He thinks it likely that Montrose was fording the Oykel, just west of the point where it is joined by the Cassley, to march along the south bank of the river. He says that Strachan exposed only 100 horse, since the Covenanters seem to have known that Montrose was already aware of the presence of only one troop of horse in the area; possibly Montrose was betrayed or misled by his own Monro scouts. The hundred charged Lisle's forty Royalist horse, whilst the Royalist foot retreated to the woods, but the Royalist cavalry broke, pushing back against their own infantry. Hurry in the centre tried to make a stand but only the Danish mercenaries attempted a volley. Local tradition has it that before the fighting the Monros and Rosses advanced up Strathcarron to shelter behind the ridge of Feith Tharsuinn to await the outcome of the battle and then joined in once they saw the way it was going (Cowan 1977).

Roberts' account (2000) is similar and he too believes that Montrose was on the move. He adds that Strachan, advancing north from Tain, learnt on the afternoon of Saturday 27 April that Montrose was moving south and advanced quickly to engage because he did not want to fight on the Sabbath. Stevenson (1977) also believes that Montrose was on the move.

Williams, however, like Sallagh, takes the view the Montrose was encamped. 'With the hills to the north and the Kyle estuary to the east, the burn enclosed a triangle of level ground admirably suited to cavalry. At the northern point of this triangle was Carbisdale Loch, and, beyond, a narrow defile overhung by Creag a' Choineachan. Here, in the jaws of the pass was Montrose's camp. His left flank rested on the Kyle. His right and rear were protected by the hills and on the bluff facing south-east towards the open ground the Royalists had thrown up a formidable breastwork. The position was a strong one and could not be taken by cavalry in a frontal assault.' Strachan realised he had to tempt Montrose out, so sent out the single troop of horse which he knew

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Montrose was aware of, to act as a decoy. Williams then has Montrose ordering Lisle to halt his horse and advancing with his main army towards the Covenanter cavalry, rather than retreating to the woods. Once Montrose was committed in the open Strachan charged with the cavalry concealed in the broom followed by Hackett with 80 dragoons. The Royalist horse was driven back on to the foot and a number of the gentlemen who made up the cavalry were killed. The Orcadians panicked and fled, and although the Danish mercenaries stood and fired a volley they were soon overwhelmed. At this point the Monros and Rosses, who had previously detached and taken up position in the lea of the hills flanking Carbisdale to see what would happen, fell upon the fleeing and defeated Royalists (Williams 2001).

Aftermath and Consequences

Montrose escaped from the battlefield with a few companions and after wandering for several days reached Assynt. According to Sallagh, he was discovered, together with a Major Sinclair, by a patrol sent out by Neil MacLeod, Laird of Assynt, in response to a letter from Andrew Monro, Strachan's scout. He was brought to Ardvreck Castle and handed over to Major-General Holbourne (later to command the Scottish infantry at the Battle of Inverkeithing in 1651). Other versions differ slightly, in having Montrose seeking food and shelter and being taken to MacLeod, who handed him over to the Covenanters in return for the reward which had been put on Montrose's head in 1644 (Williams 2001). Whether or not this constituted a 'betrayal' as Royalist literature alleged, the result was the same. On 21 May in Edinburgh, Montrose was executed by hanging.

Montrose remained loyal to Charles until his death; unfortunately his loyalty was not reciprocated. On 12 April it was reported that Charles had all but agreed terms in the negotiations with the Covenanters which had started again in mid-March although on 26 April it seems Charles was still trying to prolong negotiations to allow Montrose time to make progress with his invasion. On May 1, apparently without any knowledge of the battle or its outcome, Charles accepted the terms offered the previous year in what both he and the Covenanters recognised to be a hollow agreement, and he later signed the Solemn League and Covenant on 23 June. Shortly after this, the Covenanters invaded England on his behalf. On 3 May Charles sent Montrose orders to disband without having any idea what his situation was and he later denied any involvement in the invasion. '...there is every indication that he abandoned Montrose with the same cynicism which allowed him to accept the solemn league' (Cowan 1977). Essentially, the outcome of the battle which cost the life of Montrose and hundreds of men was politically irrelevant.

