The Inventory of Historic Battlefields – Battle of Killiecrankie

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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KILLIECRANKIE

Alternative Names: None
27 July 1689
Local Authority: Perth and Kinross
NGR centred: NN 909 634
Date of Addition to Inventory: 21 March 2011
Date of last update: 14 December 2012

Overview and Statement of Significance

The Battle of Killiecrankie is significant as it is the opening battle of the first Jacobite Rising in Scotland. In later years their success at Killiecrankie would be a continual inspiration to Jacobites in Scotland, even though the loss of Dundee in the battle fatally undermined their cause. It also highlights the devastating effect a well-executed Highland charge could have on an enemy, and also displays the first of numerous technological and tactical developments by the fledgling British Army in this period.

John Graham of Claverhouse, the Viscount Dundee, had raised an army after James VII and II was ousted from the throne by the arrival of William of Orange in 1688. The battle came after a summer of manoeuvres where Major General Hugh Mackay led Government troops across the Highlands in pursuit of the growing army of Jacobites. The battle, fought on the slopes of the Killiecrankie Pass, was a victory for the Jacobites. It was, however, one of the bloodiest fought during the fifty years of the Jacobite risings, with huge losses on both sides. The most significant fatality was Dundee, leaving the cause with no effective leadership. This ultimately prevented the Jacobites from capitalising on their initial success and without a clear successor the rising came to an end the following year.

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 Killiecrankie is defined on the accompanying map and includes the following areas:

- The base of the Killiecrankie Pass as the approach line of the Government troops.

- The southern slopes of Creag Eallaich. The location of the Government and Jacobite line and the core of the battle as determined through archaeological fieldwork. This includes the remains of buildings associated with the Jacobite’s initial sniper action, Urrad House and gardens and the position of the Government baggage train within the Claverhouse Stone field.

- Killiecrankie village and lands to the south-east including areas of land owned by the National Trust for Scotland as the route of the Government rout and retreat. This includes the Soldier’s Leap and land which has high potential to contain graves associated with the battle.

- The well preserved landscape characteristics of the battlefield including the terrain of the Pass and the slopes of Creag Eallich. The intervisible views from the base of the glen looking upslope and from the upper terraces of the hill downslope are key to understanding the manoeuvres of both armies.
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Historical Background to the Battle

The battle came at the end of a cat and mouse chase around the Highlands as Mackay and Dundee each tried to get an advantage over the other and bring him to a decisive battle. In July 1689, both were heading for Blair Atholl to take the castle there. Dundee was coming south with around 2,400 men, while Mackay was marching up the Pass of Killiecrankie, a gorge formed by the River Garry, with between 3,500 and 5,000 men and three leather guns. Dundee reached Blair Atholl first and, as Mackay emerged from the pass down on the lower river terraces, his scouts reported elements of the Jacobite army in the area. He sent a vanguard out to confront these units, but then realised that Jacobites were on the high ground within a quarter mile of his location. Mackay then ordered a Quart de Conversion, and then marched up the slope that was now to their front. This ‘steep and difficult ascent, full of trees and shrubs’ (from Mackay’s own account) is exactly the same today, leading from the old road up to Urrard House. This brought Mackay’s army onto a terrace of level ground, which allowed them to deploy and face the enemy.

The Jacobites came over the top of the hill and drew up their line somewhere around the 200m contour. Mackay’s line was roughly 1,500m long, which meant that his men were fighting three deep, rather than the more normal six. The smaller Jacobite force was spread along a smaller front. Once in position, the two armies spent several hours insulting each other while Dundee apparently waited for the sun to go down so that it no longer shone in their eyes. During this period, the Government lines were harassed by Jacobite snipers in a building standing between the two lines. Mackay sent a party of men under the command of his brother to force them out, which they duly did and inflicted several casualties on the Jacobites. According to Jacobite sources, these snipers were some of Cameron of Lochiel’s men.

This small scale action seems to have precipitated the main battle. Shortly after the Government soldiers regained their own lines, at around 8 pm in the evening, the Jacobites moved down the hill in three groups in a classic Highland charge. As they charged, they were shielded from much Government shooting by a series of natural terraces that meant they kept disappearing from view. Primary accounts note that on the left flank in particular, the Government troops were able to fire no more than three volleys before the Jacobites smashed into them and scattered them. On the right flank of the Jacobites, the MacDonalds took heavy fire as they were slowed in the charge by field walls and buildings. However, the 40 strong Jacobite cavalry under Dundee broke the Government right flank; it was during this action that Dundee was fatally wounded. A brief rally from Mackay’s 100 strong cavalry was quickly ended as they realised that the infantry lines were collapsing, while the Jacobite right was keeping many of them bogged down in fighting on this side. Men started to stream from the battlefield with the Jacobites in pursuit. Many stopped to loot the baggage train, while others continued the pursuit for several miles.

