

# THE BATTLE OF HARLAW



ABERDEEN  
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*Illustration 2: Battle of Harlaw monument.*

# THE BATTLE OF HARLAW

The Battle of Harlaw was fought on 24 July 1411. It is so symptomatic of how little is known about the battle that both sides have claimed it as a victory. However, Harlaw has had a profound impact on the north east of Scotland and on its perception of its own history. The battle has become shrouded in myth and mystery and means different things to different people.

The immediate cause of the battle was a struggle for power in the north east of Scotland between Donald, Lord of the Isles and the Earl of Mar, Alexander Stewart over possession of the Earldom of Ross. However, the roots of the battle are feudal and relate to an ongoing power struggle in the country at the time. On the one hand were Donald, Lord of the Isles and a number of clans. On the other hand were elements of the Stewart family, particularly those known as the Albany Stewarts (relatives and adherents of Robert Stewart, Duke of Albany and Regent of Scotland). This leaflet explores the background of the battle, the major players involved and looks at what is known about the battle and its consequences.

*Cover – illustration 1: Battle of Harlaw monument.*

## Lordship of the Isles

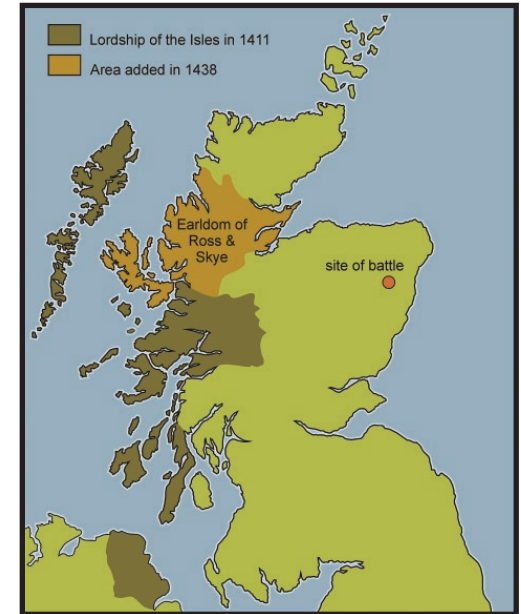
The Lordship of the Isles comprised a varying extent of land at different times, but can be roughly approximated to Argyll. It included the Hebrides (Skye and Ross from 1438), Knoydart, Ardnamurchan, and the Kintyre peninsula. The Lordship developed under descendants of the Vikings, mixed with Gaels and Scots. Its first great historical leader is often said to be Somerled who ruled in the 12th century. It was a maritime and seafaring kingdom and as such its heraldry always contained a galley.

It was effectively in the 12th and early 13th centuries an independent kingdom within Scotland. We should, however, be careful in using the term Scotland here. This was a time when the nation as we think of it was starting to come into existence: the Isles, however, were effectively the last major area to retain a strong tradition and reality of independence about them.

Arguably it was only after the Battle of Largs (on the west coast of Scotland, some 30 miles west of Glasgow) in 1263, that the Lordship became, nominally at least, part of Scotland. During the 14th century the MacDonald family had been emerging as the dominant power in the Lordship. This was confirmed when, under the leadership of Aonghus Og, they supported Robert the Bruce during the First Wars of Independence, against Edward I of England. John, first Lord of the Isles (died 1386) did actively set about building up a state in the Lordship, but it was a feudal state and one which owed its allegiance to the royal Stewarts as kings of Scotland.

## The Stewarts

The Stewarts were a Norman family who came to Scotland in the years after the Norman conquest of England, in 1066. They acquired the office of High Steward of Scotland, which eventually became hereditary in their family, and it is from this office that the name Stewart derives. The Stewarts rose to become the dominant political force in Scotland: the first Stewart king of Scotland was Robert II, who succeeded to the throne in 1371. Robert Stewart, son of Robert II, became Duke of Albany in 1398. Albany spent much of his time attempting to further his own influence. In the later years of Robert II's reign he was considered unfit to rule so Albany and his brother, the Earl of Carrick, ruled as Regents of Scotland, effectively as kings in all but name.



