



From Battle to Blitz: Sites of Conflict in West Central Scotland

Tony Pollard

This is part of the series *Essays on the Local History and Archaeology of West Central Scotland*, commissioned for the Regional Framework for Local History and Archaeology, a partnership project led by Glasgow Museums, with representatives from the councils of East Dunbartonshire, West Dunbartonshire, Glasgow, Inverclyde, North Lanarkshire, South Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire and East Renfrewshire.

Dr Tony Pollard is the Director of the Centre for Battlefield Archaeology and a Senior Lecturer in History at the School of Humanities, University of Glasgow.

Introduction

Scotland is well populated with battlefields; some of them, like Bannockburn and Culloden, are iconic, while others such as Bothwell Bridge and Kilsyth have been obscured by the mists of time and the vagaries of popular interest. Both of these latter sites are within the area which is the scope of the present series and this brief paper will provide an introduction to these and the several other battle sites in west central Scotland (fig. 1). Had this series been put together twenty years ago it is doubtful whether battle sites would have featured within its pages, but fortunately since that time there has been an increasing awareness that they represent an important component of our shared cultural heritage and the archaeological study of battlefields has earned itself a respectable place alongside other, perhaps more traditional, modes of archaeological research. It should

perhaps be noted before proceeding further, that this paper does not consider Roman remains, which include the fortlet on Lurg Moor, above Greenock, and the western terminus of the Antonine Wall, because although these structures are obviously military in character the focus here is on battles and other forms of combat.

The western lands around the Firth of Clyde may not have witnessed conflict on the same scale as those bordering the Forth or the east coast, where battles such as Bannockburn (1314), Pinkie (1547) and Dunbar (1650) involved tens of thousands of men, but there can be no doubting the long-standing strategic

Figure 1. Map of conflict sites in the study area mentioned in the text.
© CSG CIC Glasgow Museums and Libraries Collections. Produced by the former GUARD (Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division), created by Ingrid Shearer (Northlight Heritage), based on information supplied by the author.

