XI.

BANNOCKBURN—23RD AND 24TH JUNE 1314.
A STUDY IN MILITARY HISTORY.

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Much controversy has raged over the site of this decisive battle in Scottish history, and over the numbers engaged in it.

Until comparatively recently most historians were content to accept the "traditional" location in the neighbourhood of the Borestone, given by Nimmo in his *History of Stirlingshire*, 1771; Nimmo does not state his authority, but the earliest appearance in print in reference to the Borestone is in John Mackay's *A Journey through Scotland*, published in 1723. He says, "On my road, near a village called St Ringin remains the stone, in which King Robert Bruce's standard was fixed at the famous battle of Bannockburn." He does not say that the battle itself actually took place there, and of course standards were borne, and not set up.

That very accurate historian, Lord Hailes, writing in 1779 after reading Barbour and visiting the ground, specifically disagrees with Nimmo (*Annals of Scotland*, II, 42) and places the battle "on a field which had Stirling on the left, and the brook of Bannock on the right."

An account of St Ninian's parish written about the same time as Mackay, places the battle a further mile or so to the NE. of the Pelstream (Macfarlane's *Geogr. Collections*, I, 315).

The early maps of the district, Adair 1682 and Pont 1608, show no site.

I can find no evidence that would satisfy a soldier or an antiquary that the decisive battle, on 24th June 1314, took place about the Borestone. All the evidence is to the contrary, and the problem is to assess from the statements of the contemporary writers, and from military factors, the evidence in favour of the sites suggested by Lord Hailes and in Macfarlane.

As regards the numbers present, where many eminent and other historians have gone astray, the problem has been in trying to equate the numbers given by Barbour and other early writers to the ground indicated by these early chroniclers. We now know the numbers were grossly exaggerated, though there is general agreement that the Scots were outnumbered in the ratio of one to three in foot, while the English had complete superiority in heavy cavalry and archers.

Edward II summoned 4000 levies from Ireland by writ dated 28th March 1314 (*Parl. Writs*, II, Div. i, 113) and 21,540 from England and Wales by a summons issued from York on 27th May (*Rot. Scot.*, I, 127; *Fœdera*, III, No. 482).   The place of muster was Wark on the Tweed, and the date 10th June (*Vita Edw. II*, 201).

The "covered" horse, the principal arm upon which the English relied, were additional to and outside the call-up.   They numbered between 2000 (*Vita Edw. II*) and 3100 (Abbot Bernard of Arbroath, contemporary).

The "covered" horse consisted of nobles, knights and their men-at-arms, for the most part mounted in armour upon country-bred horses.   These were covered by "trappers," flowing blankets bearing the riders' emblems and reaching near the ground.   The heavy horse capable of carrying armour in addition to the armoured knight had not yet been developed in England. In addition to those from England detachments were present from Normandy, Gascony, Picardy, Flanders, Guelders, Brabant, Holland, Germany, Pouty (Poitou), Aquitaine and Bayonne (*The Bruce; Books of Pluscarden*, IX, ch. xii).   The English Army also included some Scots—Barbour says "a gret party"—who were at odds with Bruce.

A medieval call-up seldom produced more than fifty per cent (Bain, *Cal.*, II) but in this case we may assume a slightly better figure, say 15,000–17,000.   These numbers are the maximum which could have marched from Edinburgh to Falkirk in one day, as we know they did on 22nd June; a hot dusty march it must have been.   Some 200 wagons, half drawn by teams of eight oxen, half by teams of four horses, carried spare weapons and food, spare wheels, poles and axles, tents, treasure chests, and even furniture and plate for the nobles (*Rot. Scot.*, 125–7; *Vita Edw. II*, 206–7).

They would have been split up among the ten brigades, or "batals" as they were called, as otherwise a 20-mile supply column would have been very vulnerable, and would have required an enormous guard.

