

The Battle of Bannockburn 23rd/24th June 1314

CE Reference:- War and Rebellion B1 or B2 War against Foreign Country

1. Background to the Battle

In 1307 Edward I had once again invaded Scotland with the intention of defeating the Scottish king Robert Bruce. However, before any fighting took place Edward I died. Before he died he begged his son to continue the war. Edward II chose not to do so for various reasons and many have criticised him for not completing his father's conquest of Scotland. So why did Edward II ignore his father's dying wish?

Personal reasons

- a) Edward II and his father did not enjoy a good relationship. This was a way at getting back at his bullying father.
- b) Edward II did not share the same wish as his father to be master of Britain. This war was Edward I's not his!

Financial reasons

- a) Edward I's wars in Wales, Scotland and France had left England short of money. To continue the war would have worsened this problem.

Political reasons

- a) Edward believed that if he continued the war it could possibly result in his death. With no son at present to succeed him this could have resulted in a civil war for the throne of England.
- b) If Edward delayed his coronation, it is possible that someone else might have attempted to seize the throne. There were a number of troublesome and ambitious barons around. Edward I had been strong enough to control them. Edward II wasn't so confident.

Rightly or wrongly Edward II was not in a position early on in his reign to go to war with Scotland.

2. Why did Edward II invade Scotland later on?

Long term cause

The relationship between England and Scotland was rarely peaceful. There were continual disputes over land ownership. The Scots friendship with France meant that Scotland was a constant threat to the English.

Short term causes

Robert Bruce the Scottish king had taken advantage of Edward's inaction. Edward II had invaded in 1309 and 1310, but each time Robert Bruce refused to fight a pitched battle with the Scots retreating further into Scotland and following a 'scorched earth' policy.

By June 1314, Stirling Castle was the only castle still in English hands. Edward Bruce (Robert's brother) began to besiege Stirling Castle. Sir Philip de Mowbray, the Constable of Stirling Castle, was worried that the castle might fall into Scottish hands. He needed to find a way to make Edward II come quickly to Stirling to help him.

Mowbray made an agreement with the Edward Bruce that he would surrender the castle to them, if an English army did not arrive at Stirling within a year. Robert Bruce wasn't too happy with this as he wanted to avoid pitched battles with the English. However, this was now unavoidable and he had to prepare for the inevitable.

3. Edward prepares for the invasion of Scotland

Edward II summoned his army to meet at Berwick in the North of England. Unfortunately for Edward some of his leading barons did not turn up! Many of these barons were experienced in warfare having served with Edward I in France, Wales and Scotland. Their absence (and their troops) at Bannockburn would prove decisive.

In June 1314, Edward led an army of 20,000 men and marched into Scotland. Once in Scotland, the age-old problems of fighting a war in Scotland became apparent. The soldiers were exhausted after weeks of marching over twenty miles a day. (Army stretched out over 15 miles). It was extremely difficult to organise the feeding and equipping of such a large army on the march. The army stopped about ten miles from Stirling and settled down for a short night's sleep. Early next morning 23rd June, the army marched wearily towards Stirling Castle.

4. The battle begins 23rd June - Day 1

- The vanguard arrived ahead of the remaining army. Edward was in a difficult position. Firstly, he had to fight a war which he didn't want to and secondly and more worryingly, he was surrounded by barons who two years earlier (1312) had been involved in the execution of his good friend Piers Gaveston. He had not forgotten or forgiven! Edward II gave joint command of the army to Earl of Gloucester. He was a brave man, a champion tournament knight, but he was inexperienced in warfare. **This decision proved unpopular** and angered other barons, particularly the earls of Pembroke and Hereford.
- De Mowbray, who knew the area well, **advised Edward II not to fight** Bruce on such difficult ground. Ahead of the English army was a wood. Robert Bruce had blocked every path through the wood. The roads had been undermined and covered with caltrops. (balls with spikes) The ground to the left of the woods was very steep and not suitable for horses or infantry. The ground to the right was marshy and criss-crossed with streams.
- Edward ignored this good advice. **Why?** Edward was **impatient and impetuous**, he saw any delay as a further expense and his unpopularity in England meant that he needed to return as soon as possible. He may also have **distrusted** de Mowbray's motives. Finally, he was **over confident** – This was going to be easy!



- **Henry de Bohun** spotted Robert Bruce and decided to grab some glory for himself. He charged with a spear, but at the last moment Bruce swerved out of the way, turned and buried his axe in de Bohun's head.
- The Scots were ecstatic and gloated. The English cavalry reacted by charging at the Scots.
- Another section of the English army was ordered to try and surround the Scots by marching round the right of the woods.

