From Romans to Carham

The Genesis of the Border

**Romans to Vikings**

To understand the establishment of the Anglo-Scottish border we need to understand something of the developments within the island of Britain in the preceding centuries. If we can see how both England and Scotland came into being we will be better able to understand the years of conflict that followed.

Consider this map :



The divisions that you see are Roman administrative divisions. There was no England, no Scotland and no Wales at this time. With our modern eyes we see, for example, the green section and think “Wales” – but that is anachronistic. Similarly we see Hadrian’s Wall and might think “national border” but that was not the case. The wall was probably created to mark the extent of the Roman Empire. We have no clear explanation of just what the wall was for but it may well have been a marker of the point beyond which the cost and effort of subduing the native tribes outweighed the benefits to be gained. This point was later extended further north with the construction of the Antonine Wall but the Romans clearly decided that they were right the first time and retreated back to Hadrian’s Wall. When the Romans left in the 5th century the walls lost their significance and there was no particular reason why the island should be divided at this point and no suggestion that any such division would emerge in the future. Instead, the island became divided into a number of smaller units under the control of various tribal groupings.

Over the following centuries the picture was complicated by the arrival of various invading forces : the Celtic Scots who came from Ireland and settled in Argyle; the Germanic Angles and Saxons along the south and east coasts. It wasn’t until the 6th century that the Angles reached Bamburgh and founded the kingdom of Bernicia.



As you can see on this map the northern extent of Northumbria was the Firth of Forth and the southern extent was the Humber. Northumbria (the land north of the Humber) had been formed by the merger of the kingdoms of Bernicia and Deira under the Bernician king Aethelfrith at the start of the 7th century. In the following years the kings of Northumbria expanded westwards until they ruled all of the territory from Humber – Mersey line to the Firth of Forth.

Here is another map which shows the extent of this growth.

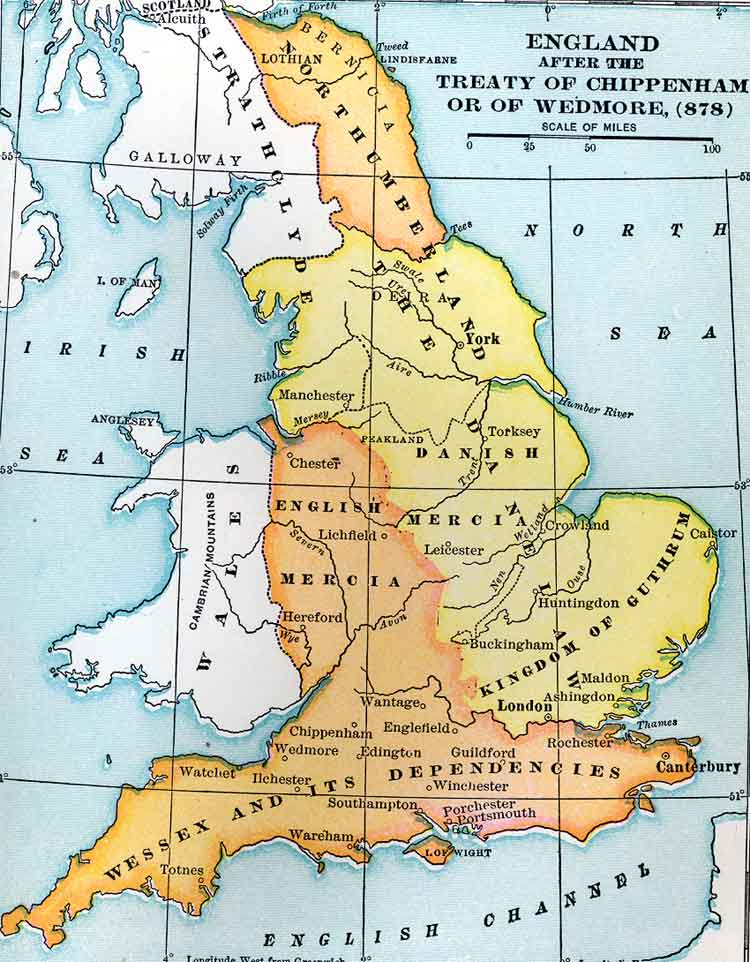


Inevitably, what we know about this period is limited by the available historical sources. We used to call this period ‘the Dark Ages’. Few historians would use that term today. The phrase has become distorted and is now often taken to mean a period of barbarism. In fact, it merely reflects the fact that there are so few surviving written sources that it is difficult to see exactly what was happening at times. Modern historians usually refer to the period from the departure of the Romans to the coming of the Normans as the Early Middle Ages. Thus, the full extent of Northumbria is a little speculative but the overall impression is probably close enough.