The Scottish Army was composed of four brigades, or "batals" of infantry, certainly less than 6000 strong.   There were only a few archers, from Ettrick Forest, and some 500 light horse.   The Scottish infantry wore a bacinet to protect the head, a leather or quilted coat, a shield, and gloves of plate to protect the hands that wielded the 12-ft. spear.   An axe, sword or dagger was worn as a personal weapon.   In addition there were the "small folk," whose rent was less than ten pounds, and camp followers, perhaps some 2000 all told, whom Bruce kept out of the schiltrons no doubt for lack of training and discipline.   Bruce had had ample time for combined training of the schiltron of spearmen, a hollow formation of no fixed strength, though 500 men formed a schiltron under Randolph.   Probably two, three or four schiltrons working together would form a "batal."   Mobility of a schiltron over 500 strong would have been too restricted.

After the sad lesson of Falkirk and the remarkable victory of the Flemish

infantry over the armoured knights at Courtrai, Bruce trained his schiltrons to fight with mobility and mutual co-operation.

The Scots relied on training, discipline and morale for victory, and the fact that nobles, knights, and common men fought democratically on foot side by side made for cohesion and leadership.

Bruce had another great advantage. He was a very experienced commander in the field, one who enjoyed the respect and affection of his troops by reason of his successes. He proved himself a great general, by any standard, at Bannockburn. We shall see him successfully applying every one of those Principles of War, so many years later to be encoded by Napoleon and adhered to ever since by successful commanders.

Edward II on the other hand was no general, and relied on the pomp and chivalry of his large host striking terror into his opponent. If that failed there was always the devastating charge of the mass of the covered horse. His infantry can have had no time for any combined training. We shall see the English breaking all the Principles of War.

The ten "batals" of the English Army assembled at Wark and marched up Lauderdale by Soutra to Edinburgh (Bain, *Calendar*, III, No. 365). Here supplies sent by sea were received at Leith.

On 22nd June they marched to Falkirk, and next day set out for Stirling headed by a vanguard, probably of 400–500 horse, commanded by Hereford and Gloucester. This force moving by the old Roman road tested the strength of the Scots position known to be in the New Park covering Stirling (fig. 1). Bruce had wisely withdrawn to this strong, prepared position from the Tor Wood some miles nearer Falkirk, without more than mounted patrol action.

His chosen position was well sited for defence. Marshy ground and the gorge of the Bannock Burn covered the entry to the New Park by the Roman road, and Bruce had strengthened the position by digging camouflaged pits.

It was on the edge of the wood—an area unsuitable for action by cavalry, as it could not be turned to the west because of thick forest, and an enemy daring to pass round it to the E. might well present an ideal opportunity for attack on ground of Bruce's choice (*The Bruce*).

After the well-known episode of the duel between Bruce and de Bohun, the Scots drove the English vanguard back across the Bannock Burn in disorder.

Edward II then took the next logical military step, a strong turning movement past the left flank of the Scots (fig. 1).

This took place in the afternoon under Clifford and Bowmont with some 500 cavalry. This force moved along under the escarpment but was defeated by Randolph who commanded the Scottish van. The significant fact of this action was that Randolph's schiltron of spearmen proved impervious

to the charge of the English cavalry which had to break off the fight and flee, part to Stirling and the rest back the way they had come. This was not a voluntary flight, but the result of Randolph's men pressing on in counter-attack (*The Bruce*, XII, 132–3; *Lanercost Chronicle*, 225). Randolph only lost one man in this action, and the morale of both sides was said to be much affected by this result.

It was late afternoon when Edward received news of this second unsuccessful action, and he decided to "harbour" for the night. Next day he could relieve Stirling Castle in person. Where did the English Army spend the night? On the answer to this question depends the site of the decisive battle. The only 14th-century writers who throw light on this problem are four in number; Archdeacon Barbour of Aberdeen, scholar of Oxford and Paris, who wrote *The Bruce* between 1375 and 1377; Sir Thomas Grey, son of the soldier knight captured by Randolph on 23rd June 1314 near St Ninian's Kirk, who wrote his *Scalacronica* while a prisoner in Edinburgh Castle in 1337; the chronicler of the Abbey of Lanercost in Cumberland, who states that he had the account from a reliable eyewitness; and the Monk of Malmesbury who wrote the *Vita Edwardi Secundi* about 1323.

