SAUCHIEBURN

11 June 1488

Local Authority: Stirling Council

NGR centred: NS 803 896

Overview

In 1488 a number of disaffected Scottish nobles rose against James III, with his son, James, Duke of Rothesay, who was only 15, as their nominal leader. The two sides met in battle just south of Stirling and the rebels prevailed. James III fled, and tradition has it that he was murdered by a priest as he lay injured in a mill after a fall from his horse. However, neither the location nor the precise circumstances of James III death are clear; with his death his son became James IV of Scotland.

The Battle

James III is said to have had up to 30,000 men, including Highland archers, with a mixture of infantry and cavalry; this seems an unusually high number for the period and there is only one source that gives any numbers. Opposing him was a rebel army of up to 18,000 men (again with the caveat that the numbers are probably massively overstated) under Angus, Hepburn and Hume (known as the Lords), including a large contingent from Dumfries & Galloway. The accounts suggest that the main part of the rebel army was mounted. It was nominally led by James' son, the future James IV.

The two armies met at a point two miles from Stirling and a mile from Bannockburn, north of Torwood. The precise location is unknown but the general location seems relatively clear. The fighting seems to have started with a charge by the Lords' army that was driven back by archery, but a second assault by the Annandale men caused James III to flee the battlefield as it seemed as though they would break through. Despite his departure, the fighting continued for some time, although there seem to have been few casualties on either side. Eventually the Royalist army withdrew, possibly with the rumour of James III's death, and the Lords were left as the victors. The circumstances of James' death are unclear, and it took some time to establish that the king had been killed. As a result of his guilt over the death of his father, James IV allegedly wore a heavy chain around his waist as penance for the rest of his life.

The battle is notable as one in which a reigning King of Scotland was killed, with his successor present in opposition to him and gaining the throne as a direct result of the outcome of the battle.

The Armies

James III: Lindsay of Pitscottie says that James had 30,000 men before the battle. Alexander Ruthven Sheriff of Strathern, brought

"...a thousand Gentlemen, well horsed with Jack and spear, a thousand Bows, a thousand half-long swords and Habergeons."

According to Pitscottie, the order of battle was 10,000 Highland men with bows in the vanguard, which included the Earl of Huntly and the Earl of Atholl, 10,000 men of the 'West-land' and Stirlingshire in the rearguard, with the Earl of Menteith, Lord Erskine and Lord Graham leading, and the king himself was in 'great battle with all the Borrows and Commons of Scotland, on the one Wing.' On the king's right-hand were Lord David, Earl of Crawford, and Lord David Lindesay of The Byres, with 2,000 horsemen and 6,000 Footmen from Fife and Angus; and on his left-hand and wing, Alexander Lord Ruthven, with 5,000 men from Strathern and the Stormont.'

The Lords: Pitscottie says that the king's army was opposed by 12,000 horsemen and 6,000 foot and that the rebels were arrayed in three battles, with 6,000 men in each. The Humes and Hepburns had the vanguard with men of the Merse, Teviotdale and East Lothian. Next to them were the men of Liddisdale and Annandale and many of Galloway.

"And then came all the Lords that conspired against the king, and brought with them in company, the Prince, to be their Buckler and Safeguard."

No numbers are given by the other main commentators. Pitscottie's account suggests that the Lords were outnumbered by the Royalist army, but there is no corroboration for this and it has also been argued that the Lords would have avoided battle if they had been significantly outnumbered.

Numbers

No further information.

Losses

At some stage during the course of the battle, James III was killed and is obviously the highest ranking casualty; Pitscottie said that whilst many were taken and hurt on both sides, few others were slain. He adds that he had heard of 'No man of reputation that was slain at that time; but there were many Earls, Lords and Barons that were taken and ransomed.'

Buchanan, however, says that on the royal side Alexander Cunningham, Earl of Glencairn, died with a few of his vassals and kinfolk. Many were wounded on both sides.