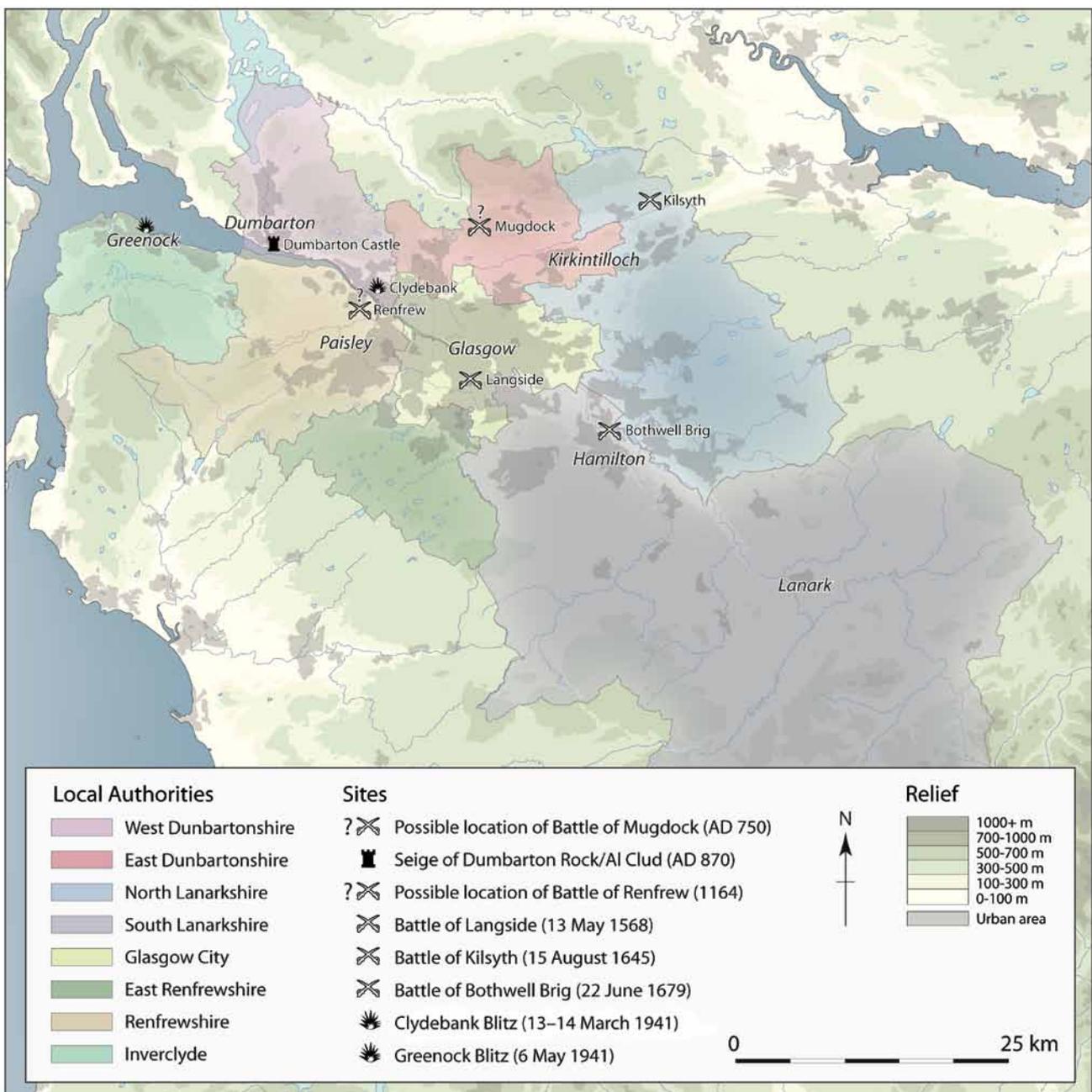




Figure 2. Dumbarton Castle, c. 1800.

importance of the area. The Clyde Estuary is the main maritime gateway to Scotland from the west and has at its head the nation's second city and what was for a long time its industrial heart. Standing guard on the northern shore of the Clyde is Dumbarton Rock – ancient capital of the Scots – which probably represents the most consistent focus for conflict in the region. This impressive rock outcrop – a volcanic plug 70m high – was first fortified in the Iron Age and was a royal centre from the late fifth up to the sixteenth century, and even after that time continued to serve a military function, as it did during World War II.

Sieges and Early Battles

The best known of several early sieges at Dumbarton, or Al Clud as it was known in this early period, was the attack in AD 870 by a Viking force led by King Olaf the White and the colourfully named Ivar the Boneless. The defenders held out for four months before capitulating to the raiders, the fall of the fort opening up the west of Scotland to Viking settlement and trade, particularly around Loch Lomond and Loch Long. In the short term, however, Olaf returned to the Viking city of Dublin with 200 ships full of captives and loot. The last of the sieges took place in 1489 when the forces of the young James IV put down a rebellion of lords who had previously been loyal to his father, James III. At one point troops inside the fort made a sally against the besiegers and burned down much of the town of Dumbarton. The siege lasted from July to the middle of December and ended with the surrender of 130 people, all of whom were given pardons for their actions against the king (MacPhail 1979).

Sieges such as those at Dumbarton tend to leave behind physical remains, even if it is just the fort or castle that served as the focus for the conflict in the first place, as is the case at Dumbarton Rock (fig. 2). Battles in the open field, however, are a different kettle of fish; even when two huge armies clash they may leave behind them nothing more than a scattering of dead bodies and scrap metal, all of which can be cleared away relatively quickly. It is not surprising then that pinpointing the location of some of these battles, especially the older ones, may be less than straightforward. It is one thing to put a pair of crossed swords on a map to indicate a battle site but entirely another to state with confidence exactly where within the landscape armies were positioned and where fighting occurred, and in at least in two cases in our area we are not at all certain where the battles took place.

The first action with an uncertain location is the Battle of Mugdock, which according to the Annals of Ulster was fought around AD 750 between Teubedur of the Britons and Oengus, son of the Pictish prince Talorgen. Very little is known about this engagement, which presumably was fought somewhere in the region of what is now Mugdock Country Park at the foot of the Campsie Fells (MacPhail 1979). The second elusive battle site is related the 1164 invasion of the mainland by Somerled, Lord of the Isles, when according to the chronicles a fleet of galleys carrying warriors from the Isles, the west coast and Dublin,

sailed up the Clyde to disembark at Renfrew. A near contemporary account of the event, remembered as the Battle of Renfrew, describes it thus: 'The enemy slew and injured with fire and sword their miserable victims, gardens, fields, ploughed lands, were ravaged and laid waste ... The people of Glasgow wounded fled from the sword-strokes' (McDonald 1997, 61). Several possible locations for the battle, in which Somerled is said to have been killed, have been put forward, including land around the Knock, a hill between Paisley and Renfrew, and, if the battle occurred soon after the landing was made at Greenock, near Inchinnan (MacDonald, *ibid.*).

Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Battles

We are on much firmer ground with the three most recent battles to have been fought in the study area: those at Langside in 1568, at Kilsyth in 1645 and at Bothwell Bridge in 1679.

At the first of these encounters the army of the abdicated Mary Queen of Scots, numbering around 6000 men, was engaged against around 4000 men under the Earl of Moray, who was the half brother of Mary and regent of her young son, who with her abdication had become James VI. Mary, escorted by her army, commanded by the Duke of Argyll, was

making her way from Hamilton to none other place than Dumbarton Castle, where she intended to establish a power base from which she could reclaim the crown. Despite all efforts to avoid confrontation her army's movements were observed and Moray, whose main force was positioned on the north side of the River Clyde, ordered a flying column of harquebusiers (musketeers) to ride pillion behind cavalymen to ford the river and position themselves in the village of Langside, through which Mary's army would pass as it made its way along narrow, hedge-lined roads (Scott 1888). The rest of Moray's army crossed the river by bridge and formed up between the village and a farm at Pathhead, the highest point of which is now in Queen's Park.

Mary's army deployed in response, while she watched events unfold from a safe distance on a hill at Cathcart. Infantry armed with muskets, bows and pikes fought alongside cavalry in an engagement, which within less than an hour saw the total defeat of Mary's army. At the height of the battle Argyll tried to use what is called 'push of pike' to break through the enemy lines; the long-shafted pikes on both sides locked against one another and it is said that shot from discharged pistols and missiles thrown by men in the rear ranks landed on the dense raft of pike

Figure 3. Part of the Battlefield of Kilsyth, looking towards Baggage Knowe in the middle distance.



© and courtesy of Robert Murray (Creative Commons Licence)

shafts, where they came to rest without touching the ground. At one point it looked as though Moray's right wing was going to crumple under the pressure but thanks to a timely transfer of reinforcements by William Kirkcaldy of Grange the crisis passed and victory was assured as Mary's men were pushed back. Soon the whole army was in flight and if Moray had not called off the pursuit quickly it is likely that many more would have perished than those in the final death toll of around 400. Mary was never to make it to Dumbarton and was forced to seek sanctuary in England, where in 1587 she was beheaded by the order of her cousin, Elizabeth I.

Today, part of the battlefield is preserved as open space thanks to the presence of Queen's Park and there is a memorial to the battle in Langside. The event is also remembered through place names such as Battlefield and Court Knowe – which is said to be the hill from which Mary watched the battle. As yet there has been no attempt to locate archaeological evidence for the battle in Queen's Park (see Historic Scotland Battlefields Inventory entry for Langside). Objects reputed to have been collected from the battlefield, including an iron breast plate and cannon balls, are in the Collection of Glasgow Museums and currently displayed at Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow.

The Civil Wars, or the Wars of the Three Kingdoms as they are more accurately called, raged from 1642 to 1651, with not even the execution of King Charles I in 1649 bringing them to an end; they were to cause a number of battles, great and small, to be fought in Scotland. Kilsyth in north Lanarkshire was the site of one of these encounters, when a battle was fought to the east of the town, in the shadow of the Campsie Fells (fig. 3). In the middle of August 1645 a Royalist force under the Marquis of Montrose, consisting of around 3000 foot soldiers and 600 horsemen, was on its way to Glasgow after enjoying a spate of victories in the north, climaxing with Auldearn and Alford. Trying to chase them down were two Covenanter armies – the Covenanters, who played a prominent role in the Wars of the Three Kingdoms, were named after the Covenant signed in 1639 by the Presbyterian opponents to religious sanctions imposed by Charles I, a response which was ultimately to lead to the wars. The armies, which were led by Argyll and Baillie, had a total of around 3500 foot and 360 horse. Much of the fighting took place on ground enclosed by dykes, which restricted the free movement of the two armies (Reid 2004). A Royalist cavalry attack routed the Covenanter horsemen, which left the right flank of the Covenanter army exposed; Royalist success in the centre, where they were fighting through enclosed fields, resulted in the final breakdown of the Covenanter line and absolute victory was assured for the Royalists as the enemy fled the field. The battle marked another resounding victory for Montrose – although he was not to see the like again and at Philiphaugh in September

1645 suffered a decisive defeat at the hands of General Leslie and a Covenanter army that had marched north from England, a defeat from which the Royalist cause during the Wars of the Three Kingdoms in Scotland was never to recover.