Barbour, except for poetic licence over numbers and in relating conversations that went on among the English leaders some sixty years previously, gives to students of military history a remarkably sound and consistent account of the events. No doubt he must have heard details from some of those present. *The Bruce* is written in Middle Scots.

Grey wrote in Anglo-French; he is direct and soldierly, and probably had his information from his father and his father's contemporaries.

The *Lanercost Chronicle* purports to deal with the necessarily limited experiences of one eye-witness who nevertheless is clear and convincing.

The *Vita* is short and straightforward. Both these latter are in medieval Latin.

This is what each has to say:

BEFORE THE BATTLE.

BARBOUR: "They harboured them that night down in the Carse; and as there were pools they broke houses and thatch to make bridges, and some say that folk in the Castle, when night fell, bore doors and shutters with them, so that they had before day bridged them, so that they were passed over every one and had taken the hard field on horse" (*The Bruce*, XII, 391–2).

GREY: "The host of the King, which had abandoned the way in the wood, had come to a plain towards the water of Forth beyond Bannockburn; an evil, deep, wet, marsh. There they unharnessed and spent the night under arms with horses bridled, having sadly lost confidence, and being too much affected by the events of the day" (*Scalacronica*, 54).

Lanercost Chronicle: "Before the battle they had had to cross a great ditch into which the tide comes from the sea, called the Bannockburn" (*Lanercost Chronicle*, 226).

Vita Edwardi II refers to "the battle near the Bannockburn" (*Vita Edw. II*, 201).

DURING THE BATTLE.

BARBOUR: speaking of the constriction of the English front, uses the phrase "through the great straitness of the place," and he describes the English as being jammed together "as in one great schiltron" (*The Bruce*, XII, 430).

GREY: The English who were following could not reach the Scots because of their own front line in between (*Lanercost Chronicle*, 225–6).

Vita Edwardi II uses the term "running into each other" of the English formations (*Vita Edw. II*, 205).

AFTER THE BATTLE.

BARBOUR: "of them a full great party fled to the waters of Forth, and there the most of them were drowned (*The Bruce*, XII, 334–6) and Bannockburn betwixt the braes of horses and men so charged was, that upon drowned horses and men, men might pass dry over it" (*The Bruce*, XII, 337–40).

Lanercost Chronicle: "When in their confusion they tried to retreat, a great gorge engulfed many, and a great number died in it, while others avoided it with great difficulty."

He quotes from a contemporary poem "Forth absorbed many well-equipped with horses and arms, and Bannock mud many whose very names we know not" (*Lanercost Chronicle*, 227).

Vita Edwardi II: "The King left the plain and hastened to the castle. When his standard was seen in retreat the whole army Scattered, a great ditch engulfed them, and a great many died in it" (*Vita Edw. II*, 205).

GREY: "They fell back upon the fosse of the Bannockburn, each one tumbling upon the other" (*Scalacronica*, 142).

From all this evidence it is clear that the battle took place somewhere in the Carse, known to the English as "The Pools" (fig. 1).

It was a military impossibility for the English Horse to have crossed the wide tidal reaches of the Bannock Burn and the time and space factors rule out a crossing there by an army of foot numbering some 15,000 men or more. The army must have crossed on a broad front from about the present Crook Bridge upwards (fig. 6). Some of these crossings required the improvised bridging mentioned; such material would have been useless in the 50-ft. wide tidal stretch.