Action

Graham, writing in 1960, noted that the only contemporary documents that allude to the battle are an Act of Parliament of 17 October 1488 and a grant of lands made in 1489. The former says

"...the debate and reason of the field of Stirling was proposed, in which the late James, king of Scotland, whom God absolve, father of our sovereign lord, happened to be slain..."

The grant of land alludes to the finding of Bruce's sword, which James III is said to have carried 'in war near to Stirling on St Barnabas's day.' These references do not mention Sauchieburn, or the way in which the king met his death.

The fullest account comes from Robert Lindsay of Pitscottie, who completed his chronicle in 1576. He gives the date of the battle as 18 June, but St Barnabas's day is 11 June. 'Sauchieburn' is never mentioned. He says that the king came to Stirling with his army, but had to spend the night in the town, having been unable to gain entrance to the castle, whose keeper, Shaw, had sided with the rebels. The king had also learnt that his son was with the rebels, having been taken, according to the keeper, against his will, although Buchanan says the keeper had in fact been bribed. In the morning his army moved out to Torwood, south of Stirling, 'in arrayed battle, and there planted down till more came to him.'

The Lords' army came forward to the Water of Carron, above the bridge, and 'planted there' that night. The following morning 'there came wise Men, on both the sides, to treat of Peace', but the king, seeing that his forces outnumbered the Lords' moved his men forward to the fields and put them in order of battle.

When the king heard that his enemies were in sight he leapt upon the horse that Lord Lindsay had given him and rode forward. The Lords' army was advancing in its order of battle. Pitscottie says that they hastened forward with great courage because they 'knew the King's Faculties, that he was never hardy, nor yet constant in battle.' The king, seeing his enemies coming forward with his own banner displayed and his son on their side, remembered the words that a witch had spoken to him before

"That he should be destroyed an put down by the nearest of his kin[which he thought was about to happen] And, By the words of the foresaid Witch, Illusion and Enticement of the Devil, he took a vain suspicion in his Mind, that he hastily took Purpose to flee."

The Humes and Hepburns rushed at the king's vanguard, but they suffered so much from the archery of the king's men that they retreated. But 'the thieves of Annandale' came in shouting and crying and the King was so frightened that he fled, heading for Stirling. As he spurred his horse through Bannockburn, he scared a woman taking water from a burn, who ran, dropping her pitcher. This in turn scared the king's horse, which leapt the burn, unseating the king, who fell at the door of the mill at Bannockburn and was so bruised by his fall and the weight of his armour that he fainted.

The miller and his wife, not knowing who he was, brought him into the mill and laid him down. In the meantime the king's forces, although they knew the king had fled, continued to fight, particularly, because 'knowing they were Borderers and Thieves that dealt with them; therefore they had the more courage to defend themselves.' The fighting reached a point where the King's army retreated in good order, until they reached Torwood, where they fought on until nightfall, and then many of the army

"...passed to Stirling, and their Enemies following them, many were taken and hurt on both sides, but few slain."

As the retreat to Stirling was taking place the King came to and called for a priest to make his confession. The miller and his wife asked who he was, to which he replied "I was your King this Day at Morn". The miller's wife ran out and called for a priest for the king. A priest who was passing by (possibly a servant of Lord Gray, one of the rebel Lords) asked where the king was. The

miller's wife led him to the king, and the priest, knowing it was the king told him he might live 'if he had good Leiching.' The king replied that he felt he might live but he wanted a priest to give him the sacrament. On hearing this, the priest drew a 'Whinger' (dagger) and gave him four or five strokes, into the heart, then laid him on his back and went away. But nobody knew what had happened, or of the king's death, or of the killer even a month later. The king's army fled to Stirling whilst the Lords' army camped for the night before withdrawing in the morning to Linlithgow. There is nothing to corroborate the story but it has been accepted generally as at least an approximation of the truth.