*Illustration 3: Map showing supposed extent of Lordship of the Isles.*



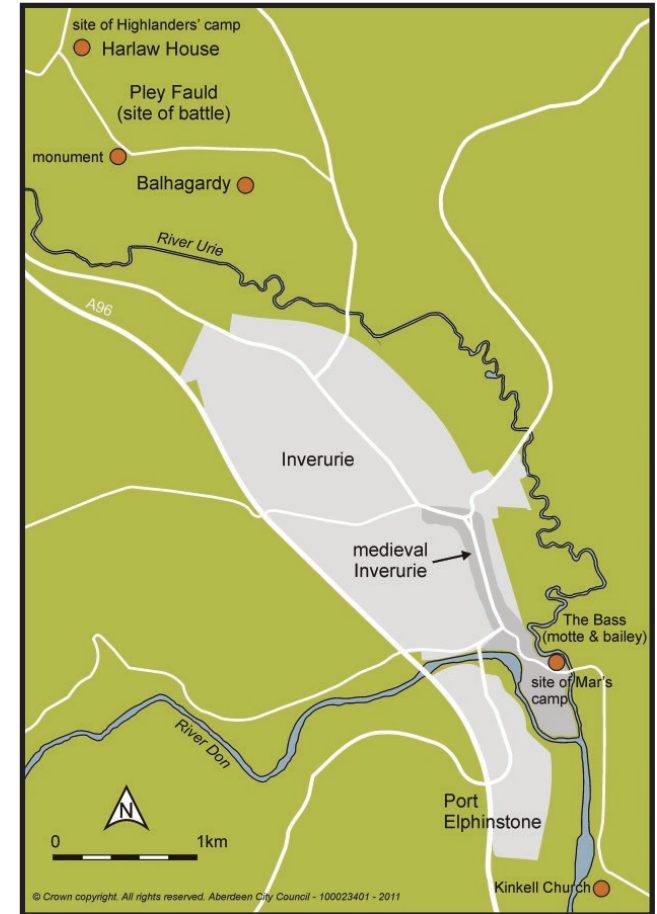
*Illustration 4: Supposed site of the battle today.*

Carrick succeeded Robert II as Robert III but had been injured, and the regency system continued. Albany, however, was increasingly being edged out of power by the Duke of Rothesay, Robert III's son. Rothesay died in mysterious circumstances: he was generally said to have been starved to death on Albany's orders. Robert III, alarmed at Rothesay's death, sent his other son, the future James I, to live in France, but he was captured en route by the English and held in captivity in England for 18 years. This left Albany as undisputed Regent of Scotland, king in all but name. Albany, the Stewarts and others associated with him spent the rest of their careers furthering their own interests as much as possible.

In their rise to power the Stewarts met with the Lordship of the Isles on many occasions, sometimes as enemies but also as allies. In 1164, at the Battle of Renfrew, Somerled was killed by a Stewart army, whilst, in 1350 John MacDonald, the first to use the title Lord of the Isles, married Margaret Stewart.

Despite this inter marriage several points of conflict between the two sides were becoming apparent. From the 1390s there was a growing dispute between Alexander Stewart, Earl of Moray and Alexander, youngest brother of Donald Lord of the Isles. Moray claimed he was being blackmailed by Alexander, who in turn seized Urquhart Castle (on the shores of Loch Ness) from Moray. This led to Albany proposing for the first time an armed expedition against the Lordship of the Isles. The territorial ambitions of both sides had physically brought them into contact: their lands now abutted each other and curbed the expansion of the other. In 1405 Albany granted his son the Earldom of Buchan. A year or so later Alexander Stewart became the Earl of Mar by seizing the current earl, imprisoning him and marrying his wife. The Stewarts were thus pressing against the Lordship.

