

David Pilling relives Black Saturday, one of Scotland's worst historic military defeats

# THE BATTLE OF PINKIE CLEUGH 1547

**T**he Battle of Pinkie Cleugh, fought on the banks of the River Esk on 10 September 1547, was one of the worst military defeats in Scotland's history and is remembered in Scotland today as Black Saturday. The battle was fought as part of a war known as the 'Rough Wooing' whereby the government of England attempted to force the Scots hand over their child-Queen Mary for betrothal to Prince Edward, only son of Henry VIII. The Scots were reluctant to be forced into an alliance with England, and when diplomacy failed Henry sent an army into Scotland to force the issue.

After Henry died in January 1547 the Duke of Somerset, who was appointed Protector of England until Prince Edward, now Edward VI, came of age, continued the 'Rough Wooing'. Somerset shared Henry's ambition of coercing Scotland into an alliance, and also of imposing the Anglican Reformation on the Scottish church. Thus in September 1547 Somerset personally led an army into Scotland, supported by a large well-equipped fleet.

The English army was partially composed of traditional levies armed with longbows and bills (a kind of curved bill-hook mounted on a short stave) but also had modern elements. These included German mercenaries armed with an early form of handgun known as the arquebus, a formidable artillery train and thousands of armoured cavalry, including a troop of Spanish mounted gunmen. This large and well-equipped army formed a stark contrast to that of the Scots, which largely consisted of the same kind of pikemen and Highland archers that had fought at Bannockburn centuries before.

Somerset marched along the east coast of Scotland, intending to stay in touch with his fleet and so avoid running out of supplies. Lightly armed Scottish horseman, most of them from the lawless Border regions, harried his army as it marched but could do nothing to check its progress. In the meantime the Regent of Scotland, the Earl of Arran, hastily scraped together as many men as possible. Other than the pikeman and Highland archers he managed to assemble some

Right: Duke of Somerset



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guns, but these were not as mobile or well manned as Somerset's. The only cavalry available to the Scots were 2000 Borderers, fine soldiers in their way but unreliable and only lightly equipped.

As soon as his army was ready Arran marched to block Somerset's advance and deployed his men on the west bank of the River Esk, where his flanks were protected by the Firth of Forth on his left and an impassable bog to his right. Arran also had some fortifications built and mounted them with cannons, some pointing out towards the Forth to ward off the English fleet. Arran's cause was not helped by one of his lieutenants, the Earl of Home, who contrived to lose most of the Scottish cavalry in a pointlessly chivalrous gesture.

On 9 September a division of Somerset's army moved to occupy Falside Hill, three miles east of Arran's main position. Home chose this moment to lead 1500 horsemen towards the English camp and challenge an equal number of English cavalry to a fight. The English accepted and sent out 1000 men-at-arms and 500 lancers to engage the Scottish Borderers, whose light armour and shaggy hill ponies were no match against the tide of heavy horses, sabres, lances and arquebuses. After a short and brutal melee the Borderers broke and fled west, and were pursued and cut down all the way back to the main Scottish encampment. This bloody skirmish decimated the Scottish cavalry and rendered them virtually useless as a fighting force.

Perhaps because of this setback and his

awareness of the superior English artillery and equipment, Arran tried to avoid a pitched battle by sending two challenges to his opponent. One was for Arran and Somerset to settle the issue by single combat and the other for 20 champions to be picked from both sides to decide the matter. Somerset, equally aware that he held all the advantages, declined both proposals. Battle was now unavoidable.

On the morning of 10 September Somerset made the first move, advancing his army towards Inveresk. Meanwhile Arran hurried his army across the Esk and marched rapidly in three massive columns of pikes to meet the English, hoping to close with them before their artillery could deploy. Abandoning his fortified position on the banks of the Esk meant that his own guns could not protect his army from being fired upon by English warships, and his left wing was raked with cannon fire.

