

# The Inventory of Historic Battlefields

## The Battle of Carbisdale

### Designation Record and Summary Report

**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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# Inventory of Historic Battlefields – Battle of Carbisdale

## CARBISDALE

Alternative Names: None

27 April 1650

Local Authority: Highland

NGR centred: NH 574 944

Date of Addition to Inventory: 30 November 2011

Date of last update: 14 December 2012

## Overview and Statement of Significance

Carbisdale is significant as the last battle of James Graham, the 1<sup>st</sup> Marquis of Montrose, in support of the Royalist cause. Widely thought to be one of Scotland's finest ever military commanders, Montrose is a highly significant figure within Scottish history. After Carbisdale, he was finally apprehended by the Covenanters and unceremoniously executed. Carbisdale also marks the end of the internal struggles within Scotland as part of the Wars of the Three Kingdoms, as with the Covenanters' subsequent agreement with Charles II, they come into open conflict with Oliver Cromwell and the Protectorate, rather than Royalist supporters in their own lands.

Following his defeat at Philiphaugh in 1645, Montrose had fled abroad, only to return in 1650 as the Captain-General of the forces of Charles II. The battle was a decisive victory for the Covenanter forces arrayed against Montrose, with his forces routed almost without firing a shot. Montrose himself escaped the field but he was handed over to the Covenanters a few days later and taken to Edinburgh for his trial and subsequent execution.

## 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.

The Inventory boundary for the Battle of Carbisdale is defined on the accompanying map and includes the following areas:

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- The low passage between the river and the high ground to the north of the area along which Montrose entered onto the flood plain from the north. This also takes in the craggy peak which accommodates Carbisdale Castle and the southern portion of the craggy ground known as Creag a' Choineachan, which has been translated as Lamentation Hill, a place name which may be related to the battle.
- The eastern side of the area runs along the western bank of the river, in which numbers of troops are reported to have drowned during the rout.
- The southern limit of the area takes in the pass of low ground along which Strachan's men advanced, continuing to the south of Balinoe. It also takes in the higher ground to the west which may have provided a less obvious line of advance for at least some of his men.
- The western limit of the area takes in the slope which bounds the western edge of the flood plain and accommodates the area of woodland to the north-west into which Montrose's men fled. The boundary joins with the northern boundary at the eastern end of the lochan from which the Culrain Burn flows.

### **Historical Background to the Battle**

Following the execution of Charles I in 1649, his son Charles II became the leader of the Royalist cause. In 1650, he appointed James Graham, the Marquis of Montrose to be Lieutenant – Governor of Scotland and Captain – General of the Crown's forces. Montrose's first task was to gain support for an invasion from the other crowned heads of Europe, but he only had limited success in this area.

Undeterred by this, in March 1650 Montrose headed to Orkney, where he took command of a force of Danish troops who had been deployed there since the previous September, along with local levies raised from the islands, giving him a total force of at most around 1500 men. Montrose and his army crossed to the mainland at John O' Groats on 12 April, possibly after sending a vanguard of around 500 men to secure the landing. Once on the mainland, Montrose moved swiftly, besieging and taking Dunbeath Castle and within six days Montrose had advanced as far as Strathoykel in Sutherland. He subsequently moved south to Carbisdale where he made camp and awaited reinforcements, although none were forthcoming.

As Montrose waited, he would once more be let down by the inadequate scouting and poor intelligence which were so characteristic of many of his battles, and he failed to determine the presence nearby of a Covenanter force under the command of Colonel Archibald Strachan. Strachan, upon learning of Montrose's position, quickly advanced upon Ferne, a mile and a half from Montrose's camp, with his own force of around 200 cavalry, along with a small troop of around 30 musketeers and about 400 infantry from local levies of the Monro and Ross clans (although sources indicate these levies may not have been wholly committed or even sympathetic to Strachan's cause).

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Once the Covenanter's had reached Ferne, Strachan's scout, Captain Andrew Monro, reported back that Montrose had deployed 40 horse on patrol and suggested Strachan send a small force forward while keeping the remainder hidden, in an attempt to draw Montrose to battle and set an ambush. As some evidence suggests Montrose had his forces within a fortified camp in a strong position, it would seem that Strachan wished to draw him out into the open rather than risk assaulting his defences.