Events & Participants

Although the battle itself could be regarded as a fairly minor event with no more than 2000 men on the field, it is notable as the last action in which the by then legendary Montrose was engaged. He escaped the field but was captured within a couple of days and held in Ardvreck Castle, after which he

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was tried and executed for treason in Edinburgh. Charles II is generally held to have behaved in a somewhat duplicitous fashion with regard to Montrose, encouraging him to lead an invasion into Scotland against the Covenanters, while also negotiating with them for his return as King of Scotland. Even at the end of it all, Charles did nothing to save Montrose from execution.

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.

Sir John Hurry was in command of Montrose's vanguard in the battle. Hurry had fought in Germany as a young man before returning to Scotland. He had a chequered career, switching sides repeatedly. He first came to prominence in the so-called "Incident" when Royalists plotted to kidnap the Marquis of Argyll, the Marquis of Hamilton and the Earl of Lanark, who were the leading Covenanter nobles; Hurry betrayed the plot to the Covenanters and joined the Covenanter cause. He fought for the Parliamentarians at Edgehill and Brentford before switching sides to the Royalists for whom he fought at the Battle of Chalgrove Field and at Marston Moor. He switched sides again, and it was as a Covenanter that he led the army sent to bring down Montrose in the Spring of 1645 that was utterly defeated at Auldearn. After losing at Auldearn to Montrose, he drifted back into the Royalist cause, joining the Engagers; this was a faction of Covenanters who signed an agreement with Charles I in 1647 to fight for him against the English Parliamentarians. He was one of the few Covenanter officers to join the Duke of Hamilton's expedition into England and was captured at the Battle of Preston in 1648. He escaped to the Continent, where he fell in with Montrose, and accompanied him on his last adventures; like Montrose, it ended in his execution in Edinburgh, on 29 May 1650.

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Archibald Strachan, commander of the Covenanter forces at Carbisdale, is little remembered today but had an eventful career as a dragoon officer during the Wars of the Three Kingdoms. Born in Musselburgh, he fought on the Parliamentarian side at the Battle of Lansdown, outside Bath, in July 1643, after which he was promoted to major. By 1645 he had returned to Scotland and joined the Covenanter army and was noted for his religious conviction. In 1649 he was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel in Ker's Regiment. He distrusted Charles II in his dealings with the Covenanters but fought well at the second Battle of Dunbar against Cromwell in 1650; it was his regiment on the Scots' right flank halted Lambert's initial cavalry charge. He was a member of the Remonstrant party that after Dunbar pledged neutrality in the war against Cromwell until or unless Charles repented and genuinely embraced the Covenant. Strachan himself went even further and defected to Cromwell with a small group of men. He was excommunicated from the Kirk for this in January 1651. He died in November 1652.

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 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 Covenanter 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 Covenanter himself who had joined the King in 1643. On 28 August 1644, Montrose raised the royal standard and embarked on a campaign against the Covenanter forces in the Highlands (Reid 2003).

In 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

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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 Covenanter 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).

After the executions of Charles I in January 1649 and the Marquis of Huntly in March, Royalist unrest allied to hatred of the extreme Covenanter government led to rebellion in the Highlands which was put down by Sir Archibald Strachan who routed the rebels at Balvenie Castle near Dufftown on 8 May 1649. In the meantime, the Covenanter government had proclaimed the exiled Charles II as King of Scotland and attempted to negotiate with him in Holland, hoping to get him to accept the Covenants and abandon his father's ideas of establishing an Episcopal church and re-possessing land once belonging to the Catholic Church. Charles had, however, appointed Montrose to be Lieutenant-Governor of Scotland and Captain-General of the Crown's forces and sent him to seek military assistance from the monarchs of Europe in mounting an invasion of Scotland. He had only limited success, but got enough support from Sweden and Denmark to obtain arms, ammunition and ships and money enough to employ several hundred mercenaries. An advance party reached Orkney in September 1649 under the command of the Earl of Kinnoul, consisting of 80 officers and 100 Danish soldiers. Although Kinnoul died, he was replaced by his younger brother. More reinforcements reached Orkney in the spring, but two supply ships were lost on the voyage. When Montrose arrived in March 1650, he found that Charles had agreed to enter further negotiations with the Covenanters. However, Charles still encouraged Montrose to proceed with invasion, perhaps hoping that success would allow him to ignore the Covenanters completely or at least allow him to extract concessions (Roberts 2000).