- The English cavalry were met with Scottish Schiltrons, clusters of men armed with 5 metre pikes (hedgehogs). These were very effective against knights, and the only way to deal with them was for archers to fire at them and create gaps. However, the archers had not yet arrived at the battle!
- **The lack of English strategic planning** was beginning to show. Without the whole of his army, Edward was not sure what to do. The command structure was not working.

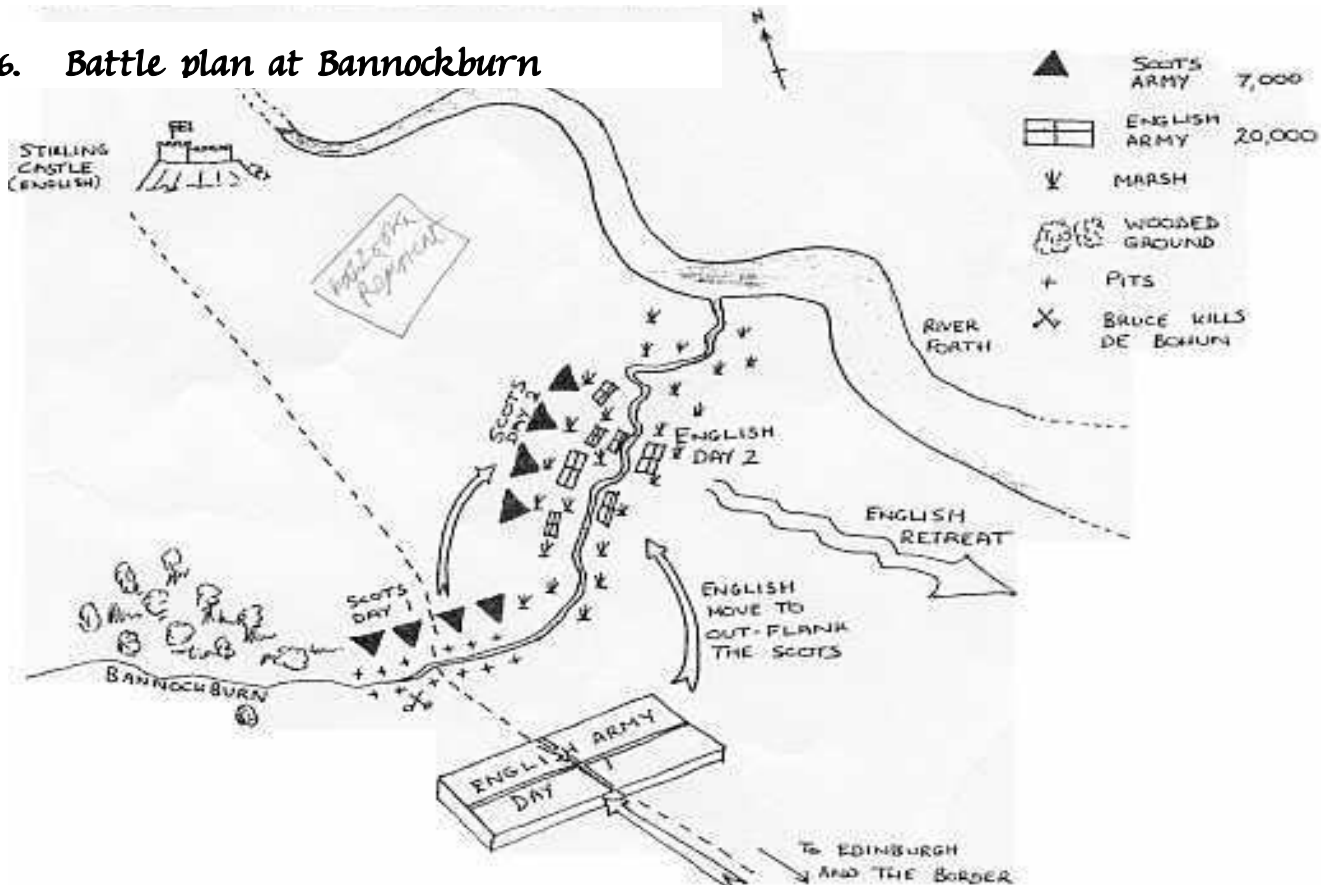


- Night closed in and Edward II wrongly assumed that the Scots would not be confident enough to attack his full army, and therefore he ordered his army to cross the river Bannockburn and form up on the other side. This would **give time for his whole army** to gather. This was probably the **worst tactical decision** made in English military history. The soldiers were already exhausted and hungry and spent the night marching across the river. When they arrived they found that the ground was marshy and there was not enough space for the whole army. Some soldiers remained on the opposite bank. Morale hit rock bottom.

