The Inventory of Historic Battlefields – Battle of Prestonpans

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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PRESTONPANS

Alternative Names: None
21 September 1745
Local Authority: East Lothian
NGR centred: NT 405 739
Date of Addition to Inventory: 21 March 2011
Date of last update: 14 December 2012

Overview and Statement of Significance

The battle of Prestonpans is significant as the opening battle of the 1745 Jacobite Rising, the final attempt to restore the Stuart dynasty to the throne by force. The Jacobites resounding victory boosted their cause, leaving them in control of Scotland and opening the path south into England for them. It also forces the government to withdraw some of their experienced forces from the continent to deal with the threat.

Prestonpans was the first significant conflict in the Jacobite Rising of 1745. The Jacobite army, comprised mainly of Highlanders led by Bonnie Prince Charlie (grandson of the exiled King James VII and II), marched south to meet the Hanoverian troops.

The ensuing battle was a resounding victory for the Jacobite army. The Government army in Scotland was effectively destroyed during the battle, with hundreds of soldiers killed and over a thousand prisoners taken. The rapid defeat of the Hanoverian force demonstrated the effectiveness of the Highland charge in the face of the well-equipped Government troops. The victory gave considerable momentum to the Jacobite cause, boosting recruitment in the following months and ultimately giving their army the confidence to march into England in November 1745.

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

- Tranent Churchyard and lands to the north. The location of the Jacobite camp which was bombarded by Government artillery the night before the battle.
- The northern part of Tranent and grounds to the east and west. The location of various Jacobite positions on the day before the battle.
- Lands to the east and north-east of Tranent up to Seton. The route of the dawn march of the Jacobite army from the churchyard in Tranent across the marshland mapped on Roy’s map.
- The fields surrounding Seton West Mains farm and Seaton village. The main area of initial fighting where the Jacobite charge made contact with the Government line as determined through recent fieldwork.
- The land surrounding Seton Chapel. The rear of the Jacobite deployment and the potential for burials related to the combat.
- The location of the 18th century wagonway and lands to the south-east including Bankton House and grounds, the former location of Preston House and policies, the location of Gardiner’s Hawthorn tree and Johnnie Cope’s Road. The path of the rout and the location of the slaughter of the Government troops within the parklands of the properties.
- The well preserved landscape characteristics of the battlefield including the open fields to the west of Seton, the route of the Government rout towards Bankton House and views across the battleground from Tranent church.

Historical Background to the Battle

Charles Edward Stuart, the Young Pretender to his detractors and Bonnie Prince Charlie to his supporters, landed in Scotland on 25 July 1745, and initiated a Jacobite rising that quickly grew to pose a major threat to the Hanoverian regime. Initially, it was the Highland clans which gathered under the Jacobite colours and this army marched south, its numbers growing all the while. The Government army in Scotland, under Sir John Cope, comprised around 3,000 men and was tasked with nipping the insurrection in the bud. Edinburgh fell to the Jacobites without a struggle while Cope, having failed to intercept the Jacobites in the Highlands, transported around 2,500 troops south by sea from Aberdeen to Dunbar.

The Government army had landed at Dunbar on 17 and 18 September and marched on 19 September to camp west of Haddington. On 20 September, on news of the Jacobite army approaching from Edinburgh to the west, it marched to counter them, deploying in a cornfield to the west of Seton, thus controlling the main coastal route running east from Edinburgh. Rather than attempt a frontal assault on such a well deployed enemy, the Jacobites marched around to the south and deployed on a ridge to the west of Tranent. This forced the Government army to redeploy closer to Preston village, facing
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south. However, on reaching their position on the high ground the Jacobites found that a marsh (Tranent meadow) lay between the two armies, and so their initial plan to launch a frontal assault from this position was abandoned. In the meantime, a Jacobite detachment advanced to the north and deployed in Tranent churchyard, closer to the Government position. Cope responded with his artillery and after incurring some casualties the Jacobite advance guard withdrew.

To force the battle on their terms, the Jacobites descended the hill early on the morning of 21 September and marched east and then north, negotiating the marsh. They appeared in three columns immediately to the west of Seton at about 5 am and deployed in two lines. Cope had some prior warning of this move from his piquets and so deployed once more to counter them, rapidly bringing his army round to face eastward. In the early morning mist the Jacobites deployed too far to the north and left a wide gap in their frontage which resulted in both armies outflanking the left of the other.