At this point the Earldom of Ross became vacant, after the death of the Earl, Alexander Leslie, in suspicious circumstances at Albany's castle at Falkland. The Lord of the Isles and Albany both had claims to the Earldom of Ross, which stretched from Skye to Ross and Inverness-shire. Donald of the Isles claimed the Earldom of Ross on behalf of his wife, Margaret, the sister of the late Earl of Ross. Albany, however, was grandfather of the infant Euphemia, who succeeded to the Earldom on the death of her father, Alexander Leslie. Albany moved to take control of the Earldom and made Euphemia his ward. Donald raided Elgin in response but Albany declared himself Lord of the Ward of Ross.



*Illustration 5: Map of supposed site of battle and surrounding area.*

Donald's responses to this included entering into negotiations with the English, who were keen to support his claim on Ross (as well may have been the captive James I, who was watching the growing power of the Albany Stewarts with much trepidation). Donald mustered his kin in the Isles at the castle of Ardtornish, on the Sound of Mull. They marched through Ross (the force is said to have numbered up to 6000) to Dingwall, defeated a force of Mackays and then marched on to Inverness, where they set fire to its bridge and castle. During these actions other clans joined forces with Donald: these included the MacLeods, MacLeans, MacIntoshes and Clan Chattan. Ballad sources state that the force numbered 10,000, which although extremely unlikely does reflect the fact that this was the largest highland force yet seen: the exaggeration reflected the fear.

At the same time the Earl of Mar began to marshal his forces. Mar and his allies would have been aware of Donald's movements for some time and there had been a meeting at Kildrummy Castle at Christmas, 1410, where many who would fight at Harlaw were present, including Provost Davidson and the Laird of Drum. No doubt early plans were laid at this meeting. Mar seems to have raised his standard at the Royal Burgh of Inverurie. He was joined by Sir Alexander Ogilvy (the sheriff of Angus), Sir James Scrymgeour (the constable of Dundee, who was standard bearer) and the levies of the local lairds and knights, such as Sir Alexander Irvine of Drum and Sir Alexander Forbes, but also Frasers, Gordons, Leslies and Skenes.

A contingent also came from Aberdeen, led by Provost Robert Davidson (see illustration 14). One document in the records of Aberdeen City & Shire Archives (see illustration 17) lists the names of men who left the city to fight against the 'caterans'. The document is undated but is of roughly the correct period. Some of the men's names have been scored out, whilst others have crosses against them. It may be that those crossed out either did not fight, or died in the battle: unfortunately we simply cannot say one way or the other. These men were, however, in all likelihood burgesses of Aberdeen. Others would have joined them in the fight: the trades and craftsmen of Aberdeen would have been well represented in the perceived defence of their liberty. Again direct evidence is lacking but tradition in the Incorporated Trades of Aberdeen points to several relics, swords and banners (see illustrations 6, 7 and 8) used by the Hammermen and Bakers who were present at the battle. What can be said is that Provost Davidson would have marshalled a force representing all the important institutions in the town. A public meeting was no doubt held to which all would have come and heard, but the rumours of the approaching army (and no doubt much exaggerated in size by the rumours) would



**Illustration 6:** Flag of the Weavers' Incorporation, said to have been flown at the battle.

have been rife in the town for some time. The scene was thus set for the Battle of Harlaw.

Donald's exact aims in raising this army and marching out are unclear to us: however, they have been the source of much speculation. The chronicler Walter Bower claimed that they wanted to sack and plunder Aberdeen and all the way down to the Tay. He wrote:

'In 1411 on the eve of St John the Apostle... Donald of the Isles with ten thousand men from the Isles and his men of Ross entered the district, crushing and pillaging everything and reducing it to waste. His aim on that expedition was to sack the royal town of Aberdeen and then to subject his authority on the country down to the River Tay. Since they occupied the district in such large and savage numbers like locusts, all those on domain lands who saw them were alarmed, and every man was afraid...'