**From Vikings to Carham**

With the death of king Ecfrith of Northumbria in a battle with the Picts near Forfar in 685 the tide of fortune for his kingdom had turned and expansion ceased. During the 8th century the dominant kingdom within this island was Mercia in the English Midlands. In the 9th century the kingdom of Wessex rose to prominence challenging Mercia while in the far north the Scots and the Picts were united to form the kingdom of Scotia under king Kenneth I. Nations were forming but this process was rudely interrupted by the Vikings!

Following the first attack on Lindisfarne in 793, the second half of the following century saw a concerted attempt to conquer parts of Britain. Only the kingdom of Wessex remained free of their control. The kingdom of Northumbria was effectively brought to an end. Cumbria and Dumfries were settled by invaders and a new Viking kingdom based on York was created. The only area which did not fall under Viking control was the land on the east coast, north of the Tees and extending to the Forth. The rulers in this area were not kings.



Gradually the Vikings were defeated. Alfred the Great and his son Edward regained control of the Midlands. Edward’s son Athelstan defeated the Viking king of York while Constantine II, king of Alba, took control of the kingdom of Strathclyde and the northern part of Bernicia. It is at this point that we can really begin to speak of “Scotland” which gradually replaced the name “Alba”. By 950 there was a semblance of stability. The York Vikings were finally overcome in 954 by the West Saxon king Eadred who united Yorkshire and the land north of the Tees. This whole area was placed under the control of Osulf as the first Earl of Northumbria who had been the High Reeve of the northern half of Northumbria based at Bamburgh. It was Osulf who had arranged the assassination of the wonderfully named Eric Bloodaxe, the last Viking king of York. With the inclusion of the defunct Viking kingdom of York into Eadred’s existing kingdom we finally have a definitive England that we would recognise as such.

At the same time as this, the English crown acknowledged the control of king Indulf of Alba (which we can now begin to call Scotland) over Cumbria (which was now part of the kingdom of Strathclyde) and Lothian - the land between the Forth and the Tweed.

The island was now divided into two kingdoms of unequal size – England and Scotland. It was time for the fighting to begin! From the outset the kings of England were keen to express their seniority and ultimate dominance over the whole island. In 934 king Athelstan had already begun this process when he invaded the kingdom of Scotia and forced king Constantine II to submit. In 937 he had defeated the combined forces of Scotia, Strathclyde and the Norse kingdom of Dublin at the battle of Brunanburgh.

In 973 the English king Edgar was able to force all other kings within Britain, including Kenneth III of Scotland and Malcolm of Strathclyde, to attend him in Chester following his coronation in Bath and to give undertakings as to their friendship. This was a substantial display of his power but clearly there were limits. The English king did not have the resources to impose permanent control over the north of the island. Even within England he conceded day-to-day rule of Northumbria to a local native earl just as the Scottish king had to tolerate semi-independent rule in Strathclyde.

Before we come to the battle of Carham we might just stop to consider this question. If peace and stability had been achieved after a long period of essentially tribal conflict over the 500 years since the Romans departed, why did kings seek to expand their realms by further warfare? Today we consider warfare to be a last resort. Something to avoid at all costs. In early medieval Britain and indeed right through to the end of the Middle Ages, warfare was considered to be a quite normal state of affairs. The role of “king” had developed from the position of warlord and the “nobility” derive from the warlord’s closest circle of warriors. The ties of friendship, family and tribe were the strongest bonds and loyalty to these was the paramount virtue. In return for their support it was the duty of the king to reward loyalty with gifts. Treasure and land to distribute as gifts came from conquest. In addition, as the tribe expanded in number it was necessary to acquire greater lands to support them. Thus, expansion into neighbouring territory was an essential duty of the king. It increased his standing with his peers and provided the resources he needed to maintain his position. In these earliest times the position of “king” was not necessarily hereditary in the way we would understand it. There was often a process of election from amongst the ruling elite group. On the other hand, it was not uncommon for one king to be murdered and replaced by a rival. A well-known example would be the Scottish king, Macbeth, who In August 1040, killed the ruling king, Duncan I, in battle near Elgin. If we look forward we can see that those kings who failed as military leaders often did not survive – consider Edward II, Richard II and Henry VI. Further afield when king Wenceslas IV (not the good one) was deposed as king of the Romans (which actually meant king of the Holy Roman Empire) in 1400 one of the charges against him was that he had failed to extend the territory of the Empire. Of course, human nature doesn’t change much and those with the power to subdue others are usually more than happy to exercise it.

In the century between the reign of king Edgar and the arrival of the Normans in 1066 the question of the location of the border between England and Scotland remained an issue to be resolved finally. This period is still not fully understood due to the lack of sources but it would seem that the Northumbrians regained control over all or part of Lothian at some point towards the end of the 10th century giving them a northern border at the Forth. What happened next was one of those battles of which many people have never heard but which is of pivotal importance in the history of Britain – the battle of Carham.