Mackay was able to gather the remains of his right flank, an English regiment led by Hastings, and Leven’s regiment from the centre and retreated in reasonable order back through the Pass down to Stirling. There was little
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attempt to stop them, largely because the Jacobite army was in no state to do so. Some were at the baggage train, some were pursuing troops over the surrounding countryside and they had also taken heavy losses in the fighting. Both Government and Jacobite sources suggest that Dundee’s army took between 600 and 800 casualties. The Government army took around 2,000 casualties, most of them Lowland Scots. These figures are very high, but all of the sources agree reasonably well on the scale of losses. The Jacobite losses represent about a third of their army, while the Government losses were at least half of theirs. These are very severe for both sides and all the more remarkable given that the main action took less than an hour.

The Armies

The two armies were quite different in constitution and in tactics. The Jacobite force consisted of around 1,800 Highland clansmen raised by Cameron of Lochiel, together with 240 of his own Camerons and 300 Irish Jacobites under Colonel Cannon. The Government army was a mixture of veterans from the Dutch wars against Louis XIV and recent recruits who had never been in battle before. The Dutch battalions were Scots who had gone to serve the cause of Orange, while most of the remainder of the army consisted of Lowland Scots. Hastings’ regiment, however, was English and there were also some Highland elements to the force, including a contingent from Clan Menzies (one of the eyewitness accounts is by Donald MacBane, who was from near Inverness, where he had joined Grant’s regiment before being transferred to Mackay’s command with the onset of the rebellion).

Numbers

Jacobites: c.2,400 men, mainly foot, with around 40 cavalry.

Government: between 3,500 and 5,000, mainly foot, with around 100 cavalry and 3 leather guns.

Losses

The losses on both sides were heavy. The Jacobites undoubtedly won the battle, but their left flank took heavy losses in the three volleys that the Government troops were able to fire. On the right flank, Jacobite losses would have been minimal as the Government troops on this side apparently broke virtually without firing a shot, which has been supported with the physical evidence. It is therefore all the more striking that the Jacobites took 600-800 casualties, as these will have been almost entirely on the left flank. From an overall force of 2,400, this represents a casualty rate of up to 33%; there has to be a degree of caution over these very high figures because the Jacobites were not subject to muster rolls (which give the enlistment date, movements and discharge date of all soldiers in the British Army), and most of the estimates come from Government witnesses. However, the Lochiel account does suggest that the Jacobites lost around 800 men.
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The Government losses are likely to be reasonably accurate because they derive from a formal army with muster rolls. There is general agreement in the sources of around 2,000 casualties amongst the Government troops, the majority of whom would have been Lowland Scots (the Lochiel account gives a figure of 1,800). The English troops led by Hastings were able to retreat with Mackay to Stirling, although they took heavy casualties as well. If this figure is accurate, then the casualty rate for the Government force may have been as high as 50%.

Action

The Battle of Killiecrankie marked the climax of a game of cat and mouse played out between a Government army under the command of Major-General Hugh Mackay and a Jacobite army under the leadership of Claverhouse, Viscount of Dundee. Much of our knowledge of the battle comes from the detailed account provided by Mackay (published in 1833), though several others do exist. The campaign consisted of the two armies manoeuvring around the Highlands for several months, each attempting to get the advantage of the other; the Jacobite siege of Ruthven Castle took place during this period. In July 1689, both Mackay and Dundee headed for Blair Atholl, each intending to use it as a base to dominate the area. Dundee won the race, and both sides finally came face to face close to the Pass of Killiecrankie on July 27, 1689. Mackay emerged from the Pass to discover that the Jacobites had reached Blair Atholl first: small groups of the enemy were observed further toward Blair Atholl. Mackay gave orders to Balfour, whose regiment was to end up close to the left of the line, to take troops to meet them. According to Mackay, more of the enemy were observed “marching down a high hill, within a quarter mile to the place where he stood, when the gross of their body appeared even closer to their present position”, Mackay then ordered a ‘Quart de Conversion’. The army then marched up the slope that was now to their front. This was described as “a steep and difficult ascent, full of trees and shrubs”; it has exactly the same appearance today, being covered by trees and undergrowth, but not dense enough to halt the progress of troops climbing up it. It is the slope that leads from the old road up to Urrard House. This brought Mackay’s army onto a terrace of level ground, which would allow them to deploy and face the enemy. This is the ground upon which Urrard House and the supposed grave of the officers stands. In Mackay’s view, he had gained possession of

‘a ground fair enough to receive the enemy, but not to attack them, there being, within a short musket shot to it, another eminence before our front, as we stood when we were up the lowest hill, near the river’.

This next eminence is now occupied by the A9 road, which has been built on an artificial embankment, obscuring the original topography and bisecting the battlefield.

According to Mackay, before he could position his troops, ‘Dundee had already got possession…before we could be well up, and had his back to a very high hill’. This high hill is clearly Creag Eallaich, which rises up to 509 m. The Jacobites, however, would not have been on the top of the hill, where
they could not deploy, but spread out on a terrace, above Mackay’s position. The most likely location appears to be the 200 m contour, which then and now accommodated a number of farms. However, the accounts of MacBane (1728) and Lochiel (Drummond 1842) both differ from that of Mackay here, with both of them stating that Mackay was deployed and waiting before the Jacobites arrived.