Certainly Donald may well have wanted to lay claim to territories in the sheriffdoms of Banff, Aberdeen and Kincardine which pertained to the Earldom of Ross. Others claim that he wanted to put himself on the Scottish throne. The latter claim is certainly not true: the campaign was probably as much a pre-emptive strike at Albany and the forces under Mar marshalling around Aberdeen. Donald's physical direction, however, was clear: he was taking the direct, overland, route towards Aberdeen. He may also have wanted to attack the Earl of Mar. Certainly he must have known that he was provoking an armed response from Mar, the government's policeman in the north. The campaigning season was against them: harvest was coming and an army could only remain briefly in the field.

Propaganda, however, has much affected our view of the battle and its principal participants, and much can be said of both sides. On the one hand Donald of the Isles has been said to represent the uncivilized wild Scots of the highlands. On the other hand he was an Oxford educated nobleman, who was recognized throughout Europe as a powerful and legitimate ruler. On the other side the Earl of Mar has been said to represent the forces of central government: that is to say, of progress and civilization. On the other hand he was an unprincipled opportunist and a pirate. Both he and

**Illustration 7:** Sword said to have been used at Harlaw, by the Hammermen's Incorporation of Aberdeen.



**Illustration 8:** Sword said to have been used at Harlaw, by the Tailors' Incorporation of Aberdeen.





**Illustration 9:** Artist's impression of combat at Harlaw by Jan Dunbar.

Robert Davidson, the Provost of Aberdeen, had been accused and tried, rightly, for piracy. One court case brought against Davidson in France concerned piracy by his men of a ship belonging to 'Dick' Whittington, then Lord Mayor of London. It is fair to say that few of the principal participants went into the battle with flawless reputations but they were really products of their day and as such we should not judge them by our standards. However, at the time Provost Davidson was described as 'warlike' by a partisan of his side. Despite the fact that Mar later seems to have changed his character, in his younger days he was highly aggressive and, indeed, murderous.

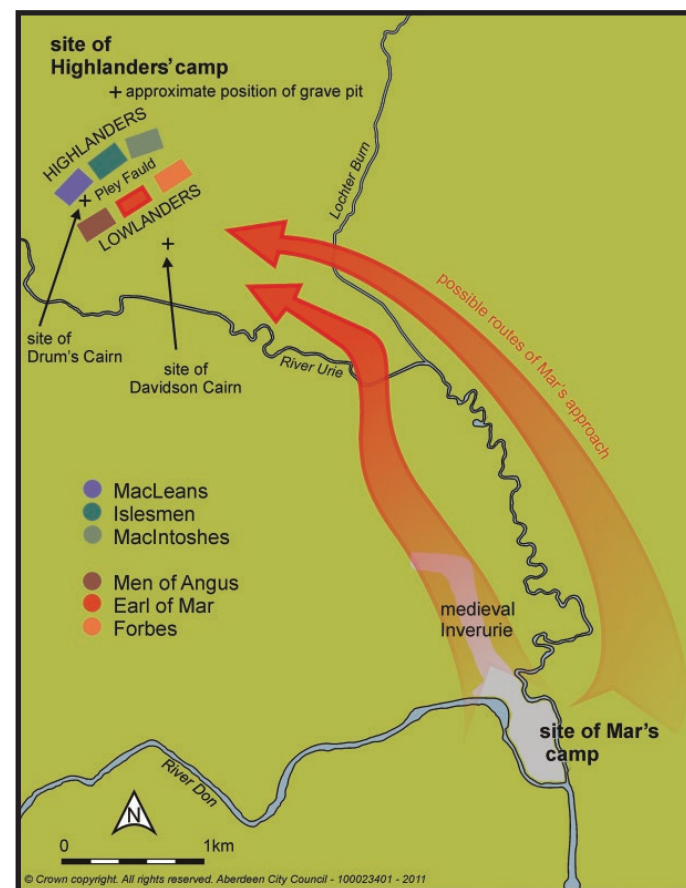
The ensuing clash has also often been portrayed as one between Highlander and Lowlander, between a Gaelic speaking version of Scotland and an English speaking one. However, it has been argued that the Lordship of the Isles was not an exclusively Celtic institution, that it was a feudal power and has shown that Donald himself was proud of both his Stewart and Gaelic ancestry. His seal showed both the Stewart royal tressure as well as the traditional MacDonald galley. Donald issued charters and behaved in all the ways that one would expect of a feudal magnate. Moreover, some men on Donald's side would have been Scots speakers whilst men on Mar's side would have been Gaelic speakers. This reminds us of the fact that this was a feudal power struggle: certainly it marked an important stage in the growing rift between Highland and Lowland but it was not, exclusively, a clash of Teuton (or Saxon) and Celt.

