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Battle of Bannockburn: A Scottish Hero Lights the Flame of Freedom

Many brave leaders stepped up for the Battle of Bannockburn and answered the call of the pleading Scottish folk - leading the brave in a fight against the oppressor. One such man was Robert the Bruce, a renowned hero of Scotland who gave the English King Edward II a right old thrashing in a long series of conflicts that is today known as the Scottish War of Independence. Join us as we relive the crucial engagement of that strife, the famous Battle of Bannockburn, a fierce spark that even today lights up the hearts of all Scotsmen!

A Coming Storm: The Prelude to the Battle of Bannockburn

The history of Scotland was always filled with a ferocious pining for freedom. Through thick and thin, glory and defeat, these fierce highland peoples were always struggling to be free from the shackles of the conquering Englishmen. For centuries they **sought independence**, freedom for their harsh highlands and lochs, always searching for hope in the overcast Scottish clouds. And to be truly free, one has to *fight*. And fight they did.



*Robert the Bruce kills Sir Henry de Bohun on the first day of the Battle of Bannockburn . Source: **Public Domain***

But before we descend to the imposing field of battle, we need to understand the complex political situation in Scotland that preceded it. As we mentioned, the Battle of Bannockburn was a part of the so-called Scottish War of Independence. That is the best place to begin our story.

This conflict unofficially began with the death of Alexander III, **King of Scots** , in 1286. During his rule, Scotland experienced some stability and growth, most notably when it acquired the Isle of Man and the Western Isles after Alexander III signed the Treaty of Perth. But, the king fell off his horse in 1286 and died.

Face of King Robert The Bruce, Outlaw King is Brought Back to Life 700 Years After His Death Dr Watson Provides Proof That Scotland's Legendary King Robert The Bruce Was English Born!

A problem arose - his only heir was a little girl, Margaret the Maid of Norway, to whom he was a maternal grandfather. And not only was she a child, she wasn't even in Scotland. The first act of the Scottish nobility was to set up a government of guardians until the girl would come of age. But this did not last too long, as young Margaret caught ill on the ship voyage from Norway and died in the **Orkneys** in 1290, being only 7 years old.

And that's where the issue truly begins, as with all kingdoms without a clear heir. This interregnum period became known as the "Great Cause" (*An t-Adhbhar Mòr*), in which the "Competitors for the Crown of Scotland" came forth to stake their claims. These were the most significant Scottish nobles and lords, with 13 of them as chief claimants: John Balliol, Lord of Galloway; Robert de Pinkeney; Floris V, Count of Holland; John Comyn, Lord of Badenoch; William de Ros, 1st Baron

de Ros; Eric II, King of Norway; Robert the Brus, 5th Lord of Annandale; John Hastings, 1st Baron Hastings; William, Baron de Vesci; Nicholas de Soules; Roger de Mandeville; Patrick Dunbar, 7th Earl of Dunbar; and Patrick Galithly.

But power struggles such as these, where a throne is vacant and inviting to all, are never simple. And it would quickly show. Alliances were made and claimants began vying for influence.

One of the major players was the Lord of Galloway, John Balliol, who quickly forged an “alliance” with the influential Bishop of Durham, Anthony Bek, who was coincidentally the representative of the English King Edward in Scotland. John Balliol also began styling himself as the “Heir of Scotland”, much to the disdain of other lords.

Amidst all this, another player entered the scene - the powerful **Robert the Bruce**, Lord of Annandale, Lord of Hartness, son of Robert de Brus. Upon hearing that his close allies, Domnhall mac Uilleim, Earl of Mar, and David I Strathbogie, Earl of Atholl, were raising their forces in preparation, he too appeared at the site of supposed Margaret’s inauguration with a sizeable force of soldiers. It all pointed to a single thing - civil war.



*Statue of Robert the Bruce, Stirling Castle, Stirling, Scotland. (Aaron Bradley/ **CC BY SA 2.0**)*

Enter the King of England

In hopes of avoiding this worst case scenario, the Scottish nobles reached out to the English King, Edward I, and asked him to arbitrate. Edward didn’t bother with that, but instead demanded that all Scottish nobles recognize *him* as the ruling Lord Paramount of Scotland. Needless to say, this did not happen, and in the meantime the assembled nobles decided that John Balliol was their right choice, and he was proclaimed king in 1292.

