

FLODDEN.

When dawn broke on the morning of 10th September, 1513, the landscape of hell was revealed. On the gently undulating northern ridges of Branxton Hill more than 10,000 men lay dead or dying. In the midst of the carnage were the naked, plundered bodies of King James IV of Scotland, his half-brother, Alexander Stewart, Archbishop of St Andrews, George Hepburn, Bishop of the Isles, two abbots, nine great earls of Scotland, fourteen lords of parliament, innumerable knights and noblemen of lesser degree and many thousands of farmers, ploughmen, weavers and burgesses. It was the appalling aftermath of the battle of Flodden, the greatest military disaster in Scotland's history.

In the grey light of that terrible dawn, sentries posted around the captured Scottish cannon could make out where the brunt of battle had been joined. Below them, at the foot of the slope ran the trickle of a nameless burn now choked with slaughter, a wrack of mangled bodies, broken pikeshafts, shattered shields and everywhere blood and the sickening stench of death, vomit and voided bowels.

Not all of the bodies were yet corpses. Through a long dark night the battlefield had not been a silent graveyard. Trapped under lifeless comrades, crippled, hamstrung or horribly mutilated, fatally wounded men still breathed. Bladed weapons rarely kill outright and they were often used to bludgeon men to their knees or into unconsciousness. In the churned mud of the battlefield some men will have lost their footing, fallen and been hacked at before they could get up. Many bled to death, maimed, lacerated by vicious cuts, screaming, fainting and screaming once more in their death agonies. Some will have been put out of their misery by parties of English soldiers scouring the field by torchlight for plunder, stripping the bodies, ransacking them for valuables. But other men will have lingered on in unspeakable pain, praying to their God, passing in and out of consciousness, slowly bleeding to death. The fury of the battle on Flodden field may have been stilled and awash with death and defeat. But all was not yet over.

In an instant the plunderers and scavengers looked up and the sentries by the cannon stood to, frantically peering through the morning light. They could hear the rumbling thunder of hoofbeats – and then, suddenly, riders erupted over Barelees Rig. With 800 horsemen at his back, Lord Alexander Home galloped hard across the horrors of the battlefield and up the slopes of Branxton Hill. They had not come back to Flodden to rejoin a lost battle but to rescue their captured ordnance. And they very nearly succeeded. After a sharp skirmish, the English gunners managed to load and get off a volley at Home's squadron, and they scattered.

And so it ended. As the Border horsemen wheeled round and raced out of range, the remnants of the shattered Scottish army were limping across the Tweed at Coldstream. There was no organised pursuit. The victorious English army had taken heavy casualties and the Earl of Surrey and his captains were exhausted.

In any event, their bloody work was done. The floors o' the Forest were a' wede awa, Flodden was a national disaster, a harbinger of lawlessness in the shape of the Border Reivers, the beginning of a long period of political uncertainty and the last medieval battle in the history of Britain. The last time a king was to die leading his army.

It was also an epic. As two huge armies mustered and marched into history, extraordinary scenes had been witnessed. At Ellemford, high in the Lammermuirs above Duns, where sheep now graze on the flanks of the hills, where buzzards hang in the updrafts and an elegant bridge crosses the Whiteadder, King James IV and his army camped. Huge guns were trundled down the hill trails, dragged by oxen, and by 21st August 1513, almost 30,000 men had massed in this beautiful, now lonely valley. Two days later, the largest force ever to leave Scotland crossed the Tweed at the fords below Coldstream. They had declared war, they had entered the realm of the Tudors, of the ferociously ambitious and bull-like Henry VIII.

Meanwhile Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey, and the Bishop of Durham carried the standard of St Cuthbert before their battle-hardened troops. In front of the high altar of the great cathedral, Howard had watched the bishop bless the flag of the Haliwerfolc. The lands of Palatinate, of the Prince-Bishops of Durham, reached to the Tweed and beyond, and in an early definition of Englishness, their people were known as the Holy Man's Folk, the Haliwerfolc. Ancient allegiances were being roused and summoned.

Between 2nd and 9th September two vast armies circled each other in a small corner of North Northumberland, like heavyweight boxers looking for weaknesses or waiting for wrong moves. After the Earl of Surrey had despatched a herald, the Rouge Croix, it was finally agreed that battle would be joined on 9th September. Supplies for almost 70,000 men, horses and camp followers were running dangerously low and neither army could remain in the field much longer.