Buchanan repeats the story of James III being refused entry to Stirling Castle, but says that the keeper, Shaw, had been bribed. Because of this, when the rebels pressed upon him he had no place to which he could retreat, and he was forced to risk an engagement 'with what force he had'; this seems to imply that he had a smaller force than the rebels, or was not confident, even if he had superior numbers. Buchanan repeats Pitscottie's account of the first line of nobles giving way and then the intervention of the men of Annandale and their neighbours from the western coasts, adding that they advanced boldly with longer spears than their adversaries and put the centre of the king's army to flight. He differs from Pitscottie in saving that James fell from his horse whilst fleeing to one of his ships, stationed in the Forth, rather than to Stirling. He took refuge in some water mills 'but being overtaken, he was slain there, with a few attendants. 'Buchanan says there were three who pursued him very closely (Patrick Gray, Stirling of Keir and a priest named Borthwick), but it is not known which of them killed him. He says that the report of James III's death 'although doubtful' stopped the pursuit and slaughter of fugitives, for the nobles wished it to appear that the war was undertaken against the king only, and not against the people.

It should be noted that Graham, who pointed out that there is no contemporary account of the way in which James III died, believed that the account of his murder, first given by Pitscottie, is a piece of romantic embroidery, adapted from Boece's account of the murder of Sir John Comyn as given in Bellenden's translation of 1536. He illustrated this by comparison of the two texts which are strikingly similar.

Aftermath and Consequences

In Pitscottie's account, the Lords, together with the prince, stayed at Linlithgow waiting to hear what had happened to the king. They were informed that he had been taken on board two ships under Captain Wood, a loyalist, who had recovered many injured men from the battle using small boats. Wood denied that the king was there and said they might search the ships if they wished. However, the Lords, unhappy with this response, summoned him to the Council, but he, knowing that the king had been murdered, was suspicious and only came because two Lords were sent as pledges to his ships until he returned safely.

Pitscottie's account gives a sense of the relationship between James III and James IV. When Captain Wood presented himself to the Council, the Prince

asked him if he were his father, to which the Captain replied that he was not, but was his true servant. Wood continued to maintain that the king was not in his ships and that he remained loyal to him. Although the Lords were unhappy with his response and attitude they had no alternative but to let him return safely to his ships, for fear of harm coming to their pledges, who would be hanged if the Captain suffered any harm. As it happened the pledges would actually have been hanged if the captain had been any later returning. The council sought ships and sailors to seize Wood, but such was his reputation, that none would, 'not even if they had ten ships to his two... '

Buchanan says that James III was considered a tyrant, 'a prince not naturally of bad disposition, but corrupted by evil communication', adversely influenced by the Boyds and by 'men of the very lowest description', and also influenced by the example of many of his fellow kings in Europe. It was therefore voted in the next Convention of the Estates that he was justly slain, and an act passed to prevent all who had borne arms against him from being ever personally, or in their posterity, 'disturbed on that account'.

Buchanan says that when the death of the king was finally confirmed the Lords organised a magnificent funeral for him, which took place at Cambuskenneth Abbey near Stirling on 25 June. Even after this the prince himself did not govern, even when he was crowned James IV, and instead power was wholly invested in Angus, Hepburn and Hume. However, in due course, James IV would exert his own authority and became an effective King of Scots.

Events & Participants

James III was an unpopular king for most of his reign, particularly because of his preference for advancing his own men, many of them commoners, at the expense of the nobility and members of his own family. He was also unpopular because of his continuing attempts to create an alliance with England despite the reluctance of his nobles and the English. In 1482, he lost Berwick to the invading English; when he raised an army, again promoting his favourites, many of the nobility turned against him in open rebellion. James's favourites were murdered and he was imprisoned in Edinburgh Castle. Even after this he continued to seek an alliance with England, continued to promote his favourites and became estranged from his wife and eldest son, James.

The young James IV went on to become a 'Renaissance King', patronising the arts and sciences. He signed a peace treaty with Henry VII of England in 1502, and married his daughter Margaret in 1503. However, bound by the Auld Alliance treaty of 1295, he sided with France in its war with England and led his army south. The Scots were routed at Flodden Field on 9 September 1513, where James was killed along with many of the Scottish nobility.