Once Montrose had arrived at Kirkwall in Orkney with reinforcements of a mixed group of Royalist exiles and Danish mercenaries, he began to prepare for an invasion of the mainland. Reid states that Montrose was on very shaky ground and a more prudent general might have waited in Kirkwall to see the outcome of negotiations being conducted between the Covenanter government and Charles (Reid 1990). Gordon of Sallagh, a contemporary and a follower of the Covenanter Earl of Sutherland, stated that Montrose landed in Caithness with one thousand six hundred and fifty, not exceeding fifteen hundred men (presumably 'men' refers to foot soldiers, rather than gentlemen and horse). He then comments 'With an arrogant pride, he thought with that number to overrun this kingdom, which a man of his

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experience would not have undertaken, without the assurance of friends in Scotland' (Sallagh 1813). Events were to prove that Montrose's hopes of raising support were groundless.

According to Sallagh, Montrose sent Sir John Hurry, once a Covenanter commander, across with an advance guard of 500 to secure the Ord of Caithness, a narrow defile separating Caithness from Sutherland, Montrose landed near John O'Groats on 12 April, and then moved south, besieging and taking the surrender of Dunbeath castle, before moving into Sutherland. The Earl of Sutherland, lacking horse, gave ground before Montrose, but left strong garrisons in the castles of Dunrobin, Skelbo, Skibo and Dornoch. Sallagh says that Montrose arrived at Strathoykel on the sixth day after landing and moved to Carbisdale, where he waited in vain for the recruits he hoped would join from Strathnaver (Sallagh 1813). Throughout this campaign, his attempts to recruit had very limited success because of the hold the Covenanting nobility had over the area (Roberts 2000). Cowan says that Montrose had completely failed to appreciate that the balance of power in the north had shifted to the Covenanters in the shape of the Earl of Sutherland and the few gentlemen who joined him were those who had already lost out from Sutherland's rise and had little left to risk (Cowan 1977).

Unknown to Montrose, whose intelligence and scouting, not for the first time, was woefully deficient, a sizeable government force under Colonel Archibald Strachan was in the area and was well aware of Montrose's presence. Montrose, on the other hand, believed that there was only one cavalry troop in the area (Reid 1990). Sallagh says it was agreed in a council of war that the Earl of Sutherland should return to Sutherland to protect his lands from possible attack by Harry Graham, the brother of Montrose, who had been detached to raise recruits in Caithness and whom they feared might be joined by recruits from Strathnaver, and that the government forces should move to meet Montrose. This they did on 27 April 1650 at the Battle of Carbisdale (Sallagh 1813).

Battlefield Landscape

Montrose entered the area of the battle, on the wide flood plain, from the north, having marched through the narrow pass between the high ground on which Carbisdale Castle now stands and the river. Although a source of debate within the sources, the presence of earthworks at the eastern end of the village of Culrain suggests that he was here for several days and did fortify his camp. Although the earthworks have not been subject to any form of detailed investigation, the angled bank and ditch in the field to the south of the village hall does bear a striking similarity to a ravelin. If this interpretation is correct, then it places Carbisdale within a very small number of battlefields in Scotland, and indeed in Britain, with associated earthwork defences.

Strachan and his Covenanters approached from the south, though it is difficult to be certain about the deployment of his men, given that the accounts describe his attack as an ambush carried out by three groups. It seems likely that the battle took place on the flood plain, possibly in front of the camp, with Montrose's men quickly retiring into the woods, which can still be seen, on the slopes to the west of Culrain village.

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Location

A number of detailed descriptions of the site of the battle are given in the various sources.

One contemporary source says the battle took place at 'Craigchoynechan', beside Carbisdale. (Sallagh 1813). Another says only that they were drawn up in a place near a 'Scrogie Wood' (Balfour 1825). Reid describes the Royalists being ambushed by Strachan on the open strath at Carbisdale, near the present day village of Culrain (Reid 1990). Roberts puts the action at Kincardine, just south of Ardgay, on the flat ground just north of the Culrain Burn (Roberts 2000).

Cowan gives a more detailed picture. He believes Montrose was on the move, fording the Oykel, just west of the point where it is joined by the Cassley, to march along the south bank of the river. He puts the present day village of Culrain in the middle of the battlefield, situated in the middle of level ground roughly triangular in shape, bounded to the north and west by the densely wooded slopes of Craig a' Choineachan and the low wooded slopes of the 'Scroggie Wood', on the east by the Kyle and on the south by the Culrain Burn. He believes that Montrose marched through the narrow pass between the Creag and the Kyle into the centre of the triangle, facing south-eastwards towards Bonar Bridge and the Dornoch Firth (1977).