Realising the strength of the Scots' entrenched position, Surrey led his men to the east, skirting Flodden Edge and staying out of artillery range. On the morning of the appointed day, he crossed the River Till and took up a position to the north of James IV's army, barring any retreat to Scotland. And then, on a

damp afternoon, the greatest battle ever fought between England and Scotland began.

On the left wing of the Scottish host, the Highlanders led by the Earl of Huntly massed in formation with Lord Home's Borderers, and in the moments before their chiefs roared the *claideamh mor*, the order to charge, the Gaelic-speaking warriors did something remarkable. They began to summon the army of the dead. They began the *sloinneadh*, the naming of the names of memory. To bolster his courage, each man began to recite his genealogy. Many waiting to charge could go back 20 generations. As if they were offering up the murmur of prayer, each man remembered why he had come to fight. *Is mise mac Iain, mac Ruaridh, mac Domhnuill. I am the son of John, the son of Roderick, the son of Donald.* And once their quiet voices stilled, the roar of the *claideamh mor* rent the air and they broke into the charge. With their broadswords and Lochaber axes, the Highlanders tore into the English ranks, the division led by Edmund Howard. They scattered and a rout was only prevented when Lord Dacre rode to the rescue with his English Borderers. As history rumbled across Branxton Hill, fortune appeared to be smiling on the Scots.

At the same time, James IV was about to make a catastrophic decision, a crucial error of judgement. Instead of occupying an elevated position at the rear of his vast army, he chose to lead from the front. His division raced down Branxton Hill and as they reached the lower slopes and much softer ground, many men began to skid and lose their footing. This unsteadiness made it very difficult for them to control their long, 12 foot pikes. The wet ground made them charge out of formation, only engaging piecemeal with the solidly planted ranks of English billmen. With their shorter, more easily handled bills, they began to slice into James IV's division. And as the men at the back saw the Scottish pikes go down, they hesitated and many of them ran, believing their king to be killed. By leading from the front, James was immediately submerged in the ruck of the fighting, only able to see what was directly in front of him, in no position to direct his forces. The result was disaster.

The legacy of Flodden was most immediately and keenly felt in the Borders. North of the Tweed the memory of the battle is kept alive in the fabric of the midsummer common ridings. At Selkirk the ceremony of the casting of the colours is unique in Britain and it is based on the return of a soldier known as Fletcher, traditionally believed to have been the only one of sixty from the town to return. In his bloodied hand he held aloft, in a gesture of desolate defiance, a flag captured from the men of Macclesfield in Cheshire. Many Englishmen had fought and fallen at Flodden.

And passions still run high. When the Mayor of Macclesfield recently wrote to the Provost of Selkirk asking for the return of the flag, he was told that he would need to come to the Borders and take it.

Flodden is an immense story. Like Culloden in 1746, it signalled the end of a fading, feudal Scotland. And it also ushered in a century of lawlessness, the criminal society controlled by the appalling Border Reivers. Across Europe, renaissance, enlightenment and the reformation were changing lives, forming new ideas and creating the institutions of the modern world. In the first half of the 16th century, central authority broke down in a leaderless nation, and while swords and spears spoke in Scotland, the law was often silent.

What is to be learned from all of that suffering and slaughter, from all of those ancient enmities? First that they are ancient and must remain firmly in the past. In 2014 Scotland faces a historic choice and whichever way the people of Scotland vote, it must be a signal lesson of Flodden that enmity, even ancient enmity can have no part. And it is to the credit of politicians on all sides of the argument that it has not reared an ugly head. But it might.

And alongside that it must be important to remember, to understand the visceral, bloody realities of what went on on that terrible day 500 years ago. Lest we forget, Flodden should become a place of remembrance and of pilgrimage, a place where the uncomfortable lessons of history can be learned and never forgotten.

Two weeks ago, on one of the countless beautiful evenings of this glorious summer, I drove over to Branxton. As the sun threw long shadows across the gently undulating fields, I tried to imagine the 10th of September, 1513, the distant roar of thousands of men, the screams, the fear and feral closeness of hand-to-hand fighting when men can smell the breath, smell the sweat of men grunting pushing, hacking, swearing at them, trying to kill them. In a Gaelic phrase, I tried to listen for the music of the thing as it happened. I tried to listen to the slow, sad music of our history. I hope that many in Scotland and England hear it too.