Mackay’s right flank appears to have been anchored on a stream that runs north to south down the slope to join with the Garry at the bottom of the glen. This stream was the Allt Girmaig, which would provide a barrier to movement by both sides further to the east and so provide a natural boundary to that side of the battlefield. The western limit of Mackay’s line was held by Lieutenant-Colonel Lawder, who was on a small hill. The most likely candidate for this little hill covered with trees is a tree-covered knoll, which today has a house called Balchroic Cottage sitting on the top of it. There is another knoll, also covered with trees, some 300 m north-west of the first, but as this is somewhat up slope and further to the west, it seems less likely. The distance between the burn and the first knoll is around 1,500 m; it may have been possible to cover this given that Mackay had elected to leave

‘a little distance betwixt every battalion, having made two of each, because he was to fight three deep; only in the midst of the line, he left a greater opening where he placed the two troops of horse.’

Not only were the battalions spread thin, fighting three deep instead of the usual six, but he had also left gaps between them, all of which would allow for such an extended line.

Both sides faced one another for several hours through the afternoon and into the evening, taunting and skirmishing. Mackay’s men were troubled through most of the afternoon by a party of Jacobite sharpshooters, who latterly had taken up position in a building part way up the hill. Mackay gave orders for them to be flushed from this position and so accordingly, a group of musketeers was dispatched from his own regiment on the right flank, which was commanded by his brother (who was killed in the later fighting). The operation was a success and the snipers retreated back to their own lines, losing some of their number in the process. Interestingly, according to the account of Cameron of Lochiel, the snipers were a party of 60 of his 240 Camerons, who were occupying the building as much to deny the enemy its use as to use it for sniping.

This action seems to have prompted Dundee to move and at around 8 pm, the Jacobites charged in three bodies. The Government line quickly broke on the left flank, possibly due to the lack of extended killing ground for their musketry to take effect - MacBane reported that the enemy were upon them before they had chance to fire more than three rounds. Only on the right flank did the Government troops hold at all, and even here they took heavy losses. Nonetheless, Hastings’ English regiment survived reasonably well, and along with Leven’s men made up the main body of the group with which Mackay retreated to Stirling.

Hastings on the right and Leven in the centre poured flanking fire into the Jacobites, but were quickly broken up by the Jacobite cavalry. Dundee led the charge of the small Jacobite cavalry force (c.40 strong) into Leven’s regiment
in the centre. However, for some reason, the charge veered to the left, possibly to support that part of the line that was facing the stiffest opposition from Government troops. Dundee, at the head of his men no longer, was felled by at least one shot as he cleared the fog of musket smoke, the bullet apparently hitting him under the arm. There is a story that he was shot by a sniper located in what is now Urrard House, but there is no real evidence to support this. Dundee’s loss to the Jacobite cause was a grave one and undoubtedly helped seal the fate of the uprising.

There was a brief attempt by Mackay’s cavalry to come around the Government troops and flank the Jacobites, but this quickly fell apart as some of the cavalry quickly fled the battlefield, and others became bogged down in the fighting on the Jacobite right flank. Before long, the cavalry had left the field, leaving the infantry to their own devices. MacBane, who was one of the Government soldiers in the battle, made his escape initially on horseback, having taken a horse from the baggage train, but he then had to take off on foot and thereafter claims to have made the now famous “Soldier’s Leap” (an improbable jump of around 5 m across the rapids of the River Garry).

The victorious Jacobites chased the routed Government troops for several miles, slaughtering many and plundering the baggage cart. It is popularly believed that the looting of the baggage train was the reason that Mackay and the other survivors were able to retreat from the battle, as the pursuit ended once the baggage train of 1,200 pack-horses was discovered. This claim is refuted in the Locheil account, which also goes on to describe the scene of carnage revisited by the tired Highlanders after returning from their pursuit; with many of the dead having had their

‘heads divided into two halves by one blow. Others had their sculls cutt off above the eares by a back strok, like a night-cap’ (Drummond 1842).

Aftermath and Consequences

In absolute terms, the victory at Killiecrankie was a Pyrrhic one for the Jacobites. Dundee was killed, with no one of similar quality to replace him, and the campaign spluttered to an end with the battle at Dunkeld and the final rout at Cromdale. From that perspective, the result of Killiecrankie had no real significance. However, it has certainly entered the popular imagination. Burns wrote the first three verses of the well-known song ‘Braes o’ Killiecrankie’, William Wordsworth penned a sonnet about the battle and the story of the Soldier’s Leap is one of the better-known tales of Scottish history. The National Trust for Scotland visitor centre at the Pass of Killiecrankie is a well-known attraction for visitors, although many are drawn by the dramatic scenery rather than the history of the battle.

From the Government perspective, the death of Dundee was the most significant element of the battle because his loss deprived the Jacobites of their greatest general. From the Jacobite perspective, the significance of the battle was that it gave them first blood, and it put the Lowlands in fear of the Highlanders. While the 1689 campaign failed at Cromdale, the Jacobite cause had a victory to show that there was a realistic chance of success; had
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Mackay beaten Dundee, it is questionable whether there would have been much success in recruiting in future campaigns.