Whether or not Montrose's camp was well defended, the ruse by Strachan appears to have worked, with Montrose deploying a vanguard to the field under Sir John Hurry and taking command of the remainder of the army himself. When the remainder of the Covenanter force sprang their ambush and began advancing on Montrose, he appears to have attempted an orderly withdrawal towards the wooded and rocky slopes at his rear, which would have been ill-suited to Strachan's cavalry. Seeing this, Strachan attacked with around 200 of his cavalry, overtaking the Royalists just as they reached the woods and turning the retreat into a rout. Montrose's Danish troops appear to have been the only elements of his force to play any part in the fighting, managing to fire a single volley of musket fire before they too were driven off. While Montrose himself escaped with a few others, the remainder of his force was not so lucky. The pursuit of his army was a brutal affair and the slaughter in the wood continued for another two hours, with around 200 Royalists drowned while trying to cross the Kyle of Sutherland in a desperate bid to escape the massacre and another 400 captured.

### **Events & Participants**

Although the battle itself could be regarded as a fairly minor event with no more than 2000 men on the field, it is notable as the last action in which the by then legendary Montrose was engaged. He escaped the field but was captured within a couple of days and held in Ardvreck Castle, after which he was tried and executed for treason in Edinburgh. Charles II is generally held to have behaved in a somewhat duplicitous fashion with regard to Montrose, encouraging him to lead an invasion into Scotland against the Covenanters, while also negotiating with them for his return as King of Scotland. Even at the end of it all, Charles did nothing to save Montrose from execution.

James Graham was the fifth Earl of Montrose and the first Marquis of Montrose. He was the chief of Clan Graham. Montrose had been a supporter and signatory of the National Covenant in 1638, but had then become a Royalist, although he was driven by motives other than a desire to impose the Divine Right of Kings upon Scotland. He and Archibald Campbell, the eighth Earl of Argyll, were bitter rivals, and Montrose believed that the Covenant had become nothing more than a vehicle for Argyll's ambition. Always a moderate among the Covenanters, Montrose considered that the agreement in 1641 with Charles that had removed episcopacy from Scotland had fulfilled the demands of the Covenant and that to continue in opposition to him would be breaking that agreement. Following the signing of the Solemn League and Covenant in September 1643, Montrose presented himself to Charles I

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service at his headquarters in Oxford. On behalf of the King, he then fought a campaign intended to draw Covenanter forces away from supporting the Parliamentarians in England, and in this it was a success. Montrose fought a series of seven battles against Covenanter armies across the Highlands in 1644 and 1645, beginning with Tippermuir and ending at Philiphaugh, where he suffered his only defeat. He attempted to do the same on behalf of Charles II in 1650, but on this occasion fought only a single battle at Carbisdale. After his defeat there, he was captured and brought to Edinburgh for trial. On 21 May 1650, he was hanged and then beheaded. His head was fixed to a spike on Edinburgh's Tollbooth, his body quartered, and his limbs were displayed in Stirling, Glasgow, Perth and Aberdeen. Following the Restoration of Charles II as king in 1660, Montrose's remains were collected together once more and were interred in the High Kirk of St Giles in Edinburgh in May 1661.

Sir John Hurry was in command of Montrose's vanguard in the battle. Hurry had fought in Germany as a young man before returning to Scotland. He had a chequered career, switching sides repeatedly. He first came to prominence in the so-called "Incident" when Royalists plotted to kidnap the Marquis of Argyll, the Marquis of Hamilton and the Earl of Lanark, who were the leading Covenanter nobles; Hurry betrayed the plot to the Covenanters and joined the Covenanter cause. He fought for the Parliamentarians at Edgehill and Brentford before switching sides to the Royalists for whom he fought at the Battle of Chalgrove Field and at Marston Moor. He switched sides again, and it was as a Covenanter that he led the army sent to bring down Montrose in the Spring of 1645 that was utterly defeated at Auldearn. After losing at Auldearn to Montrose, he drifted back into the Royalist cause, joining the Engagers; this was a faction of Covenanters who signed an agreement with Charles I in 1647 to fight for him against the English Parliamentarians. He was one of the few Covenanter officers to join the Duke of Hamilton's expedition into England and was captured at the Battle of Preston in 1648. He escaped to the Continent, where he fell in with Montrose, and accompanied him on his last adventures; like Montrose, it ended in his execution in Edinburgh, on 29 May 1650.