5. Day 2 of the Battle 24th June

- As morning arrived, Gloucester, advised Edward to wait a day before fighting. **Edward accused him** of cowardice and treason. Rightly, Gloucester felt offended and promised to show Edward that he was neither a coward nor a traitor. Along with 500 knights, Gloucester charged the Scots. His horse was speared, he was thrown off and then hacked to death.
- Unexpectedly, the Scots moved towards the English, intending to lure the English forward. The English took the bait. English knights charged the Scottish schiltrons. Schiltrons were quickly formed.
- Although, the English archers were at the battle, they were out of range of the schiltrons or in danger of hitting their own knights. Robert Bruce had set aside a few hundred horsemen who he ordered to charge at the unprotected archers. (no men at arms) The archers fled the battlefield.
- It now became apparent that the battlefield was too narrow and unsuitable for the English to be able to use all their forces. Those at the back who had been ordered to encircle the Scots could not move forward.
- Edward's horse was killed, an incident that gave the Scots extra inspiration.
- Realising that the battle was lost, 500 knights escorted Edward from the battlefield.
- A rearguard was formed to hold up the Scots and allow Edward to escape.

6. Battle plan at Bannockburn



7. Why were the Scottish victorious? How did the English lose?

In working out (assessing) why a battle was won or lost it is very rare that one can attribute one factor to the outcome. Typically, there are many interlinking factors at work. Bannockburn is a hard battle to assess, mainly because of the lack of primary sources. Few English accounts remain, and therefore Scottish accounts have to be used, particularly John Balfour's 'The Bruce'. But whatever, your bias, it is clear that Edward II should never have lost the battle. He had superior numbers and a better trained and equipped army. Therefore, how did it happen?

A) Scottish tactics and strategy

Robert Bruce was a clever, inspirational and experienced leader. He chose the ground carefully. He then prepared the ground using pits and caltrops to reduce the effects of the English cavalry charges. Slopes and streams protected his flanks. His army had an escape route if the worst came to the worst. Edward in contrast was inexperienced in warfare, impatient, untrusting and over confident.

B) English tactics and strategy

- Much of English army tired after long march with little sleep.
- Earl of Gloucester, chosen by Edward II as joint commander was a brave but inexperienced leader. He would lead from the front, but this does not necessarily make a good leader. His selection angered barons who already had a problem with Edward II as king.
- For some barons a victory against the Scots, would they thought, make Edward very popular. Did they conspire to ensure a defeat? There was a lack of unity within the English army.
- Some lords had refused to join Edward or sent fewer knights than they should have. Their experience might have proved important
- Edward ignored advice not to fight at Bannockburn. De Mowbray knew that the ground favoured the Scots. Narrow field would not allow English to use superior numbers. Ground difficult for mounted knights. Rivers and marshes made for difficult moving of troops.
- The English were very confident and complacent. The Scots were never going to win. The large number of English knights would crush the Scots.
- A series of disastrous decisions sealed the fate of the English army. Recent battles against the Scots (Falkirk 1297, Methven 1306) had shown that the Scots would not attack, but adopt a defensive position. Edward II assumed the Scots would do the same at Bannockburn. However, he made a tactical error.
- Crossing the Bannock overnight was a disastrous decision - men tired and hungry and in no fit state to fight. Edward was advised to wait, but he insisted that the battle start. Edward called the earl of Gloucester, a traitor.
- Edward I had relied on knights to attack the Scottish schiltrons, but only after his longbowmen had created substantial gaps in the schiltrons. Edward II kept **his archers** in reserve and the schiltrons held firm. Edward I & III always protected their archers. Edward II did not and this allowed Bruce's cavalry to attack and disperse the English archers.

8. The weapons and armour of the English army

Edward's army was probably the most powerful force used against the Scots. The Scottish chroniclers said that it was a hundred thousand strong. To have supplied such a force was a practical impossibility. A more likely figure is somewhere in the region of 20,000.

The pick of the army were the knights, their squires and men-at-arms - it was a lethal weapon. The riders wore a surcoat of chain mail and this was covered with plate armour and then a robe which carried the knights coat of arms for easy identification in the battle. The main weapon was a 12 ft iron-headed wooden lance. Battle-axes and maces (a kind of spiked club) were carried for close in work.

The cavalry's tactics were simple: charge forward and smash through and trample down any one who stood in their way. This was usually against lighted armed foot-soldiers. It was rare for knights to charge each other. Knight to knight encounters were usually restricted to single combat. Imagine the terror a force of heavy cavalry at full gallop could inspire. The very earth would shake and tremble under the impact of the horses' hooves and only troops of good discipline and leadership could stand any chance of resisting them. Edward had 2,000 knights.