Another very detailed suggestion is made by Williams:

'With the hills to the north and the Kyle estuary to the east, the burn enclosed a triangle of level ground admirably suited to cavalry. At the northern point of this triangle was Carbisdale Loch, and, beyond, a narrow defile overhung by Craig-caoinichean. Here, in the jaws of the pass was Montrose's camp. His left flank rested on the Kyle. His right and rear were protected by the hills and on the bluff facing south-east towards the open ground the Royalists had thrown up a formidable breastwork. The position was a strong one and could not be taken by cavalry in a frontal assault.'(Williams 2001).

The location is considered in Highland Council's Historic Environment Record MHG9159, which nominally places the battle site at Lamentation Hill, Carbisdale, Grid Ref. NH5680 9450. Scroggie Wood is not mentioned on current or 19th century maps. If Montrose was indeed entrenched as some sources claim,

'There are no current indications of location of the entrenchments, the lower flat lands above the river are heavily improved and now cut by the railway-the only earthworks (slight) are opposite Mains Farm and these do not appear defensive. The lower slopes have seen various levels of agricultural improvement, but in a general check of the area no early earthwork features were seen. Only structures are dyke walls (ruinous) abutting some of the road.'

This record also says that, according to some sources, the dead from the battle were buried in the Carn non Conach (NH59SE0004) at Rhelonie, which is some distance away to the south. It also says there are reports of undated bodies from the peat (laid out in rows) "at Culrain". The record also suggests

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that if the hidden cavalry at Wester Fearn attacked Montrose's army as they approached onto the flat area and skirmishing stretched back as far as Carbisdale farm and also on to the Rhelonie area then the battle will have occurred over an extremely large area.

The Record quotes The National Statistical Account 1845 (Rev H Allan),

'Montrose was surprised on level ground, near a pass called Invercharron (Invercharron Hill - NH 5791), on Saturday, 27 April 1650. Montrose tried to reach a wooded, craggy hill in his rear but was overtaken and defeated by Lt-Col. Strachan. The ground where the battle was fought ... took its present name, Craigcaoineadhan, which may be translated the Rock of Lamentation, - from the event ...'.

The record goes on to say that

'Creag a'Choineachan is the name applied to the area on the Ross-shire OS 6" map 1907 which is named Lamentation Hill, etc. on OS 6" 1881. If Lamentation Hill is indeed the hill towards which Montrose was retreating the 1907 OS site could well be that of final engagement, and could thus be accepted as the site of the battle, the 1881 OS site being more commemorative than factual.'

Terrain

The battlefield is centred on the low lying plain to the west of the river which debouches into the loch (this is most likely a raised beach). The main action is likely to have been contained within the area to the north of burn which cuts across the plain from the south east to the north west, creating a triangle of flat ground. Montrose appears to have chosen his location at the north end of the plain, at the foot of the crags, as this would allow him to observe the approach of any force from the south, across the plain. It is difficult to envisage how Strachan's force managed to surprise Montrose, who was securely placed behind what appears to be field fortifications, unless the attack came once Montrose had left the cover of his camp and was moving his army south across the plain. It is possible that Strachan moved his men into the cover of the depression which accommodates the burn under cover of darkness and also across the higher ground to the west after approaching from the south.

The gentle wooded slope which fringes the north western edge of the plain is consistent with Montrose's retreat to 'Scroggie Wood', while some of his force appears to have fled to the east and come to grief in the river.

Condition

The open plain to the south of Culrain is almost entirely given over to improved grazing, with large fields bounded by fences. The gentle slopes to the north-west, which appears to represent Scroggie Woods is occupied by mixed deciduous woodland and therefore may retain some of the character of the 1650 landscape. The village of Culrain was not present in 1650 and represents a mix of late nineteenth/early twentieth century and modern

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dwellings. There has been some recent development in the form of house construction but this has thus far been very limited.

The possible field fortifications present in the field just to the south of the village hall are relatively clear, their good condition probably reflecting their pronounced character when freshly constructed: they appear to be a ravelin. A later track has been driven through the eastern flank of this feature, and this may represent an earlier continuation of the road as it leaves the bridge across the railway, to the east of the feature.