There is a modern memorial to the Battle of Kilsyth on the Colzium Estate, near to where Montrose's camp was thought to be (musket balls and a sword were collected from the ground nearby in the late nineteenth century). Perhaps, though, the most durable memorials are local place names, such as Baggage Knowe, Slaughter Howe, Bullet Knowe and Drum Burn, which must surely relate to the battle (see Historic Scotland Battlefields Inventory entry for Kilsyth). Due to its largely rural location Kilsyth is a bit of a hidden gem as far as battlefields go. That is not to say that the site has survived into the modern era entirely unscathed, as the construction of the Banton Loch Reservoir and coal mining and quarrying have eroded parts of the site. The locations of the armies are not exactly known, with military historians offering contrasting deployments, and the site is a prime candidate for archaeological research.

To reach the battlefield at Langside most of Moray's army had used an old bridge to cross the Clyde. In 1679 another bridge across the Clyde was to be the scene of a further battle when a Royal army attacked Covenanter forces positioned on the east side of the river and the bridge, and the encounter has been remembered as the Battle of Bothwell Brig (or 'Bridge' in most modern references). Conflict with the Covenanters had flared up again under Charles II in the 1670s when illegal prayer meetings were broken up by the king's men, some of whom were commanded by John Graham, Earl of Claverhouse. One such action went badly for Claverhouse when he and his dragoons tried to break up a conventicle at Drumclog, near Loudon Hill in east Ayrshire. On this occasion the Covenanter prayer meeting was attended by 200 armed men on foot and fifty horsemen and, thanks to a strong position behind a stretch of boggy ground, they managed to put the smaller number of Royalist dragoons to flight, some of whom were killed.

This small victory brought many more to the cause and in the following weeks a Covenanter army some 7000 strong gathered near Hamilton. In response, a government army was mustered in Edinburgh under Lord Linlithgow. King Charles II, however, decided to put his illegitimate son, the Duke of Monmouth, in command of his forces. By 22 June a force of 5000 regular troops and militia was facing a Covenanter force by then reduced to around 4000. Monmouth's army formed up at Bothwell on the west side of the river, while the Covenanters, under Sir Robert Hamilton, occupied rising ground on the east side of the river, and the bridge itself was defended by 400 men behind a barricade across its mid-section (Aiton 1821).



Figure 4. The monument to the Battle of Bothwell Bridge.

At first, things went well for the Covenanters, with accurate fire from their single cannon putting the Royalist gunners to flight. But it was the Royalists who took the offensive and about two hours into the fight a squadron of dragoons under Major Oglethorpe stormed the barricade and pushed the enemy off the bridge. Running low on ammunition, the Covenanter front line fell back from the river bank and allowed Monmouth to get his entire army across the bridge. The discipline and superior leadership of the Royalist army showed its worth and despite a strong attack made against the Atholl Highlanders on the right, the Covenanters were soon put to flight, their break-up precipitated by cavalry galloping through their own ranks of infantry as they fled the field. Some 400 Covenanters were killed in the battle and the pursuit which followed. No less than 1200 were captured and many of these prisoners were later to drown when the ship taking them to the American colonies sank off Orkney. The Duke of Monmouth was later to lead the ill-starred Protestant rebellion against his late father's brother, James II. He was captured after the Battle of Sedgemoor in 1685 and beheaded. Claverhouse, on the other hand, was to come out in support of James following his exile after the 'Glorious Revolution' in 1688. He led the

first Jacobite rising of 1689 and was killed leading the cavalry at Killiecrankie, his death making the battle's outcome a pyrrhic victory for the Jacobites.

The original Bothwell Bridge was demolished and rebuilt in the nineteenth century. A monument to the battle was erected at the east end of the new bridge in the 1920s (fig. 4). Not surprisingly, much of the battlefield on both sides of the river has been built over in the intervening centuries, though the hollow in which the right flank of the Royalist army was positioned has survived relatively undisturbed. On the west side of the river a field surrounded by houses, and perhaps misleadingly called the Covenanter's Field, marks the location of the Royalist left before the advance across the bridge (see Historic Scotland Battlefields Inventory entry for Bothwell Bridge). A recent move to sell off this land for housing was shelved due to popular demand that this fragment of the battlefield be saved for posterity. The case for preservation was strengthened after a metal detector survey across this sloping ground recovered a number of musket balls, which probably represent fire delivered by Covenanters positioned behind the barricade on the bridge.