Context

No further information.

Other Notable Participants

James III was an unpopular king for most of his reign, which lasted from 1460 to 1488. Amongst other things, his preference for his own favourites, many of them commoners, alienated many of the nobility and members of his own family. His early desire for an alliance with England also contributed to this unpopularity; despite the fact that his nobles were extremely reluctant and the English were suspicious of his motives. James insisted on trying to get an alliance. In 1482, he lost Berwick to the invading English, with whom his brother Alexander had allied himself; when he raised an army, again promoting his favourites, many of the nobility turned against him in open James's favourites were murdered and he was imprisoned in Edinburgh Castle. Even after this he continued to seek an alliance with England, continued to promote his favourites and became estranged from his wife and eldest son, James. The fact that James IV allegedly mistook Captain Wood for his father after the battle indicates the lack of relationship between the two James. It is not clear to what extent the young James, later James IV, was an active participant against his father or simply a pawn used by the rebel nobles to legitimise their rebellion. Certainly, James IV's guilt and grief at his father's death was so great that he wore an iron belt of penitence around his waist for the rest of his life.

Archibald Douglas, 5th Earl of Angus, was one of the leaders of the rebellion against James III. Known as 'Bell-the-Cat' for having taken the risk of attacking James' favourites and executing them (the name is derived from one of Aesop's fables, *The Mice in Council*), Angus was one of the Scottish nobles who supported the English invasion of 1482-3 when Edward IV of England seized Berwick. Initially, Angus was one of James IV's guardians but his relations with the young king quickly became as troubled as they had been with James III, and Angus was on several occasions allied with England against the Scottish Crown. He was absent from the army at Flodden in 1513, but lost two sons in the battle.

Colin Campbell, 1st Earl of Argyll, was a strong supporter of James II against the Black Douglases and was created an earl by James III. He was Lord Chancellor under James III but turned against him because of his promotion of commoners to positions of power.

Alexander Home, 1st Lord Home, is said to have been one of the rebel lords at the battle. However, at the time of the battle, Home would have been 85 years old. His successor as Lord Home was his grandson, also Alexander, so it is possible that the chroniclers have confused the two Alexanders.

Physical Remains & Potential

There are no physical remains currently known from the battlefield. However, the fighting will have generated a reasonable amount of material, as there was significant use of archery by James III's Highland troops, along with hand to hand fighting as the armies came together. The area most likely to have been the scene of the fighting is relatively undeveloped so there is a reasonable expectation that there will be artefactual material remaining from the battle.

Physical Remains

No artefactual material has been reported to date, and the only human remains known from the battle are those of James III himself, which were buried at Cambuskenneth Abbey. It is unclear from the primary sources what the death toll was in the battle, but it seems to have been quite low. Accordingly, there is a relatively low potential of human remains from the battle.

The mill where James III is supposed to have been murdered no longer stands, and was apparently replaced with a farm house. A metal detector survey at Milne Park Road, Bannockburn, Stirling, was carried out for Bett Homes in April 2011 as the site was considered to be potentially part of the Bannockburn battlefield and perhaps of the Sauchieburn battlefield. While no material relating to the Battle of Bannockburn was found, two unidentified heavily worn coins, which may be late medieval, could possibly be contemporary with the Battle of Sauchieburn in 1488, though there were no other artefacts of this date. A metal detector survey and historic building recording undertaken in 2002 on the mill to the west of the site did not produce anything of note.

Cultural Association

The traditional location of the death of James III is at Milton Mill on the Bannock Burn. There is a plaque commemorating the event, but the stories surrounding his death are all later and of dubious authenticity. There are no ballads or poems about the battle, although there is a suggestion that Robert Henrysoun's poem *The Taill of Schir Chanticleir and the Foxe* contains a verse referring to James IV and the death of his father. However, the dating of the poem is uncertain and it may not refer to these events at all.