Archibald Strachan, commander of the Covenanter forces at Carbisdale, is little remembered today but had an eventful career as a dragoon officer during the Wars of the Three Kingdoms. Born in Musselburgh, he fought on the Parliamentarian side at the Battle of Lansdown, outside Bath, in July 1643, after which he was promoted to major. By 1645 he had returned to Scotland and joined the Covenanter army and was noted for his religious conviction. In 1649 he was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel in Ker's Regiment. He distrusted Charles II in his dealings with the Covenanters but fought well at the second Battle of Dunbar against Cromwell in 1650; it was his regiment on the Scots' right flank halted Lambert's initial cavalry charge. He was a member of the Remonstrant party that after Dunbar pledged neutrality in the war against Cromwell until or unless Charles repented and genuinely embraced the Covenant. Strachan himself went even further and defected to Cromwell with a small group of men. He was excommunicated from the Kirk for this in January 1651. He died in November 1652.

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### **Battlefield Landscape**

Montrose entered the area of the battle, on the wide flood plain, from the north, having marched through the narrow pass between the high ground on which Carbisdale Castle now stands and the river. Although a source of debate within the sources, the presence of earthworks at the eastern end of the village of Culrain suggests that he was here for several days and did fortify his camp. Although the earthworks have not been subject to any form of detailed investigation, the angled bank and ditch in the field to the south of the village hall does bear a striking similarity to a ravelin. If this interpretation is correct, then it places Carbisdale within a very small number of battlefields in Scotland, and indeed in Britain, with associated earthwork defences.

Strachan and his Covenanters approached from the south, though it is difficult to be certain about the deployment of his men, given that the accounts describe his attack as an ambush carried out by three groups. It seems likely that the battle took place on the flood plain, possibly in front of the camp, with Montrose's men quickly retiring into the woods, which can still be seen, on the slopes to the west of Culrain village.

### **Archaeological and Physical Remains and Potential**

The question of physical remains above ground was considered in the Highland Council Historic Environment Record (HER) MHG9159, discussed in detail below under Battlefield Landscape. This concluded that further work comparing historical accounts with features on the ground would be required.

The area of the battle, on the flat ground to the west of the river is a relatively open landscape, with the village of Culrain having a fairly small footprint. The initial actions of the battle are likely to have taken place on the plain to the south of the village, with the Royalists then retreating to the wooded hills to the north-west. The potential for battle archaeology within this area is therefore good, with metal objects including musket shot, probably existing in the topsoil.

As noted above, there has in the past been doubt about the status of upstanding remains in the vicinity of the village. However, following a site visit in association with the compilation of the Inventory of Historic Battlefields it is now clear that an earthwork located in the field immediately to west of the road bridge over the railway, on the outskirts of the village, may well represent an arrowhead-shaped ravelin. This feature, which is represented by linear banks and ditches coming to a point which projects to the south, is typical of sixteenth century field fortifications and was probably located in advance of a fortified camp or other position. The orientation of the feature, which is at odds with all the later field boundaries, is in keeping with an earthwork sitting in advance of Montrose's camp, in the expectation that an attacking force will be advancing from the south, across the flood plain, which appears to have been the case.

The clear implication of this feature is that Montrose did indeed have a camp at this location, which given the scale of the fortifications, appears to have

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been occupied for at least several days prior to the battle. There are some banks and ditches to the rear (north) of the ravelin, behind the village hall, which may represent defensive works associated with the main part of the camp.

### **Cultural Association**

The battle is not particularly well known today and there are no known poems or ballads about the engagement, although it is briefly referred to in *The Braes of Sutherland*, a ballad of the Highland Clearances by the contemporary Scottish folk-rock band Wolfstone. There is one place name which may be associated with the battle. This is Creag a' Choineachan; the hill to the north of the flood plain on which the initial encounter seems to have taken place. The Gaelic name of the hill is commonly translated as Lamentation Hill, which may refer to the retreat and defeat of Montrose and his Royalists.

### **Select Bibliography**

Cowan, E. J. 1977. *Montrose for Covenant and King*. Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London. 280-91.