There were several military innovations associated with the battle: the first use of grenades in Scotland; the first use of platoon firing in Britain; and the adoption of the socketed bayonet as a result of the defeat, which was widely thought to have been partly the result of the plug bayonet's deficiencies. Grenades were used at Sedgemoor in 1685, but this was their first known use in Scotland and was attested by grenade fragments found on the battlefield in 2003. Mackay was an innovator, and he was attempting to bring new techniques from his experience on the Continent to the British Army. He attempted to drill his men in platoon fire, but at the time of the battle it is likely that they were too inexperienced to make effective use of it. His army was equipped with plug bayonets, but Mackay was struck by the dilemma that the plug bayonet allowed the musket to be used at close quarters against broadswords, but rendered it incapable of firing. This meant that there was a risky calculation to be made of when to fix bayonets, and the Government troops at Killiecrankie suffered from this very problem. A recent innovation from Europe was the socketed bayonet, which allowed the bayonet to be mounted and the musket to be fired, and Mackay was instrumental in getting the British Army to accept the new bayonets in the aftermath of the battle. It is, however, a myth that Mackay was the inventor of the socketed bayonet, as they had been introduced in Europe a few years earlier than the Battle of Killiecrankie.

One of the most striking military aspects of the battle was the use of the Highland Charge by the Jacobites, which was to be a characteristic throughout their campaigns. This was scarcely a new innovation, having been used to dramatic effect by Alistair Mac Colla in Montrose's campaign of the War of the Three Kingdoms in 1644-5. However, this was the first time that British troops rather than Scottish had been faced with the tactic and its gory success cemented a reputation for the Highland Jacobites as ferocious and unstoppable warriors.

Events & Participants

The Battle of Killiecrankie was the first encounter between the Jacobites and the Government army. Victory for the Jacobites was bitter sweet and short lived, the death of their leader Dundee on the battlefield resulted in disputes over leadership between the Irish contingent and Cameron of Lochiel. This lead to divisions in the cause and with defeats at Dunkeld in August 1689 and at Cromdale on April 30 1690, the rising petered out. By spring 1692, following the battles of the Boyne (1690) and of Aughrim (1691) that ended James' Irish hopes, the Jacobite chiefs had sworn allegiance to William as King.

John Graham, Earl of Claverhouse and Viscount Dundee, commonly known now as Bonnie Dundee, was an experienced soldier with a history of fighting for the Crown. He had led the suppression of the conventicles in south-west Scotland for Charles II with particular zeal. He had been defeated by a Covenanter force at Drumclog, nearly being killed during the engagement, before being involved in the subsequent Government victory at Bothwell.
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Bridge on 22 June 1679. His actions against them earned him the lasting hatred of the Covenanters, who nicknamed him 'Bluidy Clavers', while his Highland allies knew him as 'Black John of the Battles'. He was one of the first of the Scottish nobility to reject the ascendancy of William and Mary, and had been declared a traitor even before William and Mary accepted the throne of Scotland on 11 April 1689. Graham raised the standard for James at Dundee Law in early 1689, before embarking into the Highlands to build support for the cause, all the while evading General Mackay's pursuing army. Killiecrankie was Graham's first and last battle for the Jacobite cause, as he was fatally wounded by gunfire during the charge. Sources differ on whether he died on the field or of his wounds a short while later, but without his leadership the Jacobite cause in Scotland was irrevocably weakened.

Also present on the Jacobite side, Cameron of Lochiel was a significant figure in the troubles of the 17th century. He was a protégé of the Marquis of Argyll and fought for Charles II against Cromwell in 1651-2; Lochiel recorded several victories against Cromwellian forces. He was knighted by Charles II in 1681. The Camerons were active in clan battles during this period as well and his men were involved in the Battle of Mulroy in 1688. His son John led the Camerons at Sheriffmuir, while his grandson Donald was one of Bonnie Prince Charlie's main commanders in the '45 Rising and was wounded at Culloden in 1746.

The Government commander, Major General Hugh Mackay, was another experienced soldier; like Dundee, he had extensive experience fighting in Europe for the Crown. In Britain, he had been part of the victorious Government force at Sedgemoor when the Monmouth Rebellion against James II was put down. After Killiecrankie, Mackay led the Williamite infantry against the Jacobites at Aughrim in Ireland in 1691, before being killed at the Battle of Steinkeerke in the Low Countries in 1692, where he was commander of the British contingent of William's army.

Donald MacBane was a private soldier, present at the battle of Mulroy in 1688 and Killiecrankie in 1689, immortalised his exploits in his memoirs, and in doing so provides one of the most detailed accounts of the battle at Mulroy (his mention of an hour long fire-fight is interesting as it flies in the face of traditional models of clan warfare which would have a single volley fired before muskets were thrown down and swords drawn). He ran away from both battles and if his entertaining writings are to be believed, he made the famous jump from one side of the River Garry to the other at Killiecrankie to evade the pursuing Jacobites, at the place now remembered as Soldier's Leap. He would go on to run a brothel and become an instructor in fencing (also publishing a manual of swordsmanship) and on his death he was buried in the garrison cemetery in Fort William.