Cavalry weapons were many a **long lance** and the **hand and a half sword**. This long sword was held in one hand or two (to give a more powerful blow). The long blade meant you could use the sword when on horseback. Only the point was sharp for stabbing. The rest of the blade was blunt – you could use it like an axe or club to break people's bones – which stopped them fighting.

The cavalry were supported by around 17,000 **footsoldiers, spearmen and archers.**

Footsoldiers were armed with an arming sword. It had a long blade with a shallow groove in it. This groove or 'fuller' made the blade stronger and lighter. They wore a quilted or leather jacket (aketon) to protect them against sword slashes or arrows. Some carried an axe with a wide curving blade set on a wooden shaft 60 - 90cm long. You could use the axe with one or two hands, giving a powerful cutting blow which might split helmets and shields.

The spearmen were armed with a 12ft spear and a short sword or dagger as a sidearm. They wore a quilted or leather jacket (aketon) to protect them against sword slashes or arrows and wore gloves of chainmail or steel plates sewn together. On their heads they wore a basinet, a simple steel helmet.

The archers carried a longbow made of yew and a quiver of 24 arrows, each iron-tipped and metre long. When the archers came forward to loose their missiles they usually stood in line about five or six paces apart.

Organisation

The structure of Edward's army, with the heavy cavalry the main force led to command problems at lower levels. As all the nobles and knights fought in the cavalry, the footsoldiers were often poorly led.

In contrast the Scots nobles and knights fought amongst their men on foot and were thus well placed to maintain morale and discipline. It would be an important factor in the coming battle. Among Edward's force, apart from the English, Welsh and Irish, were knights from Europe. There were also Scots, traditional enemies of the Bruce family and those who felt their ambitions best served by supporting Edward.

9. The weapons and armour of the Scots

The Scots who faced Edward looked very different. There were no enormous destrier horses. The Scots army (7,000) was rugged and tough, used to guerrilla-type fighting, fought out over Scotland. They were warriors and they were ready for the fight. They were a well-drilled, disciplined army, trained to deal successfully with the English charges. The chroniclers said there were 20,000 of them and this figure is exaggerated. The ratio of Scots to English was probably recorded correctly and it seems Edward had a fourfold advantage in numbers.

The core of Bruce's army was his 5,000 spearmen. The Scots **spearman** fought with a 12 foot spear, a simple steel cap on his head, armoured gloves and perhaps a leather jerkin and chain mail shoulder cover to protect from arrows. He fought in the schiltrons, or spear ring, a formation with the ability to become a fluid line in advance with more manoeuvrability. In defence the schiltrons drew in on itself into a hedgehog of prickly spears. Disciplined flexibility were the words most applicable to Bruce's. Bruce divided his spearmen into four main divisions. The spearmen were supported by archers with longbows, footsoldiers armed with polearms, swords and axes and about 500 **light horse**. However, Bruce's mounted men were no match for Edward's knights on heavily armoured war horses (destriers).

10. Aftermath of Bannockburn (What happened afterwards)

The Scots were not as pro-active as they could have been in pursuing Edward II and he managed to escape back to England. Had he been captured, the Scottish victory would have been complete and a peace settlement in favour of the Scots would have been the likely outcome. Bannockburn marked the high point of Robert Bruce's reign. He was now unchallenged and firmly placed on the Scottish throne. Scotland was now in his eyes independent, something which the English refused to accept.

In contrast, Bannockburn marked the low point of Edward's reign. His already diminishing popularity hit rock bottom. Northern England was left open to selective Scottish raids and continual blackmail to avoid further trouble.

In 1320, Robert Bruce presented the Pope with the **Declaration of Arbroath** which made it clear that Scotland was and always would be an independent country. Every Scot would willingly fight and die rather than give in to English control.

In 1322 Edward invaded Scotland again. The Scots followed their scorched earth policy. Edward's army was forced to retreat south back into England. A hungry and demoralised English army was defeated at the battle of Northallerton. But once again Edward managed to escape.

In 1329 Robert Bruce died, and with him Scottish fortunes changed. Under Edward III English battle tactics evolved into a battle winning formula – a tactical combination of archers, dismounted men at arms – carefully chosen battle position and effective leadership. There would be no more ill disciplined charges of cavalry. This winning formula was first experimented with at Halidon Hill in 1333, where the Scots' army was heavily defeated. This formula was repeated with great success in the Hundred Years War, notably at Crécy (1346), Poitiers (1356) and Agincourt (1415).

The Scots on the other hand without the mercurial leadership of Robert Bruce forgot the lessons of Bannockburn and were unable to respond to the changes in English tactics.