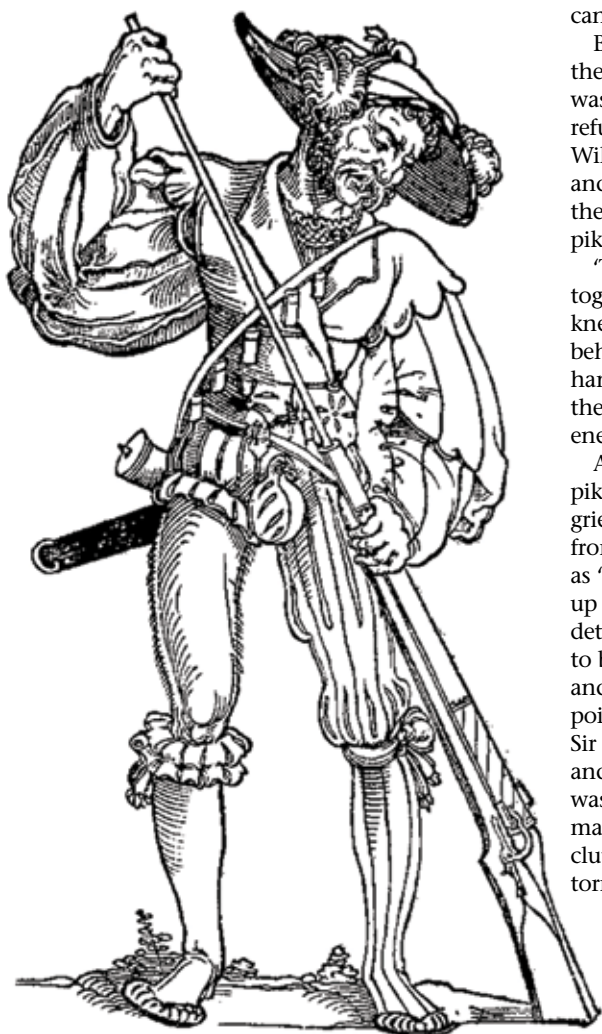
The columns of pikes began to disintegrate as shot tore through their tightly packed ranks and the lightly armed Highlanders broke and fled almost immediately. The survivors pushed into Arran's own division in the centre, impeding but not halting their advance, and the bulk of the Scottish army continued to plough onwards, much to the surprise of the English who were not yet ready to meet them.

Desperate to give his infantry and artillery time to deploy, Somerset threw his cavalry against the Scots. Heavily armoured, equipped with lances, swords and maces and mounted on



Above: 'Mary Queen of Scots (1542-1587) seen here in adulthood. As a child she was smuggled out of Scotland and betrothed to the Dauphin of France'

Below: 'An arquebusier or handgunner loading his weapon: these new type of firearms gave the English a decisive advantage over the less well-equipped Scots'



powerful warhorses, the English cavalry were formidable but unlikely to break the disciplined wall of Scottish pikes. Nonetheless they galloped full tilt into the pikemen, who by now were partially obscured by a pall of gunsmoke from the cannon fire of the English warships.

Beneath the thundering impact of the English charge the Scottish line was seen to buckle and waver, but it refused to break. An Englishman named William Patten, Somerset's secretary and an eyewitness of the battle, noted the admirable discipline of the Scottish pikemen.

'They thrust shoulders (he wrote) nigh together, the fore rank, well nigh to kneeling, stood low before their fellows behind holding their pikes in both hands...the one end of the pike against their right foot, the other against the enemy breast high'

Against this impenetrable hedge of pikes the English cavalry soon came to grief, many having their horses speared from under them while others, described as 'a few lewd soldiers' by Patten, gave up the unequal fight and fled. The more determined among them attempted to batter down the pikes with swords and maces, but achieved little. At one point the bearer of the Royal Standard, Sir Andrew Flammack, was surrounded and almost pulled from his horse, but was rescued by a fellow cavalryman and managed to hack a path to safety, still clutching the Standard that had been torn from its staff. The commander of the

English cavalry, Lord Grey, galloped out of the dreadful melee bleeding heavily from a pike wound to his mouth and throat, soon followed by the remnants of his cavalry who abandoned their futile efforts to break through the pikes and retreated up Fawside Brae.

With the ground before them strewn with dead and the English cavalry in full flight, the Scots for a moment glimpsed victory. But it was an illusion: having ruthlessly sacrificed his cavalry, Somerset used the time they gave him to organise his artillery, archers and arquebusiers. They were now drawn up in disciplined formation right in front of the Scots, and at Somerset's order began to fire at massed point-blank range into the dense blocks of pikemen. At the same time the English warships resumed their bombardment and Arran's hapless army was exposed to a rolling barrage of shot, shell, bullets and arrows tearing into its front, flank and rear.

Unable to advance into the storm of missiles and abandoned by the remnants of their cavalry, who spent the battle greedily eyeing the English baggage train but making no move to help, the Scots had no option but to stand and endure the storm. Brave as they were, it was impossible to bear the storm for long and they began to waver, and then broke into headlong flight. The rout was led by Arran, who leaped aboard the nearest horse and quit the field as his army died around him.

This was the signal for the English cavalry, which had reformed on the slopes of Fawside Brae, to launch a second charge that smashed through the tottering remnants of the Scottish pikes and put the whole to flight. Enraged by the casualties they had suffered, the horsemen went after the fugitives in a pursuit so merciless that even Somerset was shocked into recalling them.

Somerset had won a resounding victory, but in the long run it counted for little. Despite the slaughter of their army the Scottish government refused to submit to English demands for the infant Queen Mary to be handed over, and instead smuggled her out of the country to France to be betrothed to the Dauphin Francis. Somerset reacted by occupying the Lowlands and filling Scottish towns and strongholds with English soldiers, but this achieved nothing except an exhausting drain on the English treasury. The English garrisons were surrounded by hostile Scots and exercised no authority beyond town and castle walls, and in the end Somerset was forced to admit defeat and evacuate Scotland. Thus the Battle of Pinkie Cleugh is an interesting example of a 'modern' army defeating one armed with virtually obsolete weaponry, but its political significance was negligible and must be considered a pointless slaughter of thousands of brave men.