Context

Seventeenth century Scotland was in a state of political and religious turmoil. Presbyterianism had spread across much of the country and in 1637 Archibald Johnston (Lord Warriston) orchestrated the revision of the National Covenant of 1581. Signed by James VI and adopted by the Church of
Scotland, the Covenant was initially drawn up by John Craig as a means of countering the Roman Catholic Church’s attempts to regain control of Scotland. In 1638, Warriston’s revision of the Covenant was used as symbol of defiance against the attempts by Charles I to bring the Church of Scotland into alignment with the Church of England. As the de facto government of Scotland, the Covenanters defeated Charles I in the Bishop’s Wars, damaging the Stuart monarchy and contributing directly to the outbreak of the English Civil War. Led by Archibald Campbell, 1st Marquess of Argyll, the Covenanters were the leading political party in Scotland; however, they were defeated in battle by Oliver Cromwell and Scotland was ultimately annexed under Cromwell’s Commonwealth and the General Assembly of the Kirk lost all civil powers (Cowan 1968).

Following the Restoration of 1660 when Charles II was restored to his father’s throne (having been crowned in Scotland in 1650), the Covenanters had become the oppressed, cast out of political power and surviving largely as a popular movement, particularly in south-west Scotland. During the 1660s, 1670s and 1680s, there were repeated efforts by Charles II’s government to stamp out the Covenanters as a social and religious movement. The repression sparked off several rebellions, most notably in 1666, which ended in the battle of Rullion Green, and in 1679, where an initial Covenanter victory at Drumclog was followed by a decisive Government victory at Bothwell Bridge. The Covenanters were scattered and posed little further threat. In this atmosphere, Charles II died in 1685 and was succeeded by his Catholic brother, James VII & II. This marked a fundamental turning point in the balance of power in Britain as a whole, and was to have a major impact in Scotland.

Shortly after the accession of James VII & II in 1685, the Duke of Monmouth led the abortive Monmouth Rebellion with the Duke of Argyll; both men were subsequently captured and executed. James’ rule grew ever more unpopular and the birth of James’ son, who was Catholic and whose birth meant a Catholic dynasty on the British throne, gave an excuse for a group of English parliamentarians from the Whig party of opposition to invite William of Orange to take the throne. William’s arrival drove James to flee to Ireland and he was declared deposed, with William and his wife Mary (James’ eldest living child) crowned as the new monarchs. This brought the situation in Scotland back to that of the Wars of the Three Kingdoms; Scotland’s monarch had been deposed in England, and the Scottish political establishment accepted the fait accompli. Others amongst the nobility were less prepared to accept the new regime, instead taking up arms to restore the king, echoing the efforts of James Graham, the Marquis of Montrose in the 1640s. Determined to return James VII to the throne, John Graham of Claverhouse, Viscount Dundee, raised an army and launched a rebellion. He and his supporters were known as Jacobites (after the Latin for James, Jacobus). The first battle of Dundee’s Rising was at Killiecrankie in July 1689, where the Jacobites defeated a larger government army under General Hugh MacKay, Unfortunately Dundee was himself killed during the fighting. This meant that, ten years after the Covenanter rebellion had been destroyed at Bothwell Bridge in 1679, two of the main commanders of the Government forces present had subsequently
been killed in rebellion against the Government: Monmouth in 1685 and Dundee in 1689.

With the loss of John Graham of Claverhouse at the Battle of Killiecrankie on 27 July 1689, the Jacobites appointed a new commander, Col. Alexander Cannon. He ordered the Jacobite army into the assault on the town of Dunkeld on the morning of 21 August 1689. The town was defended by the Cameronians, a regiment recently raised from the ranks of the Coveniers and taking its name from Richard Cameron, one of the leading Covenanters preachers of the Killing Times who had been killed in a skirmish at Airdsmoss on 22 July 1680. Initially fighting under the command of Lt. Col. William Cleland, a veteran of Drumclog and Bothwell Brig, the Covenanters preparing to defend Dunkeld seemed to have an almost impossible task before them.

Prior to the engagement at Dunkeld, General Mackay, the commander of the Government army, which had suffered so badly at the hands of the Jacobites at Killiecrankie, had been tracking the Jacobites through Braemar into Strathbogie with a mounted column for over a month, but was out-manoeuvred when Cannon and his men doubled back south into the hills at Kincardine o’ Neil near Aboyne. Mackay, unwilling to follow them into the hills, advanced via Aberdeen and by 22 August, the day after the Battle of Dunkeld took place, had only managed to reach Drumlithie. Meanwhile Cannon, unaware of the presence of the Cameronians, had turned south-west and advanced towards Dunkeld.

With the victory of the Cameronians, the Jacobite army was forced to withdraw once more to the north. Throughout the winter they engaged in small skirmishes and raids, but did not attempt any further major engagements with the Government forces. The army dwindled in size as many of the Jacobites returned to their homes, and Cannon was replaced as commander by Major – General Thomas Buchan, but it was to no avail. The Jacobite army was taken by surprise at Cromdale on 1 May 1690 and were soon completely dispersed, bringing to a close the first Jacobite Rising in Scotland.