## The Battle of Harlaw

There are a few early sources for the battle. Perhaps the most contemporary is the Gaelic battle song, which may have been chanted to Donald's troops on the day of the battle. Next is the addition to Water Bower's chronicle, by the Abbot of Fordun, which provides a very partial account. Again from the lowland side comes a ballad which was published in 1548, but probably contains fragments from earlier, now lost, versions. Most historians lend most credence to the account of the battle as given by John Major. Major's history was composed about a century after Harlaw, but with access to written sources as well as oral tradition which was only a generation or so removed from those who were contemporary with the battle.

The battle itself took place where Donald chose to camp, near Harlaw, two miles north of Inverurie (see illustrations 9 and 10). Harlaw has been described as a town, but it was more likely to be a 'fermtoun', which was the characteristic unit of settlement in medieval rural Scotland. Typically these comprised several families and a number of houses. Donald's forces chose a strong defensive position: in the midst of this

predominantly farming country they stopped on a plateau, which was surrounded by wet land to the east and west. Mar broke camp on the morning of 24 July and crossed the River Urie. Mar split his men into two divisions and the vanguard was led by the sheriff of Angus and constable of Dundee leading the Angus and Mearns men. The forces under Mar likely formed into two 'schiltron', a dense formation of spearmen.



**Illustration 10:** Conjectural reconstruction of the battle lines, by Jan Dunbar.



**Illustration 11:** Gilbert de Greenlaw's tombstone, showing typical armour from the period of the battle.



**Illustration 12:** Reverse of Gilbert de Greenlaw's tombstone, later 17th century re-use.

Donald's forces were rallied by a battle song, which also shows that Donald's forces were in three divisions. Red Hector of the Battles, namely Hector Roy Maclean of Duart, was Donald's overall general, leading the forces on the right wing, at the head of his clan, which was the place of honour. The left wing was led by Callum Beg, chief of the MacIntoshes, whilst Donald commanded the central battle force.

Mar's vanguard was lead by Scrymgeour and Sir Alexander Ogilvy, sheriff of Angus. Donald's men, with their commanding position, would have seen these forces approaching. However, one early poem suggests that Donald's men were taken by surprise by an early attack by Mar's forces. This is unlikely but it was probable that as Mar began his march some of Donald's forces were foraging in the adjacent countryside. The vanguards clashed early on 24 July 1411 probably near to where the present day monument to the battle stands and in the shadow of Bennachie, the highest point in the north east.

The accounts suggest that Donald's forces pushed Mar's vanguard back, by three acres. The historian Peter Marren has suggested that the position of the no longer extant cairn, said to commemorate where Provost Robert Davidson was killed on the day of battle, indicates that he died in this initial push downwards from Donald's forces.

