

The Battle of Roslin 1303

Scotland's 'Forgotten' Victory in the Wars of Independence

Scotland in the winter of 1302-03 was a country in shadow, a land without a king. Rival forces roamed the land, loyalties were uncertain, and the tide of war ebbed and flowed. Stretched English garrisons feared to travel far beyond their walls, but their Scottish opponents melted away before the resources and mettle of that most formidable of opponents, Edward Longshanks. The fate of the nation hung in the balance.

Scotland's nobles had come to regret inviting Edward I of England to arbitrate over their competing claims to the throne in 1286. When John Balliol, his chosen man, showed neither the weakness to bend to Edward's will nor the strength to lead the country against it, the English king invaded in 1296 and humbled Scotland at the siege of Berwick and the Battle of Dunbar. Balliol was stripped of office and Edward seized control of Scotland for himself.

But once the king returned to the south the backlash came quickly, and sporadic uprisings could not be contained by the forces of occupation. At Stirling Bridge, Andrew de Moray and William Wallace emerged as inspirational leaders, but the former was mortally wounded and the latter badly defeated at Falkirk in 1298.

But the war for Scotland then fell into a damaging and expensive pattern: when King Edward campaigned in person, resistance was driven back and the English were ascendant; when the royal army disbanded for the winter the Scots re-emerged and bottled the occupiers up in their captured castles. So it was at the start of 1303, when an English force encamped beside the steep ravine of Roslin Glen, a short ride south of Edinburgh.



Edward the I came to be known as 'hammer of the Scots' following his campaigns against Scotland, the portrait of Edward I was painted in c. 1300 and can be seen at Westminster Abbey in London.

The Battle of Roslin 1303

The Fiction

According to the traditional story, based on John Fordun's 14th century *Chronicle of the Scottish Nation* and the *Scalacronica* but owing much to a romantic retelling in the nineteenth century, Edward's principal lieutenant in Scotland at this time was Sir John Segrave (1256-1325). He had fallen in love with the beautiful Lady Margaret Ramsay, who chose instead to marry the dashing young Henry St Clair of Roslin. In a fury Segrave persuaded his king to authorise a campaign against St Clair's stronghold, marching against it with 30,000 men. The English host was so numerous that it could not camp in a single place and divided into three. But the Scots rallied under John Comyn and Simon Fraser, who gathered around 8,000 men in a flying column near Biggar and dashed overnight to the rescue of Roslin.

The Scots attacked Segrave's camp in the early hours, catching him by surprise and taking a great many prisoners. Even the commander himself was seized, in a swift and decisive action. But the alarm was soon raised at the approach of a second English force, and the weary Scots withdrew to a defensive position on a ridge beyond a burn. Over-confident, their opponents charged across the water into a hail of Scots arrows which obliged them to veer off to their right, where they were trapped by the steep banks of the Bilston Burn and cut to pieces. But the Scots barely had time to recover their breath before the third English division appeared to the south. They redeployed again, making use of what horses and equipment they had already taken as prizes, and again the English obliged by storming straight at them. The English tumbled into a hollow and faced a terrible slaughter. The survivors were driven into the glen, where the treacherous slopes and frothing waters ensured their destruction.

The traditional story makes for exciting reading, and the battlefield's proximity to the enigmatic Rosslyn Chapel only adds to the appeal. The fields beyond the chapel still bear the marks of the fighting in their place-names: Shinbanes Field, where the bones of the slain were later ploughed up; the Kill Burn, where the second wave of attack was destroyed; and the Hewan Bog, where the English were hewn down by Scottish blades. All speak of the volume of the slaughter.



In this illustration of the Battle of Roslin, the Scots are depicted on a ridge beyond the burn, showering the advancing English forces with arrows.

But there are a number of problems with this narrative, some of which should be obvious. The first is the scale of the engagement, which if accepted would be larger than Bannockburn. For an English host to be anything like that size it would need the support of the great magnates and the resources of the king himself. In fact, we know that Edward had already begun preparing a large army to accompany him into Scotland later in 1303, and given the difficulties of mobilising and funding medieval armies it is most unlikely two campaigns on a grand scale could be conceived for the same season. Therein lies another difficulty: Roslin was fought in February, an improbable time to be mounting major invasions as weather, supply and logistical problems would be crippling. But in the Roslin campaign both armies appear to cover large distances with relative ease and considerable speed. There are other issues too: Henry St Clair did not marry Margaret Ramsay and was no love-struck young knight, and John Segrave himself was already married. Those details can be dismissed as later romance, much inspired it seems by Walter Scott's *Lay of the Last Minstrel*. The story was actually published as a work of fiction in an 1837 book by James Jackson of Penicuik, but interpreted as factual by later readers.

