

THE BATTLE OF PRESTONPANS

Edward's march through England. The scene was set for a triumphant entry into London. If only he had known the mood of the city, if only he had marched on, the history of Europe might have been substantially different.

But Charles did not know. All he knew was that Hanoverian troops had been sent for from the continent. But these troops were slow moving, something that even Murray failed to capitalise on. Field Marshall Wade started his move in Newcastle but with few provisions and scant cash. By the time he arrived at Ripon, he was considered to be only a minor threat. Cumberland, in charge of Ligonier's forces, marched from Newcastle-Under-Lyme as far as Coventry and it was now that the Jacobites played a game of checkers with Cumberland. Murray and Charles decided to split their army in two, with Murray feigning a march to Congleton towards Wales. Turning east, Murray and his army crossed the Bow hills to Leek, where they rejoined Charles' troops and then advanced unchecked to Derby. Cumberland and his allies had been outmanoeuvred and found themselves facing a ghost army at Stone. Cumberland waited for the Jacobites in vain with his exhausted troops facing the chill of the wind and the coming winter without shelter while in Derby the Jacobites were sleeping in proper beds paid out of Charles' exchequer. And on Finchley Common, what little was left of the Hanoverian troops, quite untrained in the art of warfare, were gathering for what was probably to be their last confrontation with the Jacobite army.

11. The Fatal Decision to Winter in Scotland

But then the pendulum, as it always does, swung the other way. Murray and his chiefs informed Charles that they wanted to retreat to Scotland for the winter, in order to come back with more troops in the spring. Charles was appalled. Never had a winning army retreated before a deflated foe. The road to London, Charles Edward argued, was open to them. It was his gut feeling: he could not prove it to them. In fact, every intelligence gathering told Murray they would be facing a superior force. In this instance, Charles was right and Murray was wrong. The Hanoverian spies won the day. A few days later the Jacobite army left Derby to march back to Scotland. Welcomed as 'liberators' Charles' army had to face being called 'deserters' on their way back.

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They were able to evade two English armies successfully and make their way back over the border. In Scotland, further successful fighting went on with Charles' army defeating General Hawley at Falkirk and Lord Loudon in Sutherland. Making his way back to Inverness Charles Edward, on the advice of O'Sullivan, decided to fight Cumberland on the ground of Drumossie Moor, the worst battlefield to choose: flat and boggy, with no opportunity for a Highland charge due to the lack of high ground. Culloden, as Drumossie Moor would be known, was the death knell of Scotland's ancient way of life. It lasted just twenty minutes and the butchery was, to say the least, atrocious. Unlike Charles Edward, who had issued a command that help should be given to Hanoverian survivors after a Jacobite victory, Cumberland issued the opposite order. No quarter was to be given. And none was given. Scotland, for the second time in its history (after Glencoe), faced an act of military genocide. Typically Cumberland, when back in London, entered the House of Lords and demanded that it pass a bill whereby all Highland women should be forcibly sterilised. To their credit, all the peers declined to back the bill and informed the press of Cumberland's demand, thus earning him the title 'Cumberland the Butcher'. Nor was the medal struck to commemorate his only victory ever claimed by any British regiment.

12. Abolition and Proscription

Until 1752, Scots Jacobites were forced by the thousands into slavery abroad or simply disappeared, never to be heard of again. From glen to glen, women, children, livestock and property were all ruthlessly assaulted by Cumberland's troops. Prohibitive laws were passed by Westminster forbidding the bearing of arms in Scotland, the wearing of tartan and playing of bagpipes. For forty-six years, anyone found disobeying these *Acts of Abolition and Proscription* was liable to imprisonment or transportation. Charles Edward, who had been forcibly removed from the battlefield when it became clear how badly things had gone, roamed the Highlands and islands evading the Hanoverian army and making his way back to France in September of that year. Even with a £30,000 reward for his capture no-one in Scotland betrayed him.

It is often stated by historians that Derby was the end of the Jacobite threat of a Stewart restoration but that is not true.

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Charles' army had successfully fought against several English generals winning battles in both England and Scotland and losing only one, at Culloden, the only battle Cumberland ever won in his military career. Even then Charles had made plans to gather his forces at Fort Augustus should the battle go against him. As far as he was concerned, losing a battle was hardly losing a war. But no-one had foreseen the degree of brutality that Cumberland would bring to the fight and its aftermath.

If Culloden was the end, Prestonpans was truly its beginning – the victory that gave the Jacobite army the impetus to march into England as far as Derby, only one hundred and thirty miles from London. Only one Scottish king had ever succeeded in marching unchecked into England before, when Alexander II of the Scots marched into England and met the Dauphin of France, then also on English soil, during the reign of King John, brother to King Richard the Lionheart. To believe that England has never been invaded is to believe an historical myth.

