

Battle of Linlithgow Bridge 1526

In 1526, on the 25th July, Sir Walter Scott of Buccleuch attempted to rescue the young King James V (1513 - 1542) from the clutches of the over-powerful Douglas, Earl of Angus while on a journey from Jedburgh to Edinburgh. Battle was joined at Skirmis Hill, the site of the present Waverley Castle Hotel, Melrose. Buccleuch was defeated, losing some 80 of his 600 spear men. The Douglas lost some 100 men killed including the Laird of Cessford. This death triggered a murderous feud between the Kers of Cessford and the Scotts of Buccleuch.

The Battle of Melrose

All seemed well in the Douglas camp as spring of 1526 approached. The king was held a virtual prisoner in Edinburgh and the potential opposition had been deterred by the show of power at Linlithgow. So confident was Angus that he could control the reins of power in the country that he rebuked all existing power sharing agreements with the lairds and set the young James on the throne in his own right. This is where his problems began as the teenager James refused to play ball with Angus's plan and declared John Stewart, the Earl of Lennox not only his favoured uncle but also his preferred advisor. Lennox, somewhat taken aback by the appointment, was quick to see the potential benefit to his own claim to the throne and duly complied. Suddenly the royal court became a very dangerous place to be.

However every new king has their duties to perform and this one was no exception. The Borders were as usual a lawless place to be and it was customary for the king to hold Justice Ayres every now and then to remind the Reivers exactly who was boss. Angus, despite his misgivings about leaving the sanctuary of Edinburgh, thought it was the best time to flex the royal muscles so he arranged a visit to Jedburgh in July 1526. The king's escort included George Douglas, Lennox, Lord Fleming, Lord Maxwell, Lord Erskine and Ninian Creychton of Sanquhar. As the royal party headed south many of the Douglas supporters took advantage of the trip to return to their estates in the borders. Lord Home, the Earl of Cessford, and Kerr of Ferniehurst separated from the party and headed home for a well earned break. The Justice Ayres went without a hitch and by mid July the precession set out for Edinburgh via a planned stopover at the abbey at Melrose. But Lennox had other ideas. He had called upon his ally Walter Scott of Buccleuch to raise his borderers and lay an ambush for the royal party with the aim of rescuing the king. Little did Angus know, but he was riding straight into a trap.

The Battle of Melrose is perhaps best known for its inspirational verse rather than its strategic importance as the descendent of the main rebel leader ensured the event was well documented within his own fictional work. Sir Walter Scott in his prose 'Ride to Melrose' alludes to the fight in the verse:

*When first the Scott and Carr were foes
When Royal James beheld the fray
Prize to the victor of the day:
When Home and Douglas in the van
Bore down on Buccleuch's retiring clan
Till gallant Cessford's heart-blood dear
Reek'd on dark Elliot's border spear*

Both John Leslie and Lindsay of Pitscottie briefly describe the action in their histories of Scotland but give little away as to the disposition of the forces. We are told that Buccleuch mustered some 600 - 1000 men to his cause mainly from his own household but also from the other local families. Many were considered by Leslie as:

'thevies and broken men of the bourdoriss'

and Pitscottie describes them as:

'theiffis of Annerdill' and 'Liddisdail'

These men were more like the Border Reivers (so dear to Sir Walter Scott's heart); heavily armed light horsemen on cobs and nags more used to lightning raids and nightly excursions than stand up battles. The king however was escorted by a more professional band of retinue troops drawn from the garrison from Edinburgh. He was

accompanied by many of the lairds from court and family members of the Kerrs and Humes. The lairds whose estates were in the borders were likely to raise local support similar in nature to those of Buccleuch's borderers

The exact position of the battlefield is difficult to establish. There are a number of local place names that do allude to the fight. 'Charge Law' is reportedly the ground on which Buccleuch drew up his men before the attack, 'Skirmish Hill' the site of the main action and 'Turnagain', a small eminence where the rebels rallied during the retreat. Certainly the *'stoutlie fordwart in the backsyde of Hallidoun Hill'*

suggesting the ambush was perhaps not as successful as planned. The king was hastened to Darnock Tower and left under the protection of George Douglas, now accustomed to the role of bodyguard and not surprisingly Lennox, happy to play no part in the affair and on hand to snatch the king away should the opportunity arise. The king is said to have watched the fight from the roof of the tower, which suggests the majority of the fighting took place on Darnock Green and affirms the naming of Skirmish Hill, the present site of the Waverley Hotel.

Angus had time to gather together the rest of the king's escort and if Pitscottie is to be believed delivered a grand eulogy:

' Schir, zone is Ballcleuch and theiffs of Annerdail witht him wnbessett your grace from the gait. Bot I vow to god, schir the sall ether fight or flie and he shall tairrie heir on this know and my brother George witht you witht any wther companie thou pleis, and I sall pase and put zone theiffis of the ground and red gait into your grace or ellis die for it'

And with that Angus dismounted from his horse and charged into the fray. The fighting was said to be ferocious, with victory uncertain until Lord Home, Kerr of Ferniehurst and Cessford showed up with the reinforcements.

'Bot at last Lord Home heirand the wordis of that matter how it stude returnit againe to the king in possibill haist witht him the lairds of Cessfurde and Fairniehirst to the number of iijxx speiris and sett on fercelie wpoun the lape and winge of the laird Baccleucheis field and shortlie bure him bakvart into the ground.'

Buccleuch was wounded and his men broke and fled west along the Tweed closely pursued by Ferniehurst and Cessford. The pursuit was so vigorous that the pursuers appeared to become isolated from their main body and Cessford was surrounded and slain by members of the Elliot family and servants of Buccleuch

Casualty figures differ between accounts with Pitscottie suggesting at most over 400 men were killed from both sides. Certainly he states that the king was to have appeared 'heavie, sad and dolorous' at the extent of the bloodshed. Angus returned in triumph and took the king into Melrose to celebrate his victory before returning to Edinburgh the following day. Angus found Lennox's reluctance to join him in battle somewhat disturbing. He began questioning his loyalty and rightly so. Lennox realised the time was now upon him to make his move. He left court assuring the king that he would return to rescue him or die in the process. He rode hard for the sanctuary of Stirling where, once safe within its walls, he called for a muster of the loyal men of Scotland.

Sources''

Melrose Scotland bordernet

<http://www.bolb.org.uk>