As the Jacobites charged, the Government cavalry attempted to stop the Jacobite right but failed and were repulsed. In their flight they carried with them their artillerymen, who left their officers to discharge a single round at the charging Jacobites. As the Jacobites came on, significant numbers of the largely untested Government troops on both flanks broke and fled before they came to hand-to-hand fighting, and in so doing they disordered some of their reserves. Although some of the Jacobite forces pursued the fleeing troops, the majority turned on the Government infantry’s now exposed right flank. The charging Jacobites received a volley from the Government troops, but this did little to break their momentum and after firing their own muskets, which they then threw down, they ran forward with drawn swords. What remained of the Government battle formation was immediately broken, with just a few units offering any further resistance. Within no more than ten minutes the Jacobites were in control of the field and had captured both the baggage and artillery of the Government troops. While Cope managed to retreat with some of his infantry, by way of a lane beside Bankton House (a mansion house to the west of the battlefield), large numbers of his army were captured. Cope reached Berwick with only about 450 troops.

Events & Participants

The battle was the first encounter between the Jacobites and the Government army in the 1745 rising. It resulted in the effective destruction of the Government army in Scotland and paved the way for a major escalation in recruitment to the Jacobite cause. Victory at Prestonpans made possible the march into England by the Jacobite army in November of 1745. However, it also prompted a serious response by the British government, which withdrew considerable numbers of troops from the continent in order to meet the threat, leading ultimately to their victory at Culloden the following year.

Charles Edward Stuart, better known as Bonnie Prince Charlie, was born in 1720 and was the grandson of the deposed King James VII & II. His father, James Frances Edward Stuart, the Old Pretender, had made previous unsuccessful attempts to restore his line to the British throne, and Charlie, the
Young Pretender, subsequently took up the cause. Landing at Glenfinnan on 19 August 1745, he embarked on an eight month campaign which initially met with some success, entering Edinburgh without resistance and then swiftly routing a Government force at Prestonpans, before advancing into England. His army reached as far as Derby by December, but by this point the campaign was already beginning to unravel. The Jacobites withdrew to Scotland, and despite continued attempts to gain the upper hand, including a victory at Falkirk, they were slowly driven back into the Highlands and their final fate at Culloden. After the battle, Charlie was able to escape back to the continent, and would never again openly return to Britain, despite initial attempts to resurrect his cause. As the years passed he grew increasingly bitter about his defeat, before he finally died an overweight alcoholic in Rome in 1788.

Also present on the field were a large number of Jacobite clan chiefs. These included Clanranald, Glengarry and Keppoch on the right wing and the MacGregors, the Appin Stewarts and the Camerons on the left, with the Atholl Brigade and the MacLachlans in the centre. Command of the Jacobite right wing fell to the James Drummond, the Duke of Perth, while the left was under Lord George Murray. Murray was one of the senior commanders of the Jacobite army in the '45 Rising. Born at Huntingtower Castle near Perth in 1694, at aged 18 he served with the British Army in Flanders. Murray and two of his brothers took part in the Jacobite Rising in 1715, after which he had to flee into exile in Europe. He returned and commanded part of the Jacobite forces at Glenshiel in 1719. Murray was wounded in the battle and again forced to escape to Europe after the Jacobite defeat. After being pardoned for his involvement in 1725, Murray returned to Scotland and in 1728 married Amelia Murray, heiress of Strowan. Murray initially refused to join the 1745 rising, but later sided with the Jacobites once more, being made a lieutenant-general by Charles. He commanded the left wing in the Jacobite victory at Prestonpans, but opposed the subsequent plan to advance into England. During the debate at Derby, Murray was a strong supporter of withdrawing to Scotland. Murray commanded the rearguard during the retreat, but Charles increasingly distrusted him. At Culloden, Murray unsuccessfully attempted to convince Charles of the unsuitability of the location for the Jacobite army. In the aftermath of the defeat Murray attempted to gather the remnants of the force at Ruthven Barracks, but with the failure of the Rising and Charles' flight back to Europe Murray had no choice but to return into exile himself at the end of 1746. This third exile would be his last, and he never returned to Scotland before his death in 1760 in Holland.