Commemoration & Interpretation

No monument to the battle is known. The body of James III was brought to Cambuskenneth Abbey, near Stirling, and interred with the body of his wife Margaret, who had died two years earlier. On Queen Victoria's orders a tomb to the pair was erected there in 1864, which she financed.

There is a plaque at the ford where James III is supposed to have been killed, marking the presumed location of the mill that was present at the time of the battle. There is no extant evidence of the mill itself, while the story of James III' murder is unproven.

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Battlefield Landscape

The landscape of the battlefield is not clearly understood. James III and his army had advanced south to Stirling and spent the night in the town. They moved further south the following day towards Torwood. The Lords had been south of the Carron, but spent the night immediately before the battle camped on either side of it. The two sides met at a point which the various sources place two miles from Stirling and a mile from the field of Bannockburn. Assuming that the Battle of Bannockburn was on or around the Carse, these two distances intersect around the southern edge of Bannockburn village. There is a lot of open ground here, including a hill which is a possible location for James III's men to have mustered before the battle began. The fighting may have taken place up on the high ground close to Bannockburn, or it may have spilled down onto the plain below. The area is now cut by the M80, M9 and the A9.

Location

The name of the battle, as the Battle of Sauchieburn, is a late ascription. Graham, writing in 1960, noted that the only two contemporary references talk in one case about the 'field of Stirling' and in the other about the battle being 'near Stirling' and suggests that it was only in 1817 that the battle was described as the 'Battle of Sauchieburn'.

He argues that the battle as described by Lindsay of Pitscottie could not have taken place anywhere near the Sauchie Burn. In his view, the two armies advanced along the Stirling-Larbert road and most of the fighting took place to the south of the Tor Wood, or even in the wood itself. The king's desire to break the insurgents led to his decision to fight a pitched battle in the open rather than take advantage of one of the natural obstacles the rebels had to pass such as the Tor Burn, which enters a ravine just east of the north-west corner of the Tor Wood and is impassable by mounted troops for a mile downstream from that point except where it is now bridged (NGR NS 833855, NS 835857); or alternatively the Bannock Burn, the banks of which are steep downstream from Milton (NGR NS 802899) to a point below Bannockburn village.

Graham says that although the south edge of the Tor Wood is six miles from Stirling, the timing Pittscottie describes is reasonable if, as he says, flight and pursuit had begun whilst fighting continued in the wood, or if in 1488, 'Tor Wood' denoted an area of woodland or park which stretched further northwards than it does nowadays. The latter point is reasonable, as the accounts of Bannockburn in 1314 make it clear that Tor Wood extended much further north at that date, but the problem with Graham's location is that it ignores the measurements given in the sources, which are that the battle took place one mile from the field of Bannockburn and two miles from Stirling. While any location derived from this information will necessarily be very rough, it does suggest a location on the south side of modern-day Bannockburn. If that is correct, then the most likely place for James' army to have mustered initially is on the hill above the Bannock Burn, with the fighting taking place on the ground to the south.

Graham placed the mill where James was murdered at Bannockburn, and that the ruined 'Beaton's mill' at Milton which was reputed to be the site of the murder was not only in the wrong place, but was actually an ordinary small cottage, probably of the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, and certainly not medieval.

Terrain

The ground where the fighting is presumed to have taken place is relatively high and forms part of the ridge of high ground on the southern side of the Carse. The northern edge includes a hill which stands above the oldest part of Bannockburn village, with the ground sloping relatively gently to the south and east. To the south, the ground continues to slope down towards the river Carron, with ridges of higher ground to the east and west. It forms a broad valley that was probably part of Tor Wood in the medieval period.

Condition

The ground is remarkably open and well preserved given the proximity to Bannockburn and Stirling. There are portions of the battlefield that have been developed for housing, some of which are likely to have been part of the fighting. The presence of housing on some of the battlefield, together with the proximity to Bannockburn, means that the battlefield is likely to be at risk of further housing development. The site also has the M80, M9 and the A872 running through it.