**Battlefield Landscape**

The location of the battlefield is well established through a number of eye witness accounts and the recent archaeological fieldwork. The battle was fought at the head of the Pass of Killiecrankie, south of Blair Atholl and the landscape of the battle is reasonably clear. The Government troops advanced along the Garry, and climbed the scarp slope to Urrard House when they realised that the Jacobites were approaching and were on the high ground. The Jacobites were drawn up on the slopes of Creag Eallaich (probably on the 200 m contour line) while the Government troops were spread out along the base of the hill.

The current Urrard House is on the site of the house which stood at the time of the battle and from where the shot that felled Dundee is traditionally said to have been fired. The modern house is a far grander structure than the contemporary one, which was called Roan Ruirridh. The original house had an enclosed garden that Mackay briefly considered using as a defence; however, the current walled garden is probably a later feature because it does
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not appear on Roy’s map. There is a wall surrounding the house that probably represents the enclosed garden that Mackay considered.

Mackay’s right flank was anchored on a burn that runs downslope into the Garry called Allt Girnaig, and his left flank was anchored on a small hill, probably the knoll where Balchroic Cottage stands. All of these elements of the landscape remain largely unchanged and are intervisible.

The mound known as Tomb Clavers is another artefact of post-conflict changes; rather than a constructed mound, the feature is a piece of ground left undisturbed by quarrying that was enhanced with a stone wall and rubble infill to create its current form.

These landscape features are all extant and unaffected by later developments and the terraces that provided protection to the charge of the Jacobite left flank are easily discernible. Indeed, overall the landscape has seen little major development, with no urban build up and houses being relatively isolated in the landscape. The most striking change is the presence of the A9 trunk road that now bisects the battlefield. This will undoubtedly have had an adverse impact on the ground it covers, but the visual impact of the site is undiminished by its presence. The location of the battlefield is well established through a number of eye witness accounts and the recent archaeological fieldwork. The battle was fought at the head of the Pass of Killiecrankie, south of Blair Atholl and the landscape of the battle is reasonably clear. The Government troops advanced along the Garry, and climbed the scarp slope to Urrard House when they realised that the Jacobites were approaching and were on the high ground. The Jacobites were drawn up on the slopes of Creag Eallaich (probably on the 200 m contour line) while the Government troops were spread out along the base of the hill.

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**Location**

Fieldwork carried out in 2003 indicated that the eyewitness accounts of the battle are accurate in their location of the battle (Pollard & Oliver 2003). The Jacobites were drawn up, probably along the 200m contour, on the slopes of Creag Eallaich, while the Government troops were spread out along the base of the hill. Mackay’s right flank appears to have been anchored on a stream that runs north to south down the slope to join with the Garry at the bottom of the glen. MacBane remembers, ‘having a great Water in the Rear, and another on the Right of our Line.’ This stream was the Allt Girmaig, which would provide a barrier to movement by both sides further to the east and so provide a natural boundary to that side of the battlefield. The western limit of
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Mackay’s line was held by Lieutenant-Colonel Lawder, who according to Mackay, “was posted advantageously upon the left of all, on a little hill wreathed with trees, with his party of 200 of the choice of our army”. As previously noted, the most likely candidate for this little hill covered with trees is a tree covered knoll which today has a house called Balchroic Cottage sitting on the top of it.

Terrain

There has been little overall change in the landscape over the centuries. In addition to field enclosures, the main change has been the construction of the A9 across the line of the Highlanders’ charge. Urrard House is a country house in the Victorian style, very different from the building that stood there at the time of the battle, but the original seems to have been of similar scale, based on a photograph of 1860.

The terrain itself is absolutely perfect for the Highland charge, with a long slope that flattens out to a terrace that is itself relatively small. This forced the Government line to be close to the bottom of the slope, meaning that the charge would not have lost any momentum at the point of engagement. The other advantage to the ground is that it consists of a series of slight terraces running down the slope, which had the effect of screening the Jacobites from the Government troops at the base of the slope. They would have had little opportunity to shoot at them until the Jacobites were virtually on top of them. This reduced the Jacobite casualties from Mackay’s platoon fire, and meant that the Government troops had virtually no opportunity to engage their plug bayonets to protect themselves from the charge.

Condition

Overall the battlefield is in very good condition. The obvious exception to this is where the A9 bisects the battlefield. In addition to the dual carriageway itself, there is also disturbance from cutting into the uphill slope and building up on the downslope. This means that there is a relatively broad corridor of disturbance across the battlefield, but in terms of where the majority of the fighting took place, the problem is quite small. The other main issue for the battlefield is that the whole area was used by Atholl troops for training both before and after the battle, and there are later munitions, buttons and other insignia mixed in with the metal detector finds.

Archaeological and Physical Remains and Potential

In 2003, a programme of metal detecting, geophysical survey, excavation and topographic survey was carried out as part of the BBC TV series *Two Men in a Trench* (Pollard and Oliver 2003).