To the rear (north) of the village hall, is the area where the main camp would be expected, if the triangular shaped feature on the south side of the hall is the tip of a ravelin. There is a deep ditch running along the western side of the road where it runs north to south to the north of the village hall, and this may represent part of the camp defences, and indeed judging from its angle may be a continuation, with the ditch better preserved but the bank lost, of the ravelin to the south.

It was noted on the field visit that there has been recent tree planting in the area which may represent the camp and this is likely to have had an impact on any buried archaeology in that area.

Archaeological and Physical Remains and Potential

The question of physical remains above ground was considered in the Highland Council Historic Environment Record (HER) MHG9159, discussed in detail below under Battlefield Landscape. This concluded that further work comparing historical accounts with features on the ground would be required.

The area of the battle, on the flat ground to the west of the river is a relatively open landscape, with the village of Culrain having a fairly small footprint. The initial actions of the battle are likely to have taken place on the plain to the south of the village, with the Royalists then retreating to the wooded hills to the north-west. The potential for battle archaeology within this area is therefore good, with metal objects including musket shot, probably existing in the topsoil.

As noted above, there has in the past been doubt about the status of upstanding remains in the vicinity of the village. However, following a site visit in association with the compilation of the Inventory of Historic Battlefields it is now clear that an earthwork located in the field immediately to west of the road bridge over the railway, on the outskirts of the village, may well represent an arrowhead-shaped ravelin. This feature, which is represented by linear banks and ditches coming to a point which projects to the south, is typical of sixteenth century field fortifications and was probably located in advance of a fortified camp or other position. The orientation of the feature, which is at odds with all the later field boundaries, is in keeping with an earthwork sitting in advance of Montrose's camp, in the expectation that an attacking force will be advancing from the south, across the flood plain, which appears to have been the case.

The clear implication of this feature is that Montrose did indeed have a camp at this location, which given the scale of the fortifications, appears to have

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been occupied for at least several days prior to the battle. There are some banks and ditches to the rear (north) of the ravelin, behind the village hall, which may represent defensive works associated with the main part of the camp.

Cultural Association

The battle is not particularly well known today and there are no known poems or ballads about the engagement, although it is briefly referred to in *The Braes of Sutherland*, a ballad of the Highland Clearances by the contemporary Scottish folk-rock band Wolfstone. There is one place name which may be associated with the battle. This is Creag a' Choineachan; the hill to the north of the flood plain on which the initial encounter seems to have taken place. The Gaelic name of the hill is commonly translated as Lamentation Hill, which may refer to the retreat and defeat of Montrose and his Royalists.

Commemoration & Interpretation

In autumn 2009, the 1st Marquis of Montrose Society was considering establishing a memorial in tribute to the sacrifices made by many Orcadians during and prior to the battle of Carbisdale. (Kirkwall and St Ola Community Council minutes 29 August 2009).

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Reid, S. 1990. *The Campaigns of Montrose*. The Mercat Press, Edinburgh. 177-78.

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Information on Sources and Publications

Gilbert Gordon of Sallagh described the battle in '*The Continuation of the History of the Earls of Sutherland*', written contemporaneously, and republished in 1813. The editors of Wishart's '*Memoirs of Montrose*' claim that 'His (Sallagh's) authority is good for local events, but strongly tainted with bigotry, and warped by family pride.' They say that he took his name from his estate on Loch Shin and probably fled on Montrose's advance. Without giving any evidence they say that 'his account of the battle seems to that of an eye-witness.' (Murdoch and Simpson in Wishart 1893). They also comment that his account is in the main confirmed by Balfour, although, as discussed above, there are some differences.

Sir James Balfour (c1600-c1658), author of the four Volume '*Annals of Scotland*', republished in 1825, was Lord Lyon King of Arms to both Charles I and Charles II, and therefore might be expected to see things from a Royalist perspective. However, his record of the battle is clearly written from a

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Covenanter Government perspective, for example, describing the Royalists as ‘the enemy’ and Montrose as ‘the traitor, James Graham’. It may be that, in the inter-regnum between the two King Charles, Balfour was simply going with the prevailing wind.