Reid, S. 1990. *The Campaigns of Montrose*. The Mercat Press, Edinburgh. 177-78.



# The Inventory of Historic Battlefields - Boundary

Carbisdale

27 April 1650

Local Authority: Highland

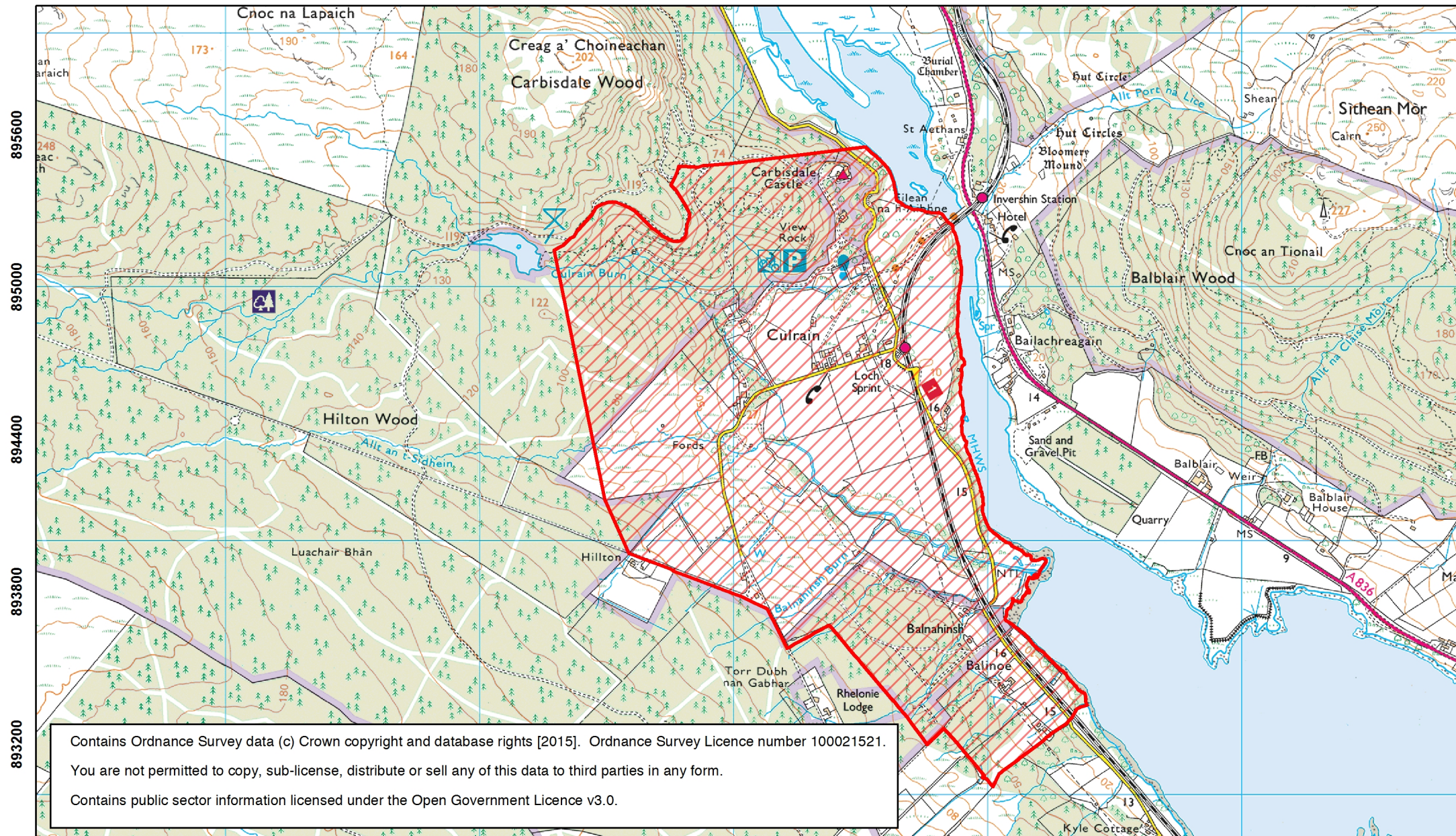
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