There are two scheduled ancient monuments that have been related to the battle: the first is the Claverhouse Stone (NN 9082 6319), which was proved to be the location of the looted baggage train through the 2003 metal detect survey. The association between the stone and the battle is entirely fortuitous;
the stone itself is a prehistoric standing stone and was erected thousands of years before the battle.

The second scheduled ancient monument is a mound with a memorial cairn on its summit, known as Tomb Clavers, or the Grave of the Officers. Tomb Clavers has been considered the tomb of the officers for over a century. It does not appear on the 1865 First Edition Ordnance Survey map, which may indicate that the feature was constructed after that date, although it is also possible that the cartographers did not mark it on the map. However, there is evidence of the name ‘Tomb Clavers’ at an earlier date. The Old Statistical Account (an account of each parish compiled by the local minister in the 1790s) contains a record of the discovery of bones at Urrard House in the course of gravel quarrying; the account states that the bones were discovered close to a mound known as Tomb Clavers, and that the remains were re-buried on the site.

Today, the site is marked by a memorial to Ian Stewart Fitzgerald Campbell the Younger, who was killed in action in Malaya in 1950. The memorial starts off as a dedication to the memory of the officers and other ranks that died in the Battle of Killiecrankie, and states that the cairn marks the grave of the officers. The young man for whom the memorial was erected was the son of the owners of Urrard House. The memorial cairn is the focus every year of a remembrance ceremony held by the White Cockade Society, where the dead on both sides are celebrated and commemorated.

The house that was standing at the time of the battle, called Roan Ruarriridh at that time, was largely re-built as Urrard House in the mid 19th century after a fire. There is a photograph of Urrard House surviving from 1860, which shows the original part of the building that would undoubtedly have been standing in 1689, on the day of the battle. According to one unlikely local tale, Dundee was shot dead by a sniper firing from a window in the house. The Jacobites occupied the house after the battle, and there is also a tradition that the skeleton of a man was found in the garret, said to be the remains of a soldier seeking sanctuary (Statistical Account 1791-99, 769). The back of the current building has been extensively remodelled over the intervening years, but the old building lies partially under the west wing, as revealed in excavation in 2003.

Although the gardens at Urrard today include a splendid walled garden this does not appear to be the feature described by Mackay when he “visited a garden which was behind, of a design to put them in there in expectation of succour” (1833, 58). Perhaps wisely, he chose not to use it as it was a potential death trap, with no way out once surrounded. Roy’s map from the 1750s does not show the current walled garden but does portray the house, then known as Ranrourie, to be surrounded by a wall; it seems more likely to be this that Mackay refers to. The current walled garden contains an artificial mound called Dundee’s Mound that was traditionally the burial place of Dundee’s horse, which was also killed in the battle. However, it is more likely that the mound was a later piece of landscape gardening, where an element of ‘wildscape’ was incorporated within the order of a walled garden to provide an aesthetic contrast. Excavations in 2003 revealed no indications of burials of any form.
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The metal detecting carried out in 2003 revealed that there were physical remains relating to the battle still present. The distribution of material indicated that accounts of the battle, which described the Government left flank as firing barely a shot before breaking and running, are accurate as the left flank has a low density of musket balls but a lot of personal items such as buttons.

The survey also pinpointed the location of the Government baggage train on the terraces above the Garry within a field containing the prehistoric standing stone known as the Claverhouse Stone. This site was also significant because it occupied the majority of the surviving Jacobites after the initial charge.

There have been no unequivocal discoveries of human remains at the site. There is a tradition that the bodies were put into a burn to be washed down into the Garry and out to sea, but there is no evidence to support the story. Given the very high number of casualties reported on both sides it is likely that burials will survive within the defined area, especially in the general area of Urrard House which was the core of the fighting.

There are also indications of a structure that may be the remains of the building in which the Jacobite snipers hid in the action prior to the battle proper. This is at Croft Carnoch on the downslope side of the farm track (NN 911 637). The remains include a sunken trackway, two possible buildings and a circular depression which may be a corn drying kiln. The clearest remains are of a long house, which survives as a rectangular turf bank, from the gable end of which a pistol ball was recovered. The significance of this is that the pistol, probably fired by an officer can only have been fired at close range, as would have occurred during the sally by men from MacKay’s regiment. Additionally, a broken trigger guard from a musket was found in the near vicinity. This is indicative of hand to hand fighting; finding it in this location means that there was an action separate from the main action of the day down on the Government line, which must have been the sally against the Jacobite snipers.

In addition to the above, Lochiell’s account also makes mention of the MacDonals, who were on the Jacobite left, becoming stalled among buildings and dykes due to heavy flanking fire from the government right. These are likely to be the buildings and field boundaries shown on Roy’s map in this location, which as yet have not been identified in the field.