Wishart, one of the main primary sources for Montrose has nothing to say directly about the battle as there is a gap in his manuscript between Montrose seeking support in Europe for an invasion, and Montrose being brought to Edinburgh. The editors of the *Memoirs* fill the gap by giving an account based on contemporary sources, particularly Sallagh and Balfour (Murdoch and Simpson in Wishart 1893).

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Stevenson, D. 1977 *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Scotland 1644-1651*. Royal Historical Society, London. 162.

Williams, R. 2001. *Montrose: Cavalier in Mourning*. House of Lochar, Isle of Colonsay. 348-355.

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<http://her.highland.gov.uk/SingleResult.aspx?uid='MHG9159'>

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The Inventory of Historic Battlefields - Boundary Map

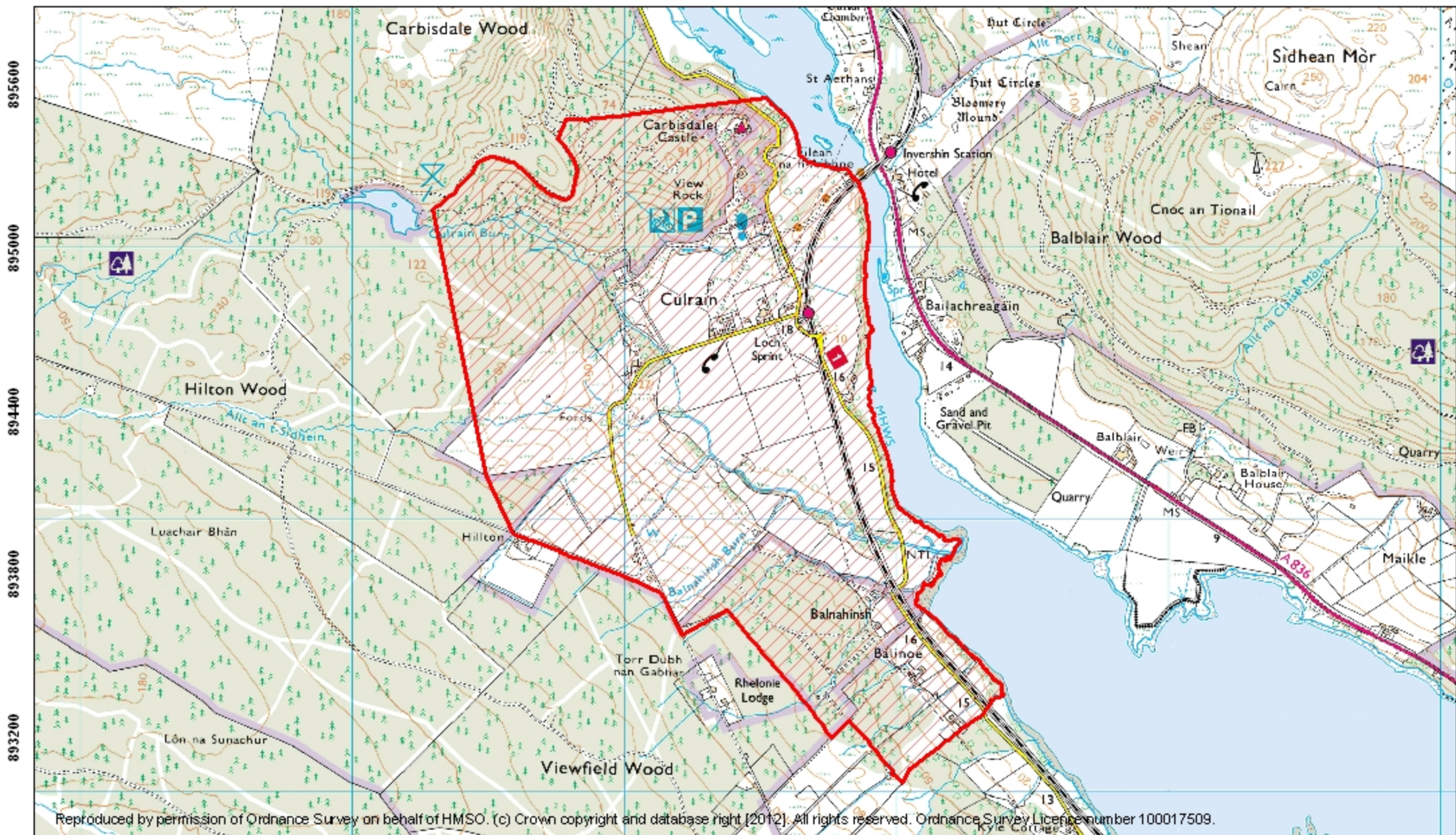
Carbisdale

27 April 1650


Local Authority: Highland



255000 256000 257000 258000 259000 260000



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 Inventory of Historic Battlefields boundary