Blitz on the Clyde

Mention has already been made of the industrial importance of the Clyde and the settlements which fringe it – by the late nineteenth century Clydeside had become synonymous with shipbuilding. Industrial success was to make the area a target in the age of total war, and during World War II Glasgow and Clydebank were heavily bombed by the Luftwaffe – Clydebank is said to be the most intensively bombed location in Britain (MacLeod 2011; fig. 5). Although not a battlefield in the strictest sense of the word, no summary of conflict sites in the area can close without mention of the Clydebank Blitz in which over 1000 civilians were killed or seriously wounded on the nights of 13 and 14 March 1941; more than 4000 homes were destroyed and 8000 suffered damage

Figure 6. Bomb damage on Dumbarton Road in Clydebank, an area that was targeted during World War II air raids because of its industrial importance.



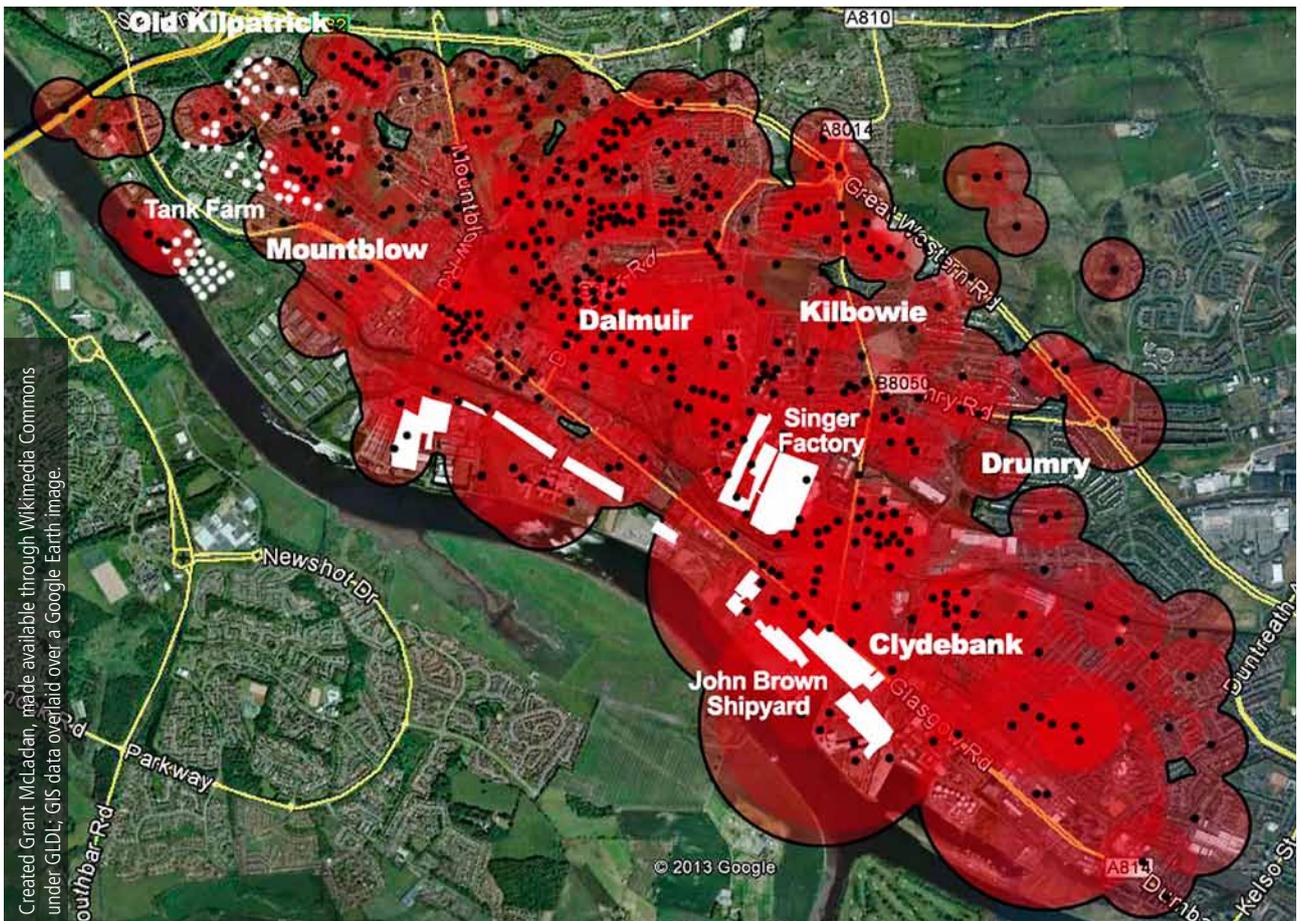


Figure 5. Map showing the locations of detonated bombs dropped by the Luftwaffe during the Clydebank Blitz in March 1941 and the extent of the damage.