The battle was probably entirely fought on foot. The highest nobles and lairds would certainly have arrived on horseback but probably dismounted for the battle. The wealthier lairds and knights may have worn plate armour, as is seen in the grave stone of Gilbert de Greenlaw (see illustration 11). The grave slab of Gilbert bears the date 1411 the year of Harlaw, but oddly it is in the graveyard of Kinkell Church which does not seem to have been founded until 1420 (see illustrations 11, 12, 15 and 16). Chiefs on the Donald side may well have worn mail with a conical helmet and jupon, a jacket or tunic worn over or under armour. It is also very likely that the armour and weaponry used on either side might have been a generation or so out of date. The main body of the men, on both sides, would have been armed with lances, spears, axes and swords and would not have worn armour, or anything that would have weighed them down.



**Illustration 13:** Axe head, in Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums Collections, said to have been found in the vicinity of the supposed battle site.

**Illustration 14:** Image of effigy in St Nicholas Church, Aberdeen, once said to be that of Robert Davidson.





*Illustration 15: The ruins of Kinkell Church today.*

The main tactic seems to have been to push the lines hard against each other. It is often said that little, if any generalship can be discerned. Indeed, the role played by individual combat is often emphasized most, for example the duel between Sir Alexander Irvine of Drum and Red Hector of the Battles, at the end of which both lay dead.

Some later ballads claim the battle to have lasted for 6 days. This is highly unlikely: it was over on the 24th, but again the emphasis on the length was a reflection of the cost of the battle in terms of life. All accounts emphasize the heat and weight of the battle, the fact that so much blood was shed and so many lives lost. Major wrote: 'The whole plateau is red with blood; from the higher points to the lower blood flows in streams...'

Perhaps it was because so many leading and prominent men were slaughtered that the battle has become so ingrained and etched into memory. All battles, medieval or not, are composed of a slaughter of the troops. Not many, however can lay such claim to a shed of noble blood, certainly not in the north east. Bower wrote, with typical partiality concentrating on Mar's side that:

'After a very bitter fight the following were killed on the Earl of Mar's side... Sir James Scrymgeour, Alexander de Irvine, Robert Melville and Thomas Murray, William de Abernethy son and heir of the Lord of Saltoun (grandson of Albany), Alexander Straiton Lord of Lauriston, George de Ogilvie, James Lovel, Alexander Stirling... and also the warlike Robert Davidson, provost of Aberdeen with many burgesses...'

Major reported that at the end of the battle 900 men of Donald's forces were slain and many more injured whilst Mar's lost 600, and again with heavy casualties. To be certain, then, there were very heavy losses on both sides, but who, if anyone 'won'? Both sides could, and did, lay claim to a victory. In Gaelic ballads it is given as a victory for Donald. Hugh Macdonald of Sleat in History of the MacDonalds states that Donald withdrew under advice from the Earl of Huntly (the only major noble of the region to be absent from the battle). Huntly counselled that as Donald had the victory in 'all appearance ... it was ridiculous for him to destroy the town [Aberdeen] and that the citizens would always join with him who had the upper hand...'. Whilst Major wrote:

'Though it be more generally said among the common people that the wild Scots were defeated, I find the very opposite of this in the chronicles; only the Earl of the Isles was forced to retreat; and counted amongst his men more of the slain than did the civilized Scots. Yet those men did not put (the Earl) to open rout...'

Although we cannot be certain about Donald's aims it is tempting to suggest that this was not a great success for his side. Donald's march south was halted and he retreated to the Isles. He remained unchallenged and a powerful ruler in his lands, but he had not laid a successful claim to the Earldom of Ross. Donald had marched south to make a point and he had retreated north. By another token proportionally more of Mar's forces were killed than Donald's.

The Battle of Harlaw was, however, only one stage in the feudal struggle between these two sides. It is important to remember that the campaign against Donald was resumed by Albany come the next campaigning season. In 1412 Albany again headed north and retook Dingwall before massing to attack Donald in the Isles. Walter Bower wrote:

*Illustration 16: The ruins of Kinkell Church today.*









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