
The Battle of Coniston Moor

In 1936 while workmen were laying a Gas Main in Church Lane Gargrave, several human skeletons were found buried in a shallow grave at a depth of about two feet. There was no trace of coffins. It seemed that the bodies had been buried in haste. It was reported that these bodies could represent those slain following a battle with Scottish Raiders in 1341 which took place in the area between Switchers Farm Hellifield, and the modern day Coniston Hotel. It is known that many of the dead were brought to Gargrave for burial. The battle itself was a victory for the Scots. They advanced on Gargrave itself and the village was burned and pillaged along with many outlying farms and settlements. It was only when a superior force arrived from Skipton that the Scottish Raiders took flight, leaving a trail of destruction behind them.



The Battlefield area with the main forces concentrated below the wooded area known as Sweet Gap or Scots Gap.

The story of the Scottish Raids into the North of England is one that can fill an article all of its own. The days of William Wallace and his stance against King Edward 1st and his invasion of Scotland were over fifty years in the past. In 1314 Robert the Bruce defeated Edward II's army at Bannockburn and the Scottish Army crossed the Pennines into Yorkshire plundering and destroying in a

succession of raids that for many years created a pattern of fear and dread amongst the scattered population of North Yorkshire and Craven.

Our particular connection concerns the threats apparent in the mid 1330's when groups of raiders made successive raids on settlements in this area. Word was spread of the advance of the Scots, who plundered and

burned homesteads, stole cattle, and either put anyone who opposed them to the sword, or took them as prisoners for slavery or bargaining purposes. The Scottish Invaders would have followed the existing roads and river valleys where towns and villages provided plunder and livestock for the taking. Hellifield would suffer along with the other small villages in the area.

It is accepted that though not embattled at this time, any structure at the Peel may have offered some respite and safety for a chosen few.

For most though, it was a case of hiding and taking refuge where possible and if practicable (and where sufficient numbers made it worthwhile), to make an often forlorn defence

against the invading raiders. A background to the story of the encounter on Coniston Moor is contained within the 'Chronicles of Ermysted' which came to light in 1936.

'In 1341, when Gargravians sallied forth, to meet the bold invaders from the North. When Gar and Gray wheeled around, brought three Scotch heroes to the ground'.

Gar was the current Lord of Gargrave and Gray was the son of the Priest.

The area of this encounter would have looked very different from today's farmland. Nowadays drained and finely sculptured farmland with its intersecting drystone walls would not have existed. The land would have been a



Victorian Ordnance Survey Map showing area of Battle. (Area to right of Coniston Moor indication). Steeling Hill shown as 'Camp'. Bottom Right.



The Battlefield area. The Gargravians would have advanced in the wooded area at the right of the photo. The woods border the Coniston Hotel area.

combination of moorland reeds and grass with damp marshland (still evident in places) prevailing over the bottom lands. The woods looking down on Switchers Farm would not have been there and the high ground would have been mainly moorland grass and stubble. This then, at an area known as Sweet Gap (or Scots Gap) is where the men of Gargrave faced the Scots in an attempt to stem their advance. The encounter would have been in the area where an old road or track crossed the lowland, running from the direction of Coniston Cold and dropping down from the hills towards Switchers Farm. Remember that the existing main road would not have been there in those days. The A65 as it is now called, or The Keighley and Kendal Road as it was originally named, was not fully constructed and opened until 1827. The numbers involved in this encounter are not known. What is known, is that we are not talking about massed heavy cavalry charges and the air being filled with thousands of arrows. So although it would not exactly be like a battle scene from 'Braveheart', but on a smaller

scale, the ferocity and gruesome elements would no doubt all be included.

The Gargravians faced a well armed and superior force who were accustomed to the rule of the sword and the gesture of 'take no prisoners'. Both sides were lightly armoured but axes, billhooks, swords, pikes and the long bow would have been used by both forces. In an encounter that would have lasted no longer than a few hours, the local defenders were cut down almost to a man and the survivors were pursued and killed as they retreated in the direction of Gargrave. Looking down on this battleground – and we pass it everytime we drive along the A65 - is the high ground know as Steeling Hill. Driving towards Hellifield, past the Coniston Hotel on the right, this large hill borders the road on the immediate left hand side. Steeling Hill overlooks the landscape for many miles. The crags over at Malham are visible in the distance, and on top of this superb lookout point are the remains of an enclosure, settlement or possibly a fort (marked on the

ordnance survey maps as Camp). Possibly Iron Age in origin, the remains at this point and the advantages that this high peak may have provided, would have been of use to any defensive force in this region and possibly at the time of the battle with the Scottish invaders.

and the subsequent burning and pillaging of the village. With a large force of cavalry and well armed men arriving from Skipton, the Scots retreated but the raids continued over the years and history would show that it would be many more years before issues with Scotland would be sorted.

So there we have it. A battleground on our doorstep. The Scots triumphant and a successive march on Gargrave

That of course is another story.

Ken Leak



Steeling Hill in the direction of Hellifield. At its peak are the remains of what is believed to be a settlement and enclosure for animals. Believed to be Iron Age in origin. The hill commands a fine view of the land below.