PHASE ONE AFTERNOON 23RD

PHASE TWO EVENING 23RD

TO LEFT OF LINE ← → TO RIGHT OF LINE
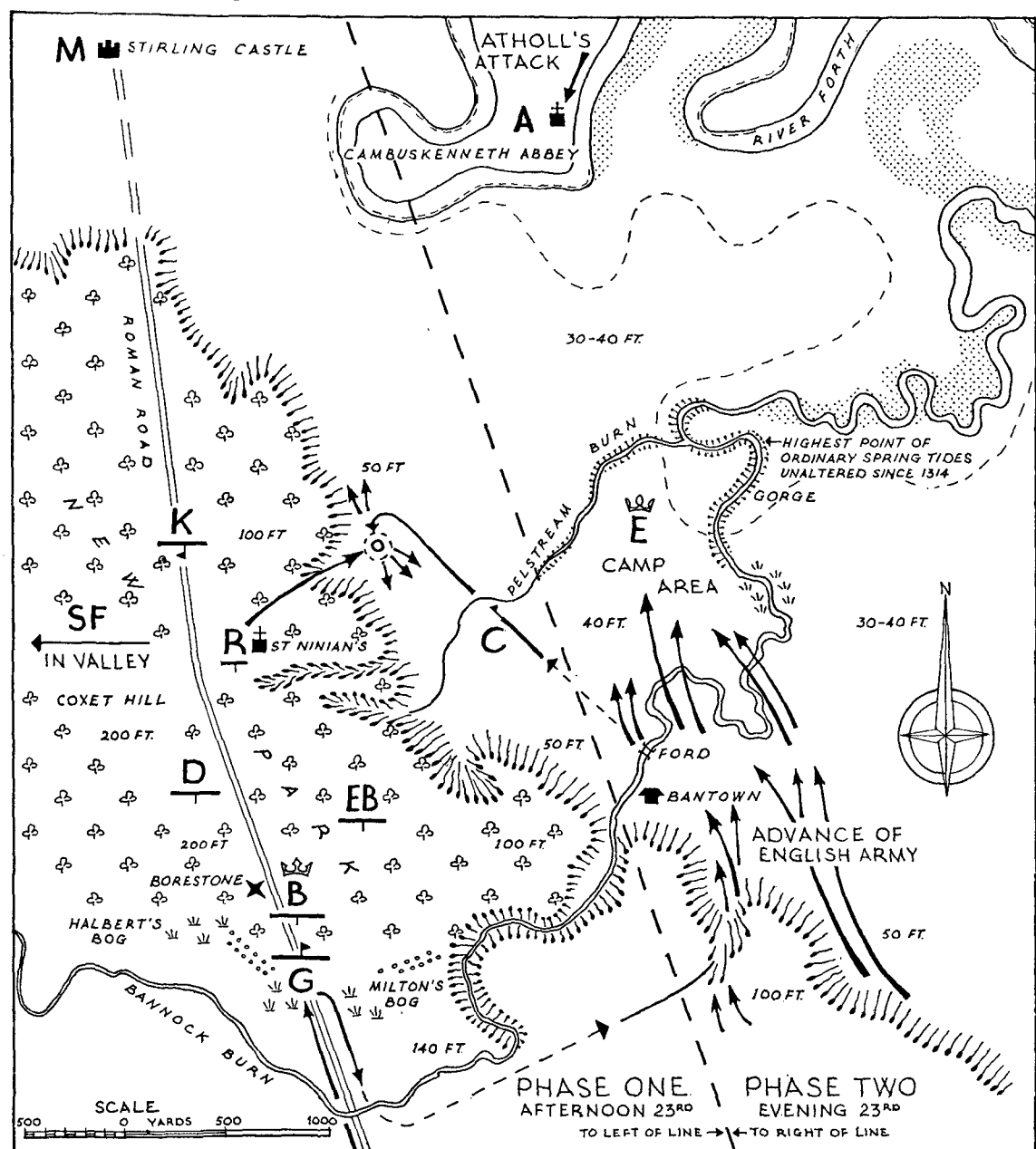
KEY

A AIRTH, COMMANDING BRUCE'S BASE DEPOT
B THE BRUCE : c.2000 FOOT
C CLIFFORD : c.500 HORSE
D DOUGLAS : c.1500 FOOT
E EDWARD II : c.2000 HORSE, 17000 FOOT
EB EDWARD BRUCE : c.1500 FOOT
G GLOUCESTER : VANGUARD, c.500 HORSE
K KEITH : c.500 LIGHT HORSE
R RANDOLPH : c.500 FOOT