The Inventory of Historic Battlefields - Deployments

Carbisdale

27 April 1650

Local Authority: Highland

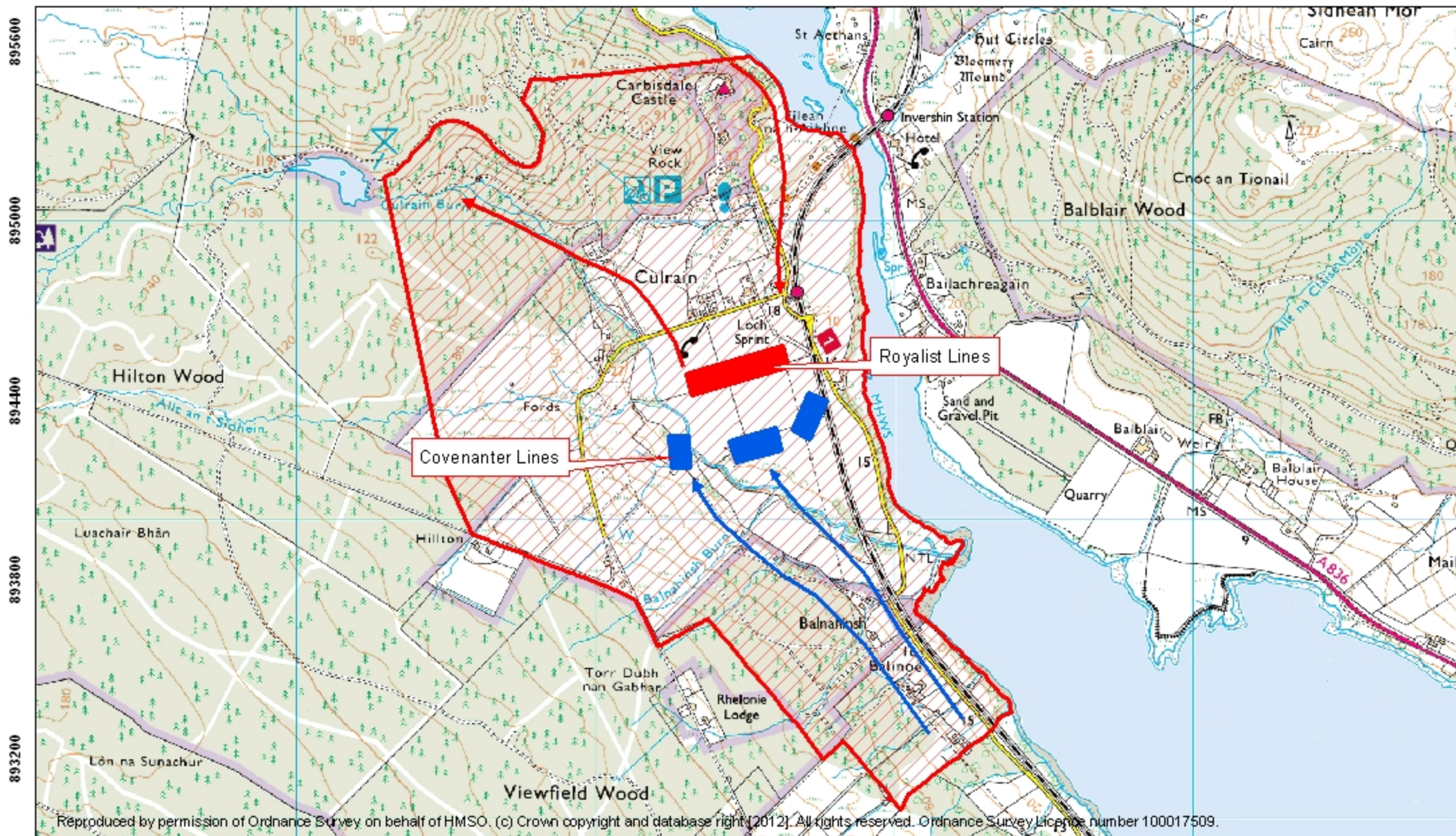


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- Inventory of Historic Battlefields boundary
- Covenanter Movement
- Royalist Movement