And Prestonpans, to quote AJ Youngson, was:

“... a signal triumph of loyalty, courage and morale”¹⁶

Had it not been for the victory at Prestonpans there would have been no success in the attempt at a Stewart restoration in 1745. And the Stewarts were restored: James VIII had been proclaimed king in most of Scotland and his son had been symbolically crowned Charles III on Scottish soil. Nor was it an attempt by catholic Scotland to restore the Catholic religion in the most ancient kingdom in Europe. It truly was the last Scottish military attempt to restore the common laws and weals of our nation, that which our ancestors fought for so valiantly at the Battle of Bannockburn on St. John's Day 1314. Those fighting in 1745 on behalf of Charles Edward Stewart, Duke of Rothesay, fought for the restoration of Scotland's written constitution of 1320, the Declaration of Arbroath that confirmed all Scots were born equal under the law. Under the silent constitution of Britain, all Scots found themselves to be serfs rather than free men and women. British law cared little for the needs of 18th century Scottish people. Scotland's representation in both the Commons and the Lords was dismal, with forty-five seats being granted to the Scots in the former and sixteen peers being taken into the latter.

What should undoubtedly be understood is that the '45 (and thus Prestonpans) was, as FW Robertson puts it, the last great national move in Scotland:

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“... the real movement ... demanded a free Scotland ... We must not be deceived by the ridiculous trappings with which our enemies have covered the great tale of the '45. It is a living issue and not a mere dead end. The coming men will study it and its great men as the real Scotland.”¹⁷

Prince Charles Edward wrote the following to King Louis XV after his defeat at Culloden:

“The plight of Scotland as I left her calls for your Majesty’s close attention. The Kingdom is about to be destroyed and the English government is resolved to treat alike those who supported it and those who took up arms for me.”¹⁸

13. The Town’s Battle Honour in Danger

At the outset of the analysis of the Battle of Prestonpans, its origins and its aftermath, I mentioned how a battle can put the smallest place on the map. It is clear that the local residents were aware of this. Only a short time after the battle took place the people of Prestonpans petitioned the *Scots Magazine*, on behalf of Prestonpans, Preston, Cockenzie, Seton and Tranent, that the battlefield should be referred to as Prestonpans and not as ‘Gladsmuir’, which is what most of the Highlanders called it during the 1745 campaign. If anything it appears that people were proud of the event that took place there on September 21st 1745 and were determined that future records should be historically accurate in identifying its location. The petition in part reads:

“... whereas on 21st September last, there was a battle fought on a field which is in a manner surrounded by the petitioning towns and villages, from one or another of which the said battle ought undoubtedly to derive its title.

Nevertheless the publishers of a certain newspaper, entitled the *Caledonian Mercury*, have most unjustly denominated the said battle from a moor on which it was not fought, nor near to it; in which they are followed by several people who, either through malice against your petitioners or through stupidity, have affected to call and still call it the ‘Battle of Gladsmuir’ by which practice

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your petitioners are, conjunctly and severally, deprived of that honour and fame which of right pertains to them, and which in all histories, future maps, and almanacs, ought to be transmitted as theirs, to latest posterity. [signed] Flying Shots.”¹⁹

Whereupon, the editor tells his readers, ‘to change or not, just as they have a mind.’

The Battle of Prestonpans was not the first and would not be the last military episode in the history of the area. In fact Prestonpans, a barony burgh since 1617 under a charter from King James VI, fell foul of Cromwell in 1650 when he burned the tower of Preston. Again, in 1797, the people of Prestonpans, in common with most of Scotland, refused to comply with the Militia Act which required Scotland to provide six thousand men to fight in the British army. A document sent to the justices at Tranent stating the opposition among local people and their resolve not to comply with the Act reads:

“... Although we may be overpowered in effecting the said resolution, and dragged from our parents, friends and employment, to be made soldiers of, you can infer from this what trust can be reposed in us if ever we are called upon to disperse our fellow-countrymen, or to oppose a foreign foe.”²⁰

Government reaction to this was swift. The following day, a demonstration turned into a riot whereby old and young, in and around Tranent, were massacred although the petitioners from Prestonpans escaped unharmed. The rebellious folk of Prestonpans also supported the Italian cause of General Garibaldi contributing £20 to the Garibaldian Patriotic Fund, and in 1868 Prestonpans was the scene of riotous opposition to the appointment of burgh commissioners. Some fifteen youths were arrested but all had their cases subsequently dismissed. This tradition of opposition, in the 20th century, translated into industrial action with the rise of trade unionism and the miners of Prestonpans were closely involved with strike action and support for strikers elsewhere even after the closure of the collieries in the early 1960s.

The history of Prestonpans does not consist merely of one battle fought on September 21st 1745 and won by the Jacobite forces of Prince Charles Edward Stewart. Its history is the story of the independent spirit of a strong minded community

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Remains of those who fell in the Battle of Prestonpans being reburied – May 13th 1950 (The Scotsman) – at the site of the Memorial Cairn (see p. 38 below)