M MOWBRAY, COMMANDING STIRLING CASTLE
SF "SMALL FOLK" : c.2000 IRREGULAR FOOT
Z APPROX. SCENE OF DISASTER IN THE BANNOCK BURN WHICH, GEOLOGICALLY, COULD ONLY HAVE TAKEN PLACE SOMEWHERE ALONG THIS REACH
⬚ MEDIEVAL MARSHES AS DEFINED BY THE 1952 GEOLOGICAL SURVEY
↯ PERMANENTLY FLOODED IN 1958, PROBABLY ALWAYS BOGGY
↯ BOG
N.B. THE APPROX. AREA COVERED BY EACH BODY OF TROOPS IS DRAWN TO SCALE, ALLOWING A HORSEMAN 4½ SQ.YDS. AND A FOOTMAN 1 SQ. YD. STANDING IN CLOSE ORDER

SCALE
500   0   YARDS   500   1000

Fig. 1.

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PHASE THREE EARLY MORNING 24TH

PHASE SIX

PHASE FOUR

PHASE FIVE

LAST PHASE MORNING 24TH

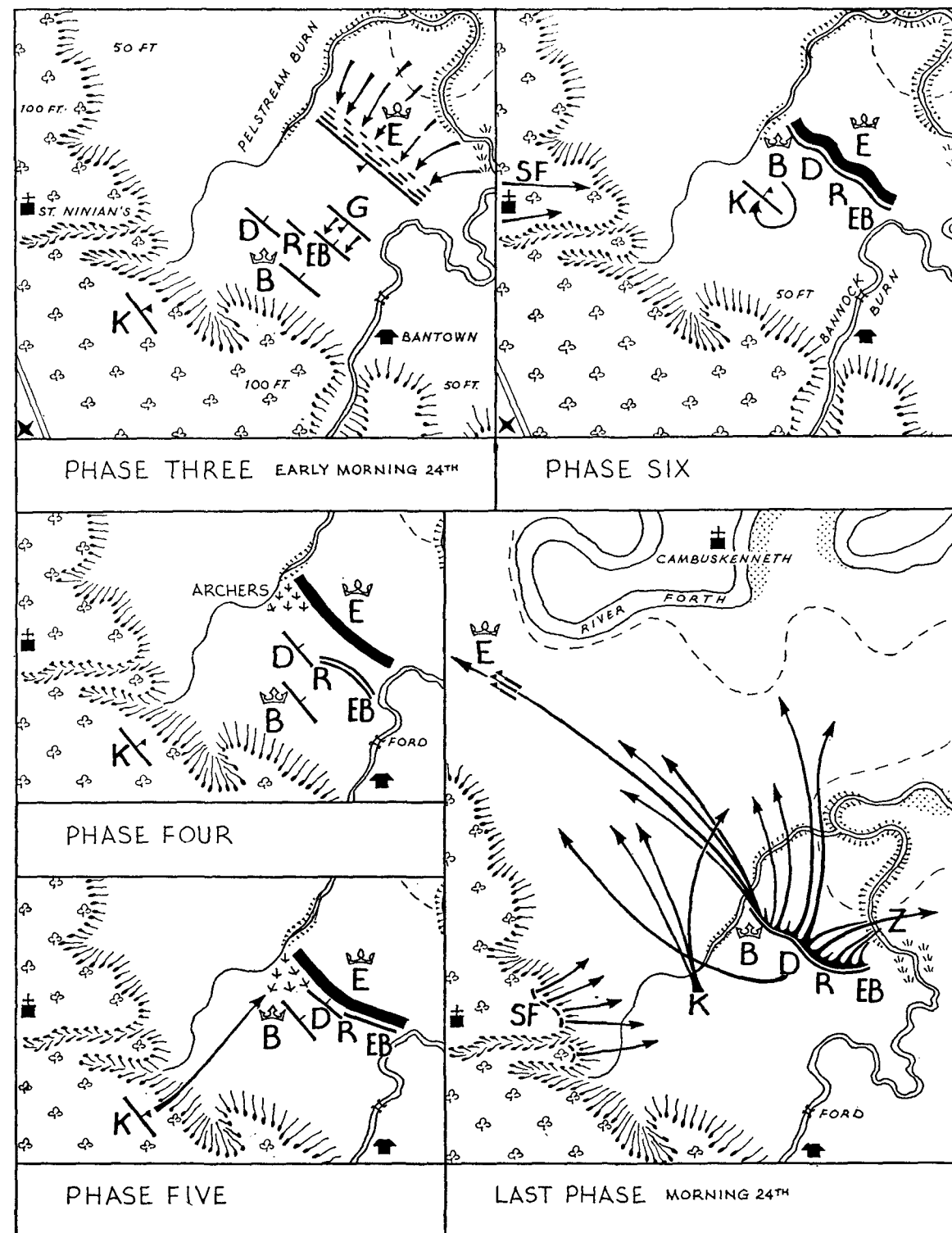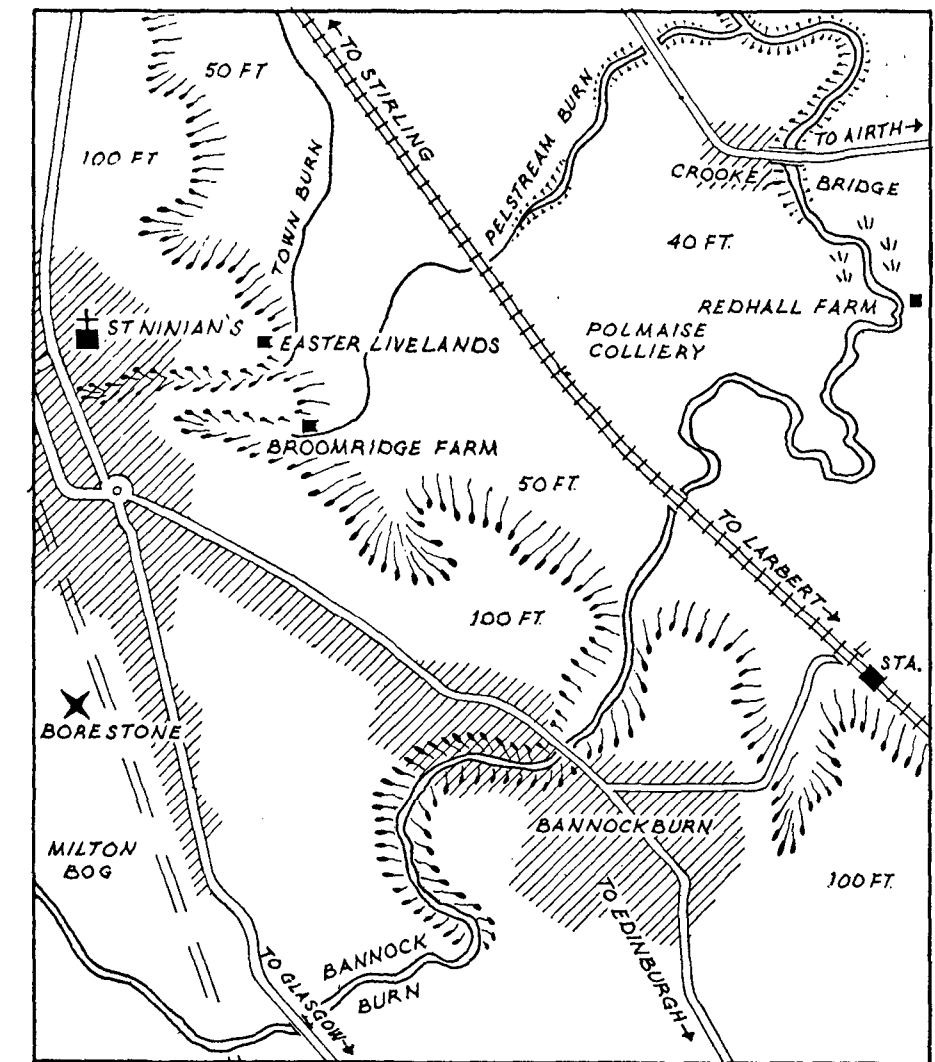Fig. 2.

Figs. 1–3. These plans are all based on original drawings by C. D'. O. Pilkington Jackson.

THE BANNOCKBURN AREA TODAY

Fig. 3.