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 the position 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 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 Sauchieburn is defined on the accompanying map and includes the following areas:

- Patches of surviving woodland, including Bar Wood, Auchenbowie Wood, Pleanbank Wood, that may indicate the original extent of the Torwood.
- The Bannock Burn, including the ford at which James III is traditionally said to have been murdered.
- The area around Bannockburn, Muiraleside, Pirnhall and Croftside, where much of the fighting may have occurred.
- The line of the Roman Road, along with the current A872 and M9, as the likeliest approach routes of the rebel lord's army.

 The high ground overlooking the Bannock Burn, where James III's army may have initially deployed.

Select Bibliography

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Lindsay of Pitscottie, R. 1728. *The History of Scotland; from 21 February, 1436 to March 1565.*Basket & Co, London. 87-97.

Further Bibliography

Information on Sources and Publications

Robert Lindsay of Pitscottie (c.1532-1586) was the son of William Lindsay of Pyotstoun, and a cousin of Patrick, Lord Lindsay of the Byres. Nothing is known of his early life or education. He may have held Pitscottie as a tenant. It is uncertain when he began his chronicle, ending it in 1576, although copies of his manuscript often add later events. His chronicle has been described as having an engaging style that is vivid to read, but he has been criticised by historians for being historically inaccurate. He is considered to have an anti-Catholic bias, while he also attacks the Hamiltons and Douglases. It is noteworthy that his great-uncle David was one of the commanders of James III's army, and some of his information on the battle may have come down through the family. The text was first published in 1728, with the definitive version published by the Scottish Text Society between 1899 and 1913.

George Buchanan (1506-1582), a Protestant, was an opponent of Mary, Queen of Scots. He evolved a concept of 'popular sovereignty' as a safeguard against tyranny. A distinguished scholar in various European universities, he was at various times in his life tutor to James V's son, denounced as a heretic for satires on the friars, which James V encouraged him to write, imprisoned by the Inquisition in Portugal and classical tutor to Mary, against whom he later gave evidence. He was also a Moderator of the General Assembly and Lord Privy Seal. His *History* which relates the history of Scotland from its origins to the death of the Regent Lennox in 1571 was dedicated to James VI, with whose education he had been entrusted, and was completed in the year of his death.

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Cartographic and Illustrative Sources

No further information.

