

PREPARE *for* BATTLE

As we approach the 700th anniversary of the Battle of Bannockburn in 2014, join us in revisiting the events leading up to the confrontation that altered the path of Scottish history

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'Now Robert, seeing that he had the whole border of England under tribute, applied all his thoughts to getting possession of the town of Berwick, which was in the king of England's hands. Coming unexpectedly to the castle on 6 December 1312, he laid ladders against the walls and began to scale them; and had not a dog betrayed the approach of the Scots by loud barking, it is believed that he would quickly have taken the castle and the town.'

CHRONICLE OF LANERCOST PRIORY, CUMBRIA

When Robert the Bruce attempted to win back Scotland's greatest trading port from the English, it was an assault too far. The sacking of Berwick in 1312 would have meant a long siege, which was difficult for the Scots in the Wars of Independence: they lacked war engines and sufficient men to pit against garrisons often supplied by sea and well connected to other strongholds. However, the Chronicle of Lanercost shows that the English felt the threat was real, and this was testimony to the surge Bruce's campaign had achieved in the preceding two years.

BRIDGE MAN

Most of us know the date of the Battle of Bannockburn: 24 June 1314. But that famous set-to came after a long, hard road travelled by Bruce and his supporters, since 1306 and the murder of his rival, John Comyn. After the death of Edward I (7 July 1307), Edward II had shown much less interest in Scotland. Robert had thus had time to face down his Scottish enemies and draw such vital captains as Thomas Randolph and James Douglas to his cause. By 1309-10 King Robert had control of much of Scotland north of the Forth and had begun restoring royal government – appointing officers, granting lands and holding parliaments (St Andrews, March 1309; Inchture, April 1312; Ayr, July 1312) as well as opening communications with the Papacy and France.

Bowmen at the Battle of Bannockburn, by Graham Coton

The lengthy absence of forces in the field led by the English king himself proved crucial. Bruce had still not felt strong enough to challenge Edward II's only expedition to Scotland, over the winter and spring of 1310-11: the Scots withdrew to the north and west while Edward and his Gascon favourite, Piers Gaveston, reinforced their garrisons at Perth and Dundee. However, in August 1311, Edward returned south to face the grievances of his nobility, plunging into civil war. Bruce seized the chance to campaign in a number of theatres. This push throughout 1311-13 would launch an intimidating series of castle captures and bring terror to Edward II's Scottish adherents and northern English subjects alike: all culminating in the battle for Stirling

THE ROAD TO BANNOCKBURN

Follow the long and winding march to Scotland's epic battle



1306

10 FEBRUARY
King Robert the Bruce murders John Comyn of Badenoch at Dumfries



7 JULY
Death of Edward I

1307



MARCH
Robert I's first parliament, at St Andrews

1309



BY DECEMBER 1311
Ayr garrison falls to Scots

1311

AUGUST 1311
Scots raid northern England and extract tribute

1310



WINTER 1310–AUGUST 1311
Edward II and Piers Gaveston campaign in Scotland

1312

12 APRIL
Dundee garrison falls to Scots



19 JUNE
Piers Gaveston executed

AUGUST
Scots raid northern England, and burn Hexham, Corbridge and Durham town; tribute extracted

29 OCTOBER 1312
Robert I at Inverness to seal treaty with Norway about Western Isles

6 DECEMBER 1312
Scots attempt to take Berwick-upon-Tweed

1313

11 JULY
Robert I turns 39 years old

JULY
Scots attempt to land in Ulster



MAY–JUNE
Edward II travels to France; Scots invade and take the Isle of Man

7 FEBRUARY
Dumfries garrison falls to Scots

8 JANUARY
Perth garrison falls to Scots



BRIDGEMAN, MARY EVANS

BANNOCKBURN

castle at Bannockburn in midsummer 1314.

August 1311 saw the Scots raid the Lothians, Berwickshire and northern England, forcing the earldom of Dunbar and the bishopric of Durham (16 August) to pay tribute for respite until mid-summer 1312. This made it all too clear that the English crown could not protect its subjects. By the year's end, Edward II's westernmost garrison, Ayr castle, had fallen to the Scots who razed it to the ground. Dundee was next with Robert occupying the burgh about 12 April 1312 despite English attempts to relieve the garrison (interestingly, by a date agreed with the besieging Scots, as would occur at Stirling in 1314). Former Scottish opponents such as David, Earl of Atholl, and Sir David Brechin now submitted to Bruce. The Scots pressed on to south-west Scotland. Further raids into northern England followed relentlessly. King Robert himself led forces which burnt Hexham, Corbridge and then Durham town on market day in August, extracting yet more ransom for year-long truces and 'a very large booty in cattle'.

Edward II had no response, embroiled as he was in the crisis of political reforms imposed on him by his nobility. Gaveston was executed by Edward's disgruntled earls on 19 June 1312. Admittedly, this would allow the English king to recover his position and to negotiate with his subjects which included the prospect of another expedition to Scotland. However, the talks would drag on into summer 1313.

Although thwarted in his attack on Berwick, Bruce recovered swiftly to lead his men across the moat at Perth on 8 January 1313, overwhelming the garrison: 'the disloyal people, both Scots and English, were dragged and slain with the sword', a fate which befell some burgesses, although their commander, Scot Sir William Oliphant (who had defended Stirling castle



A statue of Robert the Bruce stands guard at the site of the Battle of Bannockburn

against Edward I in 1304) was spared and imprisoned. The first half of 1313, saw the surrender and destruction of a succession of minor English-held castles, particularly in the south-west where Dumfries fell about 7 February and its captain, Gallovidian Dugald McDowall (who had turned over two of Bruce's brothers for execution in 1307), fled into exile. McDowall's refuge on the Isle of Man proved short-lived as Bruce and Randolph landed on the island on 17 May, taking Rushen castle after a five-week siege: Edward II, in the meantime, was in France.

The emboldened Scots then attempted a first, if repelled, assault on Ulster. By August 1313 the Scots had taken and destroyed Linlithgow peel in West Lothian, widening the English supply line between Edinburgh and Stirling castles to over 30 miles. Tradition has it that the king's forces were aided at Linlithgow, as in other captures, by local folk rising up against the garrison. Bruce's momentum seemed unstoppable.

And yet Bruce had landed no blow decisive enough to force Edward II to make peace and recognise Scottish independence. His government lacked credibility. He had rewarded his brother Edward Bruce with the lordship of Galloway in 1312 and Thomas Randolph with the lordships of Annandale, Nithsdale and Man by 1313: but he had made only a few minor grants of Lothian lands. Bruce had made a treaty with Norway in 1312, but he still lacked real acknowledgement from the Pope or France. On 11 July 1313 he entered his 40th year. His queen, Elizabeth de Burgh and his only legitimate child, Marjorie Bruce, remained England's prisoners; his dynasty seemed perilously slight.

In summer 1313, then, did King Robert's thoughts turn to moves designed to force events towards a decisive reckoning with Edward II?

To be continued... in the next issue of *Scotland in Trust*

Bannockburn blog

Go online for a continuation of the story of the events up to the Battle of Bannockburn on 23 and 24 June 1314 in the 'Bannockburn Countdown Blog' launching on the 699th anniversary of the battle this year. Written by a number of supporters and partners of the Battle of Bannockburn project,

with sneak peeks and highlights of what's to come at the new visitor experience opening in 2014, this will be the ultimate countdown to the 700th anniversary of the battle.

♣ For details see www.battleofbannockburn.com.

The new visitor site will open in 2014