(figs 6 and 7). Today it is hard to imagine destruction on such a scale but small reminders do remain: Cardross Old Parish Church was hit by a bomb and its ruined facade still stands as an evocative reminder of the Blitz, and the gravestones in the graveyard also bear scars from the blast (fig. 8). Other remains also exist in the form of concrete anti-aircraft batteries in locations such as Mugdock Country Park and the bombing decoy installation on Craigmaddie Moor, which served to direct at least a few bombs away from Clydebank during the 1941 Blitz.

Figure 7. Evacuees in Whitecrook Street, Clydebank: during the Clydebank Blitz of 13 and 14 March 1941 more than 1000 civilians were killed or seriously wounded and over 4000 homes were destroyed.



The Luftwaffe had not finished with the Clyde, though, and although less well known than the Clydebank Blitz, the bombing of the town of Greenock, close to the mouth of the Clyde Estuary on its southern side, was equally horrifying for the town's inhabitants. The raid took place on the night of 6 May 1941 and once again shipyards, notably the John Brown and Company yard, and associated war industries, including Beardmore's Diesel works, were the intended target. However, as had been the case at Clydebank, the civilian population suffered

Figure 8. Cardross Old Parish Church is a reminder of bomb damage from World War II.





Figure 9. The memorial to those who died during air raids on Greenock during World War II.

when bombs landed in residential areas, with 10,000 homes damaged, 280 people killed and more than 1200 injured (fig. 9). Other centres of population in close vicinity hit during the same raid included Gourrock and Port Glasgow. Although air-raid shelters undoubtedly saved many lives, with what was reputed to be the biggest air-raid shelter in Britain dug beneath the Gourrock rope works in Port Glasgow in 1939, their inability to protect against direct hits was demonstrated when a 250kg bomb landed on the shelter in Woodhill Terrace, killing 30 people. Although anti-aircraft fire failed to bring down any of the enemy raiders, it, along with the decoy site at Loch Thom, did not make the Luftwaffe's job an easy one, and may well have helped reduce the effectiveness of the raid, given that the intended targets were hardly touched.

Conclusion

The foregoing, although representing nothing more than a cursory introduction to sites of conflict in the study area, has, it is to be hoped, given some idea of how warfare has served to shape the history and in some respects the landscape of Scotland over a millennia and a half. As time moves on, so the physical traces of these hostilities become fainter, and, as has already happened for some of the early battles, perhaps they will eventually disappear entirely; but Scotland's many conflicts still cast their shadows, and if future generations are to benefit from the insights that looking into our past can provide it is incumbent on us to preserve reminders of these wherever possible.

References and Further Reading

Aiton, W (1821) *A history of the re-encounter at Drumclog, and battle at Bothwell Bridge, in the month of June, 1679, with an account of what is correct, and what is fictitious in the "Tales of my Landlord" respecting these engagements, and reflections on political subjects*, WD Borthwick and Co., Hamilton.

McDonald, RA (1997) *The Kingdom of the Isles: Scotland's Western Seaboard, c. 1100–c. 1336*, Tuckwell Press, East Linton.

MacLeod, J (2011) *River of Fire: The Clydebank Blitz*, Birlinn, Edinburgh.

MacPhail, IMM (1979) *Dumbarton Castle*, John Donald Publishers, Edinburgh.

Reid, S (2004) *Battles of the Scottish Lowlands*, Pen and Sword, Barnsley.

Scott, AM (1885) *The Battle of Langside MDLXVIII*, Hugh Hopkins, Glasgow.

Online resources

- <http://data.historic-scotland.gov.uk>
The Battlefields section of this website provides information about the battles of Bothwell Bridge, Kilsyth and Langside, including overviews and details of each battle's historical significance, maps, assessments of the archaeological and physical remains potential and select bibliographies.