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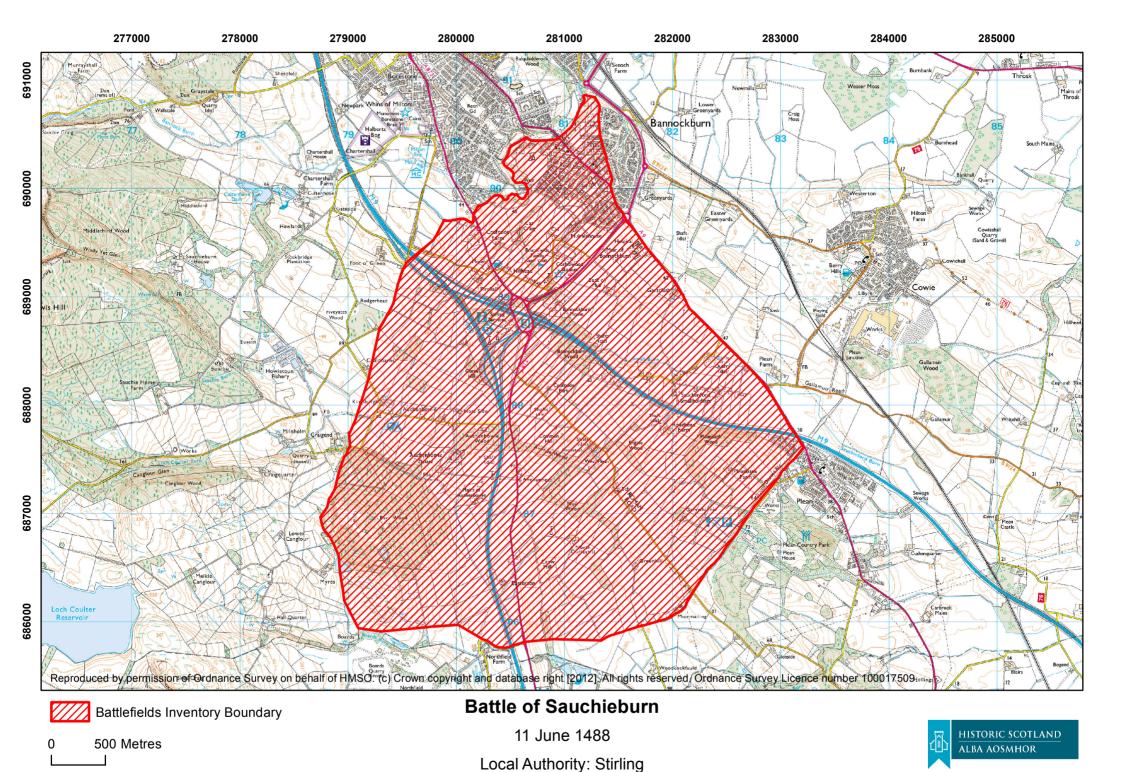
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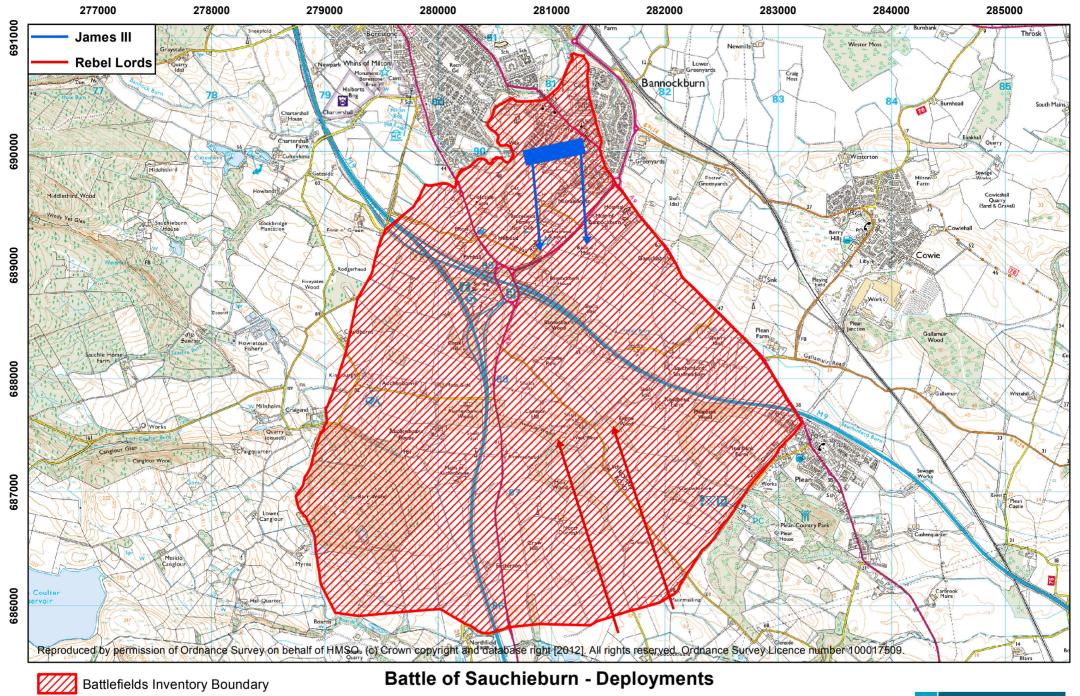
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0 500 Metres

11 June 1488

Local Authority: Stirling