The Government army was commanded by Major General John Cope who had seen action on the Continent in both the wars of the Spanish Succession and Austrian Succession. Though he was cleared by a board of enquiry after the battle, his ignominious defeat was to tarnish his reputation severely. A notable loss on the Government side was Colonel Gardiner, a local man who resided at Bankton House who was said to have been killed or wounded beneath a hawthorn tree which was still standing in the early 20th century. A memorial to him is located in the gardens of Bankton House.
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Battlefield Landscape

Recent fieldwork has established that the initial fighting occurred in the fields which now surround the Seton West Mains farm. Primary accounts indicate that this area was open arable ground, with the Jacobites charging through the stubble of the last harvest. This flat, open terrain, of the type normally considered ideal for cavalry, also proved to be good for the Highland charge on this occasion. The field lay between two areas of marshy ground to the north and south. Although these marshes have since been drained the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey map does indicate the location of an extensive marshy area on the south and a much smaller area on the north. The southern marsh is clearly shown on Roy’s map from the 1750s, running from east to west and then turning up to the north to terminate just to the south of the village of Seton. Roy’s map also clearly shows a trackway crossing the marsh and it seems highly likely that this was the point at which the Jacobite army crossed the wet ground, bringing them out onto the plain just to the west of Seton.

The battle was fought within an industrialized landscape, with a number of coal pits supported by a wagonway which ran down the hill from the south to the harbour at Cockenzie. The wagonway has long been associated with the battle and it was certainly an important feature on the field during the battle as both armies would have run across it during the rout which followed the Jacobite charge. A portion of the wagonway survives across the level ground immediately to the west of Seton West Mains Farm.

Tranent church, which was occupied by the Jacobite troops the day before the battle, was rebuilt in the 19th century but stands within the original churchyard. Likewise the grounds of Bankton House, alongside the western side of which the road which Cope and the remnants of his escaping army fled along can still be seen. Preston House, which stood immediately north of Bankton House, is no longer standing although some of its park walls are extant encompassing both the sports ground and the community centre which sit either side of Preston Road.

A limited area of the rout, on the north side of the modern road, also probably remains under fields. A detached area, comprising the grounds of Bankton House and an area of former garden on the north side of the road (playing fields which were once the grounds of Preston House), separated from the field by modern development, may yield further evidence of the rout. In this general area, as well as to the immediate rear of the initial engagement (Thorntree Mains), burials have been reported and there is the potential for mass graves.

The battle was fought on flat open agricultural ground surrounded by areas of marshland. This low coastal plain slopes gently northward to the sea, overlooked by a higher ridge of ground to the south occupied by Tranent. Although this landscape has undergone substantial alteration through the drainage of marshland and the expansion of nearby villages, the topography and key characteristics of the landscape of the battleground can still be identified and understood. The area of the initial fighting is still farmland and
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the spatial relationship between the low lying agricultural fields and the high ridge occupied by Tranent and the Jacobite’s view from the churchyard overlooking the Government army within the fields of Seton survive well. The route of Government rout from the battlefield to Bankton House can still be traced on the ground, incorporating the preserved portion of the wagonway and the site of the hawthorn tree.

An extensive portion of the landscape has been destroyed by mineral extraction immediately to the south and south east of the battlefield. An open-cast mine has removed a swathe of the land occupied by the 1745 marsh and the east-west B1361, two other roads and the mainline railway cut across the edges of the battlefield. The A1 bypass lies a short distance to the south, crossing the areas of the first Jacobite deployment and flank march.

Overall, the semi-industrial character of the battlefield landscape is still predominant. The power station, which is a major feature in the modern landscape, has impacted on the battlefield area with a rail line, coal store and pylons running across the landscape. The battlefield area includes parts of the former mining towns of Tranent, Prestonpans, Cockenzie and Port Seton, while a considerable portion of the land between the main battle site and the old core of Preston village is now occupied by housing.

Archaeological and Physical Remains and Potential

Recent investigations have demonstrated that the site of the battle has survived surprisingly well, and have pinpointed the site of the initial encounter, where the Jacobite charge hit the Government line; further to the east than most modern history books had placed it. Instead of being positioned to the west of or indeed directly on the old coal wagonway it is now clear that the Government line was in fact positioned several hundred metres to the east of this position, in an area still to this day occupied by relatively open farmland. This area is still relatively open farmland and finds of musket shot, fired by both Government and Jacobite troops, cannon shot and other items have provided vital information on the battle’s early stages.