Dissatisfied with this, King Edward I summoned John Balliol to plead homage to him. The latter refused, and Edward used this as a reason to invade Scotland. This he did in 1296, when he sacked Berwick-upon-Tweed. And this was the story that brought on a prolonged period of struggle that is known as the **Scottish War** of Independence.

Two major battles happened in 1296 at Dunbar and Berwick, as well as at Stirling Bridge in 1297. Even so, Scotland was effectively conquered by 1304, until Robert the Bruce claimed the Scottish throne in 1306 and resumed the conflict. Edward I died in 1307 from dysentery, and left the ongoing conflict with Scotland in the hands of his son, Edward II Carnarvon.



*An illuminated detail from between circa 1307 and circa 1327 of Edward II of England receiving his crown. (**Public Domain**)*

Several years later, Bannockburn happened. It was June of 1314 - a date that would remain very important for all Scotsmen. Even though Edward II was lacking the skills in politics and warfare that his late father had, he was nonetheless spurred into action when Robert the Bruce's brother, Edward Bruce, laid siege to the English occupied **Castle of Stirling** .

Edward II, having just signed for peace with France, was ready to confront the Scots and gathered vast supplies and men, bolstered with a financial loan from the Pope, and marched north. He had around 13,000 infantry men and 3,000 armored cavalry, which were supported with a contingent of Welsh archers.

His opponent Robert the Bruce was outnumbered, having only 7,000 infantry and 600 cavalry men. Even so, in hopes of having an upper hand in a pitched battle, Robert retreated into positions close to Stirling Castle, to an edge of the woods that overlooked a field in front of two small rivers - Pelstream and Bannock.

Driven By Freedom: The Day of Battle of Bannockburn

Here Robert set up his troops in a mirrored L shape, with four divisions of *schiltrons*. A schiltron was a strong defensive formation, in which the Scots were gathered into close rows and defended with their readied spears and pikes. Such a formation was notably difficult to penetrate.

Meanwhile, the English forces steadily advanced towards Stirling, with their lines stretching for a few kilometers up the road. When their vanguard under the command of Earl of Hereford became closer to the Scots, an iconic event transpired.

When the young Henry de Bohun, the **gallant knight** and nephew to Earl of Hereford, spotted Robert the Bruce in the first ranks of his army and somewhat exposed, he sought an early end to the battle by charging his horse straight towards the Scottish leader. In the manner of chivalrous knightly combat, he charged with his spear. Robert the Bruce took up this "call" to single combat, and even though he was not armored as a knight, he too charged his unarmored horse towards the English knight.



*A depiction of the clash between the Bruce and de Bohun on the first day of the Battle of Bannockburn, from H E Marshall's 'Scotland's Story', published in 1906. (**Public Domain**)*

What happened next would become the stuff of glorious tales. Nimble and courageous, Robert the Bruce was not struck by de Bohun's spear. The young knight missed, and as he passed, Robert the Bruce struck him in the head with his axe. The axe split, but so did young de Bohun's head.

Meanwhile, a contingent of English cavalry under the command of Robert Clifford was marching to the east, parallel to Scottish lines, in an attempt to circle northwards and cut off the Scottish line of retreat. All the while, the English cavalry vanguard came into conflict with the forward schiltrons of Robert the Bruce. The cavalry struggled to penetrate the tight row of spears, and suffered casualties, which were furthered by many pit traps that the Scotsmen prepared.

Earliest surviving copy of epic poem, The Brus, brought back to life Forgotten Kings and Queens: The Lost Gypsy Dynasty of Scotland

Seeing this, Gilbert de Clare, Earl of Gloucester, took his own cavalry formations and circled to the right, avoiding the pits and aiming at Robert's flank. This was skillfully countered by Edward the Bruce, who responded to this move by

wheeling his schiltrons and protecting his brother's flank. Seeing that they had no chance in this initial conflict, the English troops fell back.

On the northern side, the circling cavalry of Clifford also entered the battle. They attempted to charge the troops of Thomas Randolph, Earl of Moray, but could not penetrate the spears. After suffering heavy casualties they too retreated. And with that, the first day of the battle, 23rd of June, was finished.

When night fell, the Scots remained at their original positions, while Edward II sought a better position, where he could also set up camp. He chose a marshy area between the small streams of Pelstream and Bannockburn, close to the village of Balquhiderock. Later on, this would prove to be a key strategic mistake.



