

The Battle of Carham

There are many questions about the Battle of Carham, but very few clear cut answers. The Battlefields Trust is working with the Carham 1018 Society to find some firm answers to these questions, to produce a more logical and justifiable account of the events of 1000 years ago, and to determine Carham's contribution to the Border story.

The rise and fall of Northumbria

During the first millennium AD the British Isles were subject to invasion and occupation on many occasions. The Romans came and went, but others: Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Danes and Vikings came and made more permanent settlements. The result was the emergence of small kingdoms, which over time, merged by conquest or agreement into larger entities.

By about 700 AD, Northumbria, stretching from the Humber to the Firth of Forth, was the largest and most powerful of these kingdoms. This did not last, and within two centuries Northumbria was under threat from the Danes in the south, the Scots in the north and the Galwegians in the west and was losing territory.

When was the Battle fought?

For decades there have been two schools of thought about the date of the Battle - 1016 or 1018. Much of the argument was based on the date of the death of Uhtred, Earl of Northumbria which has also been given as 1016 or 1018. If Uhtred did die in 1016, then obviously he could not have been at the Battle of Carham in 1018 and either the date of Uhtred's death or the date of the Battle is wrong.

However, writing in about 1100, Simeon of Durham specifically states that the Battle was fought in 1018 and that it was preceded by the appearance of a comet. The only comet around this time was visible for 30 days in



August of 1018 and this strong evidence supports the date of the Battle of Carham as September 1018. This date will be assumed as correct for this project.

Where was the Battle fought?

Wark:

Again there are two candidates for the site of the Battle; Carham itself, or 2½ miles to the east at Wark. The ruins of the castle at Wark suggest that the Battle may have been fought here, and some editions of OS maps specifically mark a place on the south bank of the Tweed to the east of the village as the site of the Battle. But there is a problem with the Wark site. 1000 years ago, even 500 years ago, at this point, the River Tweed ran a different course much further to the south. (see map) and either side of the river would have been marsh land unsuitable as battleground.

Carham:

At Carham the course of the river is much more stable due to the topography and the hard limestone geology. There was, and still is, a reasonable crossing point over the river which, in the Middle Ages, would have been a good defensive point. The link to Saint Cuthbert, and the existence of a Minster founded by the Saint at Carham, makes this both a place worth attacking and also a place worth defending. Archaeological work will take place over the next year to look for evidence of a battle and of early Christian sites.

Who commanded the armies?

From the North:

Two armies combined to attack the northern part of Northumbria. One was led by Malcolm II, King of Alba (the Highlands); the other led by Owen the Bald of Strathclyde (then including Strathclyde and the Lake District). The two armies merged near Galashiels before proceeding eastwards to confront an army commanded by the Earl of Northumberland.

There is opinion that Malcolm II and Owen the Bald were related. Owen died in 1018, perhaps killed at the Battle of Carham, and Strathclyde was incorporated into the realm of Malcolm II. If the two were related it would ease the combining of the two kingdoms into one and be a significant step in the emergence of the Scotland we know today.

From the South:

There is a difference of opinion as to who was Earl of Northumbria in 1018 and therefore commander of the Northumbrian army. Uhtred is usual choice, but of course this is not possible if he had been killed in 1016. The alternative is candidate is Uhtred's brother, Eadwulf Cudel. Eadwulf gained the addition Cudel, meaning cowardly, because he is accused by some as

giving Lothian to the Scots because he was in fear for his life.

The Northumbrian army was raised from the land between the rivers Tees and Tweed, suggesting that Lothian had already been ceded to the Scots.

Did the Battle of Carham fix the Border?

When Northumbria was at the height of its power Carham was merely a place on a river in the middle of the Kingdom. Raids by the Scots gradually diminished the security of the northern part of Northumbria. In 1006 Malcolm II raided much further south, but was defeated at Durham by Uhtred, Earl of Northumbria and he retreated back to the Highlands. Northumbria was also being severely harassed in the south by the Danes and was consolidating its power in the central area from Tees to Tweed.

The River Tweed became a defensive line for Northumbrians and Scots, and although there were incursions over this line for many years to come the Battle of Carham in 1018 was defining moment in the process of fixing the Border.

The Border was not fixed in law until the Treaty of York in 1237 - although subsequently, the town of Berwick changed hands many times.

The weapons and tactics of the times

The weapons of war in early medieval times were very basic. Sword, battle axe, knife and spear were the favoured hand weapons, with the war bow for more distant death and destruction. Body armour consisted of leather jerkin and chain mail shirt, all topped with a steel helmet. A heavy steel rimmed round wooden shield was used both as a defensive and offensive weapon.

Battles were short, hard, vicious, brutal and bloody affairs. Armies were small compared to later years and were raised from local manpower; at Carham the army was raised from the area between the rivers Tees and Tweed. A commonly used tactic was the shield wall when shields were locked together as a barrier to the attacking force. Cavalry was used, but usually in limited numbers.



This detail from the Bayeux Tapestry shows Harold's shield wall at the Battle of Hastings 1066 and gives an idea of the tactics used.

Partner Organisations

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Carham Parish Council	
Cornhill Parish Council	
Ford and Etal Estates	Etal and area
The Remembering Flodden Project	Branxton

How to get to the Carham Battle Site



From the South
Go to Cornhill on the A697 (via Wooler) and then take the B6350 west to Carham.

From Scotland
Note that the crossing points over the River Tweed nearest to Carham are the bridges at Coldstream and Kelso. The main routes to Carham are: the A697 to

Cornhill via Coldstream and then the B6350 west to Carham; from Kelso, east on the B6350 to Carham.

Parking will be available near the battle ground with directions to it signposted locally.

Local Information

Wooler Community website: www.wooler.org.uk

Wooler Tourist Information Centre:
The Cheviot Centre
Padgepool Place, Wooler NE71 6BL
01668282123

Kelso Icentre:
Town House, The Square, Kelso TD5 7HF
01573 221119

Other weblinks:

www.battlefieldstrust.com
www.scottishbattlefields.org
www.carham1018.org.uk
www.flodden.net

Battle of Carham 1018

The start of the Border story



The Battle of Carham 1018

Key

England/Scotland Border

River Tweed

Palaeochannels

Grade II listed Church

Castle

Pub

Village Shop

Cafe