This material could only have come from houses near the route.   Possibly there was a *Bantown* near the ford (fig. 1) as this is shown in early maps.   There was no village of Bannockburn in 1314.   The carriage of material from Stirling Castle is only a rumour and is unlikely, though possible.

The *Vita* refers to "the battle near the Bannockburn" and the Gaelic name is "the battle of the Bannock Burn."   Some early writers refer to it as the battle of the pools, *i.e.* Carse; or of Stirling, no doubt for easy reference. None refer to it as the battle near the Forth or of the Forth.

The *Lanercost Chronicle* mentions the tide coming into the Bannock. At high tide the fresh water in the gorge may well have been held up and deepened; or the chronicler may merely be referring to the fact that the stream had a tidal estuary.   Barbour, Grey and the *Vita* do not mention the tide, but all describe the final debacle as taking place in a great ditch or gorge in a stream they had had to cross the day before.   "Betwixt the brais," *i.e.* steep banks (Barbour); "fosse" (Grey); magnam foveam (*Lanercost Chronicle*); "fossa" (*Vita Edw. II*).   The tidal reaches ran in a shallow marshy trough with a channel some 50 ft. wide, and not in any kind of gorge (fig. 1), but the stretch just above high-tide mark to a little above the present Crook Bridge (fig. 3) exactly fits the descriptions.

No mention is made by any of the writers of the Pelstream, also in places a considerable obstacle, but no soldier can ignore it (fig. 1).   Had either army had to negotiate it surely the fact would have been mentioned?   The inference is that neither in fact did, and from the military aspect to pass an army as large as the English over two obstacles in one evening would have been, to say the least, an astonishing feat.   Time and space calculations alone rule it out.   The English would have almost been turning their backs on the Scots in crossing it.

Had the battle taken place on the north side of the Pelstream the fugitives would have had to cross two obstacles in their flight and would thus have been likely to reach the Bannock on a broad front, instead of being pressed back into the gorge by the battle because there was no other eastern escape route open to them.

The English fear of instant attack shows that the armies were reasonably close to one another.   The surprise obtained by the Scots would have been impossible had the English been N. of the Pelstream, and if the Scots had had a long advance and the bottlenecks of that obstacle to negotiate.

The Scots appeared suddenly "in good array and apertly" (*The Bruce*, XII, 421).

Both Gloucester's van and Keith's light horse charged mounted.   It is unlikely that mounted action was possible except on the higher ground drained by the two burns.   Barbour is definite that the English "had taken the hard field everyone on horse" and he is supported by Samuel Colvill of

Culross who in a satyrical poem, *The Scots Hudibras,* published in 1681 before the reclamation of the Carse, says of summer,

"Now mires grow hard as toasted breid"
"That men may through the Carses ride."

All accounts describe how the English could not deploy their full strength because of the narrow front of the battle; nor could they use their mobility to manœuvre. For the numbers believed to be engaged and from the fact that the superior English were unable to take advantage of time and space, a battlefield between the Bannock Burn and the Pelstream alone provides the conditions.

A routed army usually flees right, left and centre as best it can.

Edward II, with so large a force on the right that Bruce thought he would have to fight him again next day, fled to Stirling Castle, the centre fled to their rear and were destroyed in the Forth, while the luckless left was compressed back into the gorge of the Bannock.

Had the battle taken place N. of the Pelstream, the "retreat" of Edward II and such a large force would have had to be through the Scottish Army. Then the English saw "the small folk" coming down the escarpment at the crisis of the battle, which sight caused the final panic and retreat. The appearance of the "small folk" is unlikely to have had this effect had the battle been going on N. of the Pelstream, if indeed they would have even been visible.

Taken together the military and topographical evidence is decisively in favour of the site being between the Pelstream and the Bannock Burn. Only here can the military factors and the reports of the early chroniclers be reconciled.

While the English Army was spending a short but miserable night in the Carse among the pools, Atholl raided Bruce's depot at Cambuskenneth Abbey.

This act has been held by some historians to prove that the English lay near the Forth adjacent to the Abbey. But such an operation needs time, careful reconnaissance, organisation and planning to succeed. It is unlikely there were any boats left on the south bank of the Forth. Such evidence as we have shows that Atholl came down from the N. to carry out the raid as private vengeance, no doubt synchronising his action with the arrival of the English Army.