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The Inventory of Historic Battlefields - Features

Carbisdale

27 April 1650

Local Authority: Highland

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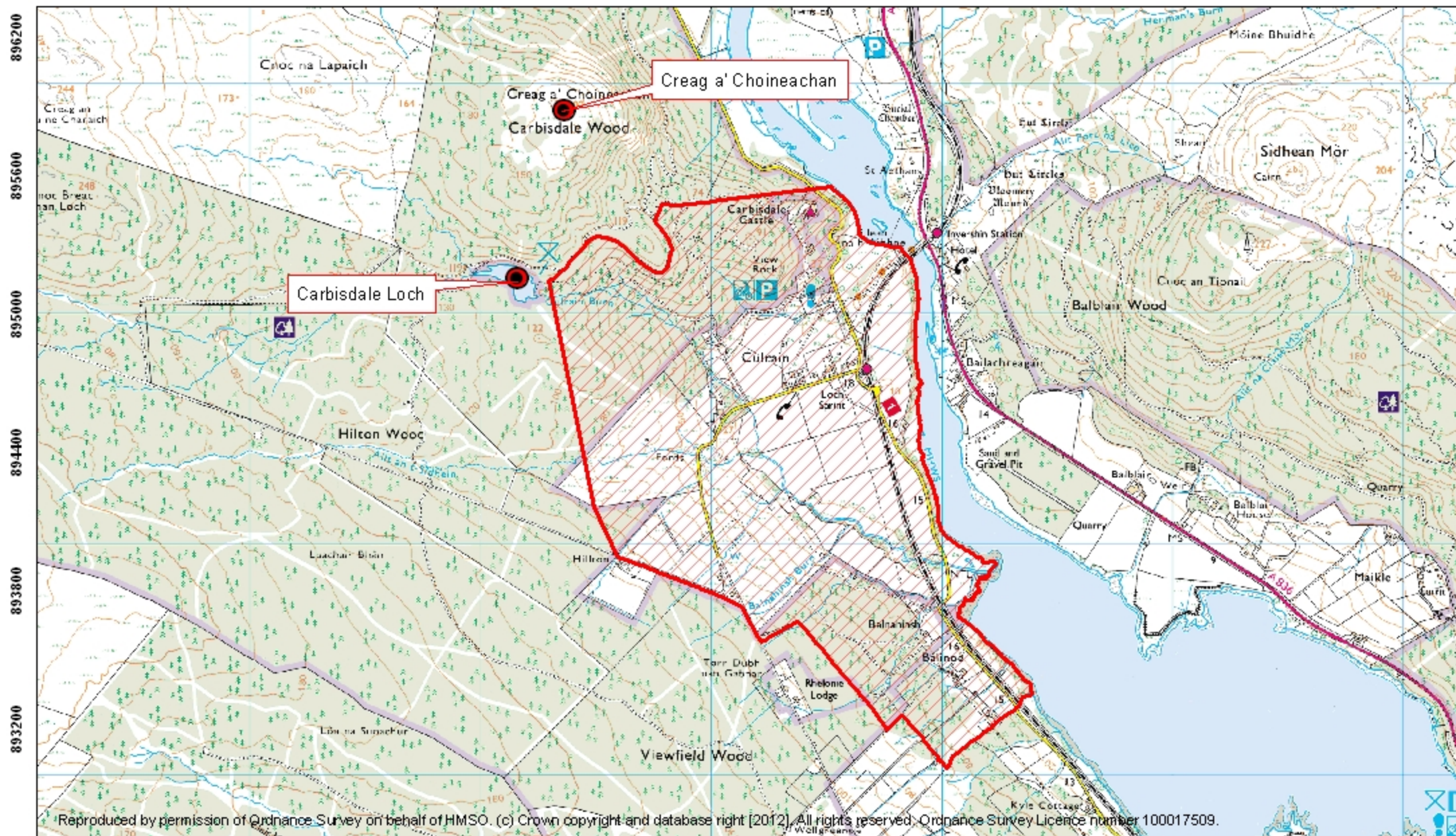
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