Roy’s map shows two farmsteads on the battlefield as little clusters of buildings. One of these settlements, Lagnabuaig, partially survives adjacent to the A9 (NN 907 637), which has destroyed the majority of the settlement. One of the structures was excavated in 2003, and proved to be a barn used into the 19th century. This building is likely to post-date the battle, and it indicates that the settlement indicated on Roy’s map survived for some considerable time. However, it is not known whether Lagnabuaig as a whole was present in 1689, although the skirmish relating to the Jacobite snipers indicates that the accounts only mention buildings where they took an active part in the battle. As the only contemporary accounts come from men who had to flee the battlefield to escape, it is possibly unsurprising that details of farm settlements were not recorded.
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Cultural Association

The battle is relatively well known, partly because of the song *The Braes o’ Killiecrankie* (popularised by the Corries in particular), composed by Robert Burns. William Wordsworth also wrote the sonnet *In the Pass of Killiecrankie* about the battle.

The battle’s popular appeal is also due to the death of Dundee in the fighting, an event which has given the battle an air of romance with a doomed hero meeting his end. Equally, its fame derives from the story of the Soldier’s Leap, where a Government trooper called Donald MacBane made a desperate leap across the gorge of the Garry to escape the pursuing Jacobites. The story is well known, not least because MacBane wrote a book about his experiences and was adept at self-publicity. The incident has been featured as a logo on a brand of Scottish whisky.

The National Trust for Scotland owns part of the Pass and there is a visitor centre near the traditional location of the Soldier’s leap and interpretation boards at key locations within the Pass. The Tomb Clavers bears a plaque to the battle which also commemorates the son of Urrard House who was killed in the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960). This cenotaph is the feature of an annual commemoration of the battle by the White Cockade Society.

Within the Pass there is a range of place-names associated with the battle, such as Dundee’s Mound, Soldier’s Leap and Trooper’s Den.

**Commemoration & Interpretation**

There is relatively little by way of commemoration or on-site interpretation at the battlefield at the moment. There is a board near the likely location of the battle, which offers a map of the battlefield and an interpretation of the events, while there is a plaque on Tomb Clavers.

In addition to Burn’s and Wordsworth’s verses about the battle there is a poem (turned into a folk song) about Dundee, called *Bonnie Dundee*. The original poem makes it clear that his rebellion was political and legal in nature

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Away to the hills, to the caves, to the rocks} \\
&Ere I own an usurper, I’ll couch with the fox; \\
&\text{And tremble, false Whigs, in the midst of your glee,} \\
&\text{You have not seen the last of my bonnet and me}
\end{align*}
\]

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Full Bibliography

*Information on Sources and Publications*

It is fortunate at Killiecrankie that there are at least two eyewitness accounts of the battle. Both of these accounts are from the Government side; one of them is by Major-General Mackay himself. Although these accounts are necessarily one-sided, Mackay’s in particular does appear to be a fairly thorough and even-handed report, especially so when one considers the magnitude of his defeat and the temptation to shift blame. There are obviously some exaggerations in his favour – for instance, his speech to his men before the battle which paints such a ferocious picture of the Highlander, and in which he warns them that if they do not stand they are doomed, comes across a little like a retrospective ‘I told you so’. He also reports that Jacobite losses were six times greater than his own, which seems highly unlikely given the limited amount of musketry that seems to have taken place. Issues of bias aside, these written accounts, especially in their description of deployment, location and landscape are important given a total lack of any maps drawn in the immediate aftermath of the battle. The work undertaken at Killiecrankie for *Two Men in a Trench* in 2003 indicated that Mackay’s account is mainly accurate in terms of the events, if not the interpretation of them. MacBane is reasonably accurate, having no political axe to grind, and gives the perspective of a man who fled the battlefield and is not ashamed to have done so.

The one Jacobite account is the official Cameron clan history, based upon the account of Cameron of Lochiel but also using accounts from various other Jacobite soldiers. This account matches the general thrust of the other two, but there are some differences. The main difference is that the Lochiel account denies that the Jacobites ceased pursuit because of looting the baggage train; the Cameron account says that they only knew about the baggage train the next day when it got light. The account claims that the pursuit petered out because the Jacobites were exhausted with all of the marching during the day, followed by the charge.

The secondary sources are of limited value. Most use Mackay fairly uncritically, although one decided to ignore the evidence of the landscape and Mackay’s account, and place the battle lines at 90° to the correct alignment (Terry 1905); in this, he was followed by other, later secondary accounts (e.g. Smurthenwaite 1984). The 2003 fieldwork indicated that the information provided
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by Mackay is reasonably accurate, and there is no substance to the alternative deployment.

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Orders and letters of Lieut.-General Hugh Mackay to Captain Robert Menzies, Younger of Weem (also known as Younger of Menzies and Fiar of Menzies ) 1689-90, relating to the Killiecrankie campaign].

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Cartographic and Illustrative Sources

Roy Map 17/2b: Area around Pitlochry, in Perthshire

There are no contemporay maps of the battlefield. The area appears on Roy's map nearly a century later, which reveals a largely open landscape, with a couple of tree stands and two fermtouns. There are very few field walls marked, all of which are on the right flank of the government troops. On the left flank, the ground is shown as being rig fields.

Secondary Sources


Barr, N. 2002 The Killing Time: Killiecrankie and Glen Coe.


