

Blood and Banishment



Broxmouth woods

The Battle of Dunbar: 3rd. September, 1650

From here you can see the site of the 1650 battle between Oliver Cromwell's 'Parliamentarian Commonwealth Army' and the Scottish 'Army of the Covenant' led by David Leslie. The battle site is south of Broxmouth House, where Broxmouth Woods is today.

The Scottish Army of 21,000 gave up their higher-ground advantage and descended from Doon Hill on the 2nd of September to confront Cromwell's force of about 12,000. Cromwell was much satisfied, reputedly saying: 'God is delivering them into our hands, they are coming down to us.'

The English attacked at 4am the following morning, pinning some of the Scots infantry against the steep sides of the Brox Burn. The battle was over in three hours; a complete victory for Cromwell. 3,000 Scots died and 10,000 were taken prisoner. The aftermath of the battle became known as the Dunbar Drive.

The English reputedly lost only 30 men. Cromwell released 6,000 Scots - the wounded, the old and the boys. On 5th September, the remaining 4,000 were forced to march 120 miles south towards Durham. Hundreds died of malnutrition and starvation on the way. Others died in Durham Cathedral, at a rate of 30 per day. By 31st October 1650, only 1200 were in captivity in Durham. Many of them subsequently died and were buried in a mass grave.



Covenantors in a defensive huddle

The battle's legacy



In 1951, a memorial stone commemorating the battle was installed near the battle-site at Broxmouth by the Cromwell Association. In 2011, George Wilson of Dunbar presented Durham Cathedral with a commemorative plaque to the Scots soldiers who died there.



Covenanter officer



Parliamentarian troops capture Covenanters' flag



Parliamentarian officers lead the troops

Several hundred Scots were forced to fight for Cromwell in Ireland and France. Many fell sick on the way or ended up in the 'pest-house' (plague-house). About 200 were deported to America and Barbados as slaves. In 'Little Scotland', Barbados, these men became known as the 'Red Legs' and lived impoverished lives, their status below the black freed slaves. Eventually they gained their freedom but had nothing.

Today the Scots soldier's treatment would be considered a war crime. They fought at Dunbar to preserve the independence of their country. Even at the time, the prisoners were entitled to more humane treatment.

A military-type mass grave was found under Durham University's library in 2013. The 28 skeletons are male, aged 13 - 25 years old. They were identified as Scottish and some had rickets and battle wounds. Radiocarbon dating concluded that these were the Covenanter troops who had died of starvation, cold and sickness whilst in captivity. The soldiers' remains will be reburied in Durham City, close to the original site.

Action photos by Christine Mincher at The Scottish Battlefield Trust's re-enactment (16-18 Sept. 2016). Many thanks to RJM Pugh, Dunbar historian and author. This information panel commemorates the dead, but also those who were marched away on 5 September 1650. Most never returned to Scotland.



Shelter from the Sea

A harbour was first recorded at Dunbar during the 1100s at the Port of Bele (now Belhaven) then at the mouth of the Biel Water in 1370. The main harbour facility was created in the latter half of the 16th century at Lamerhaven (becoming known as Cromwell/Old Harbour), east of the Castle.

Lamerhaven became a 'harbour' after walls were built to create shelter. They suffered badly during a storm in 1655 and Parliament was petitioned for help. Cromwell's government reputedly granted £300 towards repairs. The coal hirst (wharf) was added in the 1760s - a major improvement.

In 1744 more funds were needed following another storm. In 1785 the harbour was deepened and the 'return' pier added on the west entry. More storm damage came in 1806 so the upper parapet was added. Cromwell/Old Harbour then took on its present form.

Victoria Harbour was established in the 1840s. David Stevenson of the 'Lighthouse Stevensons' family was appointed chief engineer. From the 16th until well into the 20th century the harbour was famous for herring fishing. This was on an enormous scale. In 1819, there were 280 boats and approximately 2,000 men. By 1855 this had increased to over 500 boats, 30 of which were from Dunbar. In later bumper years 700-800 fishing boats would come to the summer herring fishing off Dunbar. Their catches were gutted and packed in barrels, ready to be sent to Europe, Ireland or the West Indies. In the winter months local fishermen fished for white fish, crabs and lobsters.


"We have had 60 foreign vessels here this season who have taken away about 20,000 barrels of herring" Letter from Thomas Dick Lauder Bart. to Sir James M Balfour, 1841.



Defence & War

General John Cope landed here to do battle with Bonnie Prince Charlie at Prestonpans in 1745. Can you spot the steps he used in the harbour wall? Charlie won the day and Cope retreated from Dunbar.

After France and Spain joined the American War of Independence (1776 - 1783), there was fear of invasion from their fleets. In 1779, John Paul Jones, a Scot who had become a 'privateer' for America, in command of a French squadron, appeared off Dunbar with five ships. He demolished some chimney-pots and "put the inhabitants in a terrible consternation". A considerable show of strength was mounted by townsfolk and Jones sailed away. After a second similar incident in 1781 by another American adventurer, Captain Fall, the Town Council built the 'Battery' on Lamer Island. It had sixteen guns of different calibres. They remained there until after the Napoleonic Wars. During WWII a flamethrower was installed at Victoria harbour entrance to deter possible German invasion.



During the 18th Century, merchants from Dunbar traded with Europe, importing wood, iron, flax, and naval stores. Trade with Baltic towns such as St Petersburg brought grain, tallow and timber. The biggest venture was a whaling company, which for a time had five ships operating in Greenland waters.

In 1828, 203,276 gallons of whisky were exported from Dunbar.

The Shoal Fisher: Image Dunbar History Society

McArthur's Store (Spott's Girnell) was built in 1658 using timber from condemned boats and shipwrecks and is still in everyday use. It is one of the oldest industrial buildings in Scotland, having been used as a store for grain (girnell means granary), herring, potato and nowadays as a fishermen's workshop.

In the 1990s the Dunbar Harbour Trust (DHT) coordinated its restoration. The fishermen have eleven modernised stores and there's a meeting-room for the Harbour Trust and local groups. Famous local artist John Bellany officially opened this greatly-restored building in 2009.