Numerous landscape features associated with the battle survive or can be traced within the battlefield area. Tranent churchyard is still extant and retains some of its 18th century character, despite the church being demolished and rebuilt in the early 19th century. The area to the north of the churchyard remains as farmland and has the potential to accommodate battle archaeology, particularly in relation to the bombardment of the churchyard and the Jacobites within by Government artillery on the day before the battle.

Government troops were pursued to the west as far as the walls of Bankton House and Preston House (a mansion house to the west of the battlefield), where a number of them were killed after becoming trapped against the park walls of these properties. An adult skeleton was encountered in the garden of a house in Polworth Terrace, immediately to the north-east of Preston House, during the building of an air raid shelter during WWII and it is possible, though not certain, that this was a Government soldier killed close to the walls of Preston House. Some vestige of the walls can still be seen at the bottom of the garden at Polworth Terrace.
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Bankton House, though now converted to flats, still stands to the south-west of the battlefield and has a 19th century memorial to Gardiner within the grounds. Johnnie Cope’s Road, which runs to the south along the west side of the garden, marks the route of his escape.

Preston House, which sat to the north of Bankton House within its own grounds, was demolished in the 1930s and the site is now occupied by Prestonpans Community Centre. A small archaeological evaluation of geophysical anomalies within the grounds of the community centre revealed evidence for the demolition of the original building. The grounds have further archaeological potential for future work.

Graves relating to the battle were recovered in an area to the west of the B6371 during drainage operations in the 18th century. The 18th century reports refer to a number of bodies with well-preserved clothing, a little north-east of the farm steading at Thorntree Mains (formerly located adjacent to the current eastern edge of Prestonpans). Further graves were discovered in this area in the mid 20th century and re-buried next to the 20th century cairn memorial located close to the battlefield. There is high potential for more burials and possibly mass graves to be located within this area.

The coal wagonway, which ran across the battlefield in 1745, was constructed in 1722 by the York Building Company and was still in use in the 20th century. Today it can be partially traced as a trackway running through fields to the north of the main railway line and to the west of Tranent. A surviving portion of the wagonway has provided some evidence of action in the form of carbine balls but the evidence recovered around Seton West Mains farm suggests that these relate to the pursuit of Government troops rather than the main battle site. Fields immediately to the east and west of the southern part of the wagonway are protected as a scheduled monument due to the presence of prehistoric crop marks.

The location of the hawthorn tree under which Colonel Gardiner is said to have been wounded, thereafter dying in either the manse of Tranent church or on a mattress in his own garden according to two different accounts, is marked on the First Edition Ordnance Survey map (NT 3399 6742). The location is to the immediate east of Thorntree Colliery, adjacent to a north to south running track. Although the tree was dead by the early 20th century, this location may just survive on the eastern boundary of the area which today still has the remnants of the wagonway running through it, coal having been extracted from the north and housing now filling the space to the east. It is also memorialised in the names ‘Thorntree Field’ and ‘Thorntree Mains’.

The battlefield sits within a semi-industrial and partially developed landscape, all which may have impacted on the physical evidence. However, there have been numerous reports of finds of musket balls from gardens, suggesting that evidence of the battle may still be present in some form even within built-up areas.
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Cultural Association

The battle has very strong cultural associations and was at the time depicted in various ways by newspapers and magazines. A number of ballads were written about the action, including Sir John Cope Trode The North Right Far by Robert Burns, and Johnnie Cope and Celebration Song, both written by Adam Skirving, a local farmer in the area, not long after the event. The battle was further immortalized by Sir Walter Scott in his novel Waverley. The battle also features in the novel Catriona by Robert Louis Stevenson.

The strong local impact of the battle is reflected in a number of place-names and associations. The road which runs north to south to the west of Bankton House has been popularly called Johnnie Cope’s Road since the battle; it being the route of retreat taken by Cope and his broken army. The 1st Edition Ordnance Survey map shows a number of sites clearly named after the battle, including Johnnie Cope’s Hole, and Thorntree Colliery, both coal mining sites on the battlefield.

An obelisk to the Government commander Colonel Gardiner, the former owner of Bankton House, was erected in the gardens in the mid 19th century. A 20th century stone cairn memorial sits at the side of the B1361 just to the west of the former route of the wagonway.

The Battle of Prestonpans (1745) Heritage Trust have an active programme of events including guided walks, battle interpretation and re-enactments and a touring tapestry depicting Bonnie Prince Charlie’s journey from his arrival in Scotland to the battle of Prestonpans. The Trust has a long term ambition to erect a visitor centre dedicated to the battle.

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