The Battle of Roslin 1303

The Facts

Approaching the Battle of Roslin with fresh eyes helps to reveal a more plausible series of events however. John Segrave was indeed Edward's lieutenant in the south-east, and he maintained a small mounted retinue of 53 men at Berwick. There was another force of 38 available to him at Roxburgh. These were rapid response forces, crucial for controlling occupied territory and maintaining communication between garrisons. In a crisis, they formed the core of the immediate military response. At the start of 1303 there were panicky messages crossing the Border as English captains warned of a resurgent opposition. Castles were falling, others were being besieged. In response Edward would march in the summer season to re-assert his authority, but for the time being it was the job of Segrave and his western counterpart to keep up the spirits of the garrisons and deny the Scots freedom of operation. In the west, a force of 119 men-at-arms and 2000 foot were assembled for this purpose at the start of the year. Segrave had a similar strength in men-at-arms, so perhaps he mobilised a force of infantry of equivalent size.

It seems most likely that Segrave moved north with a small and relatively mobile force in February 1303 to ensure that the lines held until the royal army returned in the summer. Linlithgow was under siege, so perhaps he was aiming for its relief. It is unlikely that Segrave expected to fight at Roslin: the steep ravines and wooded glens, ridges and hollows which create blind-spots and burns which restrict mobility, mean that an army would be boxed in on three sides. But he was nevertheless surprised in his camp, perhaps by a mobile Scottish force which had abandoned its siege operations in the hope of catching the enemy off guard. It worked, and in a series of rolling skirmishes across the unfavourable landscape the English forces were defeated and Segrave barely managed to escape with his life, having been liberated by the second column shortly before its defeat. He did later get his revenge for this humiliation, by overseeing William Wallace's execution.

Ultimately the numbers involved in the battle do no matter: whether it was a few hundred or a few thousand who fought at Roslin the effect it had was significant. The defeat of the very forces that existed to support them will have struck the English garrisons hard and left them feeling even more vulnerable and isolated.

For the Scots, here was news which could wash some of the stain off the defeat at Falkirk: on their own terms, they were more than capable of winning in the field. To avoid a repeat of Roslin, Edward was obliged to keep his main army in Scotland throughout the following winter at considerable expense. Although he was far from beaten, his enemies had also shown that they were still very much a potent force. No English soldier in Scotland could sleep easy.

The stage was now set for the emergence of Robert the Bruce, but the future king's rivalry with (and murder of) John Comyn meant that the Battle of Roslin faded from fame, becoming Scotland's forgotten victory of the Wars of Independence.

Edward Longshanks would be preoccupied by Scotland until his dying breath in 1307, infuriated by the knowledge that no victories he achieved in person proved capable of long outlasting his presence. The conflict would continue for another two generations and the legacy was bitter, but Scotland survived. And although the Battle of Roslin may not be as famous as those of Stirling Bridge or Bannockburn, it was certainly a momentous event for those involved and to those who needed the boost of a victory to sustain them in their fight. So much so that later chroniclers would understand its significance and expand the narrative to reflect, as would others who followed their lead in later centuries.

Today the story of the battle is known locally around Roslin, although usually in the form of the three successive battles against the odds and retelling the fictional Romance. A stone monument marks the spot, but it takes a committed visitor to find it.



A memorial cairn, erected by the Roslin Heritage Society, commemorates and marks the site of the Battle of Roslin.

The Battle of Roslin 1303

Hopefully now, with the Rosslyn Chapel Trust taking an interest in the battle and following an evening of presentations exploring the issues around it, this important and engaging story will enjoy deeper study and wider awareness. After all, reducing the size of the armies does not diminish the battle's significance.

Acknowledgements

Adapted from an article by Dr Arran Johnston of the Scottish Battlefields Trust. The article first appeared in the *Battlefields Trust Magazine*.

Reprinted here with the kind permission of the author.

Thanks also to Fiona Rogan of the Rosslyn Chapel Trust for providing background research into the St Clair Family and their part in the battle story.

www.rosslynchapel.com