Bannockburn: Bruce Reviewing His Troops Before the Battle. (Public Domain)

During the night, a Scottish knight, Ser Alexander Seton, who was fighting in the employ of the Englishmen, deserted their side and surrendered to Robert the Bruce. He brought information about the English forces, saying that their morale was extremely low and they were disorganized, and - pledging his own life - promised that if Robert was to take initiative and attack in the morning, he would be victorious. **Robert the Bruce** called his council of war, on which it was collectively decided that they would attack.

June 24th, 1314: The Second Day of Bannockburn Fighting

On the morning of the the 24th of June, the Scottish schiltron lines marched slowly forward, arrayed in a single line. Only Robert the Bruce remained at the rear with two formations. While they displayed general cohesion and high morale, the Englishmen were somewhat disoriented.

The Earls of Gloucester and Hereford were unable to decide which one was to take the initial charge. Before the decision was made, Gloucester went into a full charge with his forces (i.e. the English left flank) and smashed directly

into an impenetrable wall of Scottish spears commanded by Edward the Bruce. This cavalry contingent was decimated, Gloucester and Clifford died immediately, and many prominent nobles also died on the spot.



*An early 14th-century English depiction of a biblical battle, giving an impression of how soldiers were equipped at Bannockburn. The image of a king wielding a battle axe in the top half has led some historians to link this image to Bannockburn. From Folio 40 of the Holkham Bible in the British Library. (**Public Domain**)*

Seeing this, Edward II order the rest of his army to move forward in several waves. None of them were able to penetrate the Scottish ranks, and the battle soon turned into one of attrition.

Edward the Bruce pushed forward with his two schiltrons, and greatly moved the Scottish right flank forward. The rest of the Scottish forces also slowly gained ground, pushing the Englishmen further back, step by step. At this point, Robert the Bruce aimed to trap the English forces into the corner between the two streams, exploiting Edward II's strategic mistake.

In a crucial moment during the battle, Edward's archers crossed over the Pelstream and sought to hit the Scottish schiltrons from the side. Before they could do significant damage though, Robert the Bruce ordered his light cavalry under the command of Sir Robert Keith to charge them, which they did with success, driving the archers into disarray. At this moment, Bruce moved in with his own two schiltrons, supporting the exhausted troops on the front line.

This was the decisive moment, as the Englishmen, who suffered heavy losses, saw that their king was getting dangerously close to the Scotsmen and decided to flee. As they were cornered against the two small rivers, they could not maneuver efficiently, and seeing their situation they broke their ranks and fled.

Edward was led away from the battle by his two retainers, the famous Aymer de Valence, 2nd Earl of Pembroke, and the gallant Giles D'Argentan, one of the finest knights in Europe at the time. When Edward was safe, D'Argentan said to him that "he never fled from battle, and will not do so now," turned back, and charged alone into the Scottish lines, where he died.

The retreat of the Englishmen turned into a panicked rout. Men fled all over, many of them drowning in the River Forth, while others were killed in the days after the battle by Scottish villagers or the pursuing soldiers. Their losses were immense.

Untold True Story of Robert the Bruce, The Outlaw King, set to be Netflix Blockbuster
Why was Edward II Such A Hated King?



*A depiction of the Battle of Bannockburn from a 1440s manuscript of Walter Bower's Scotichronicon. This is the earliest known depiction of the battle. (**Public Domain**)*

Freedom Within Their Grasp

Estimates all agree that Robert's losses were quite low, perhaps even as low as 500 infantrymen. On the other hand, Edward suffered 5,000 deaths in his army, perhaps more. This decisive victory by Robert the Bruce and his brave Scotsmen allowed Bruce to raid over the border and into England and also to invade Ireland.

Furthermore, after the Battle of Bannockburn Scotland's independence was secured, with the treaty of Edinburgh-Northampton in 1328. It stated that Scotland was independent, and Robert the Bruce and all his heirs as its rightful rulers. It also brought an end to the First War of **Scottish Independence** .

And with that, the Battle of Bannockburn became one of the key events in Scottish history, a driving inspiration that would always shine as a bright beacon and send a single message to all Scotsmen today: "Freedom!"

*Top Image: Battle Scene. Credit: **zef art** / Adobe Stock*

By **Aleksa Vučković**

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