During the evening Bruce was able to regroup and rest his army and to hold a conference. The arguments in favour of a withdrawal to the Lennox to carry on guerilla warfare or of an attack on the English in the Carse next morning were nicely balanced until the sudden appearance of Sir Alexander Seton from the English camp, whose report of their parlous situation and low morale turned the scales in favour of attack.

Many historians say the English attacked the Scots. There is no evidence of this: probably they were thinking of the "great van" of the English commanded by Gloucester which, when surprised by the Scots next morning, he gallantly led in a charge upon Edward Bruce whose batal was leading those of Randolph and Douglas in echelon by the right (fig. 2).

This action of the van was to gain time and space for the main body to saddle up, make ready, and form up in battle array, all of which would have taken some time and no doubt caused confusion and even panic in the rear.

Gloucester had no time even to don his surcoat, and his van seems to have been too close to the main body to gain the necessary time and space, as he is reported to have called out to Berkeley to support him (*The Bruce*).

But the van was not supported, Gloucester was immediately killed, and before the main body could deploy for action the "great van" was driven back upon it in disorder, the wounded horses throwing it into confusion much as the wounded elephants of King Porus had done before Alexander's troops at the Hydaspes.

The *Lanercost Chronicle* relates that when the van retreated in disorder on to the main body the whole army panicked and soon disintegrated, and thought of nothing but flight. Barbour, however, says the fighting was long and desperate, and that at last the English got out some archers to a flank to destroy the Scots. He says that their fire began to take effect, but that Bruce ordered Keith's light horse to charge them which they did with complete success, driving them from the field. A classic example of the correct use of an inferior force of cavalry.

Bruce now saw the crisis had arrived and brought up his own strong reserve. This had hardly been committed when the "small folk," whether on his orders as is likely, or from sheer exuberance, appeared in full view coming down the escarpment, and the English, thinking further strong reinforcements were being thrown in against them, broke and fled.

The fate of the beaten army the chroniclers have already told us.

Historians talk of the English "camp" in the Carse, but this is so highly unlikely as to be ruled out. No army would camp in mid-June, but bivouack. No doubt some nobles and knights had tents, carried on pack-horses, which were set up for them, as tents are mentioned, but it is highly unlikely that any but a few of the wagons could have been got across the Bannock Burn. The "bloody field," traditionally the site of the massacre of the baggage guards, lies to the S. of the Bannock.

Mowbray, the Governor, rightly refused to admit Edward II to the Castle for fear of his capture. With a stout escort, pursued all the way, the King rode round the west side of the King's Park eventually reaching Dunbar, whence he escaped in a small boat to Berwick; an ignominious end to his boastful campaign. He and his leaders had broken every principle of war.

The value of the spoils from this battle was enormous. Even the *Vita* put it at £200,000, equivalent to £5 million today (*Vita Edw. II*, 206).

Casualties are hard to assess. Of the "squires and the foot the most part were slain" (*Ann. Lond.*, 231). The numbers of knights and squires who fell numbered 700 (*Hist. Anglicana*, 141). These are English figures.

There were, of course, a large number of knights captured and held to ransom. Bruce exchanged many prisoners, and his conduct after the battle evoked the words of an English chronicler "the hearts of many who were opposed to him he turned in a wonderful way to feeling an affection for him" (*Annals of Trokelowe*, p. 87).

The Scottish casualties are not known, but as usual in medieval battles the victor usually emerged with comparatively few.

In this decisive battle Bruce, though numerically so inferior, and lacking the decisive arm of the period, was victorious because all through the two days he adhered to the basic principles of war.

He steadfastly maintained his object; he operated from a secure base to create an opportunity for offensive action on ground of his own choice; for only by successful offensive action could he win a decisive victory: he obtained surprise, Edward II firmly believing the Scots would never dare to come down from their strong position and attack him: he struck his enemy when he could not manœuvre to deploy his full strength: he was able though inferior in total numbers to concentrate overwhelming strength at the decisive time and place: by drill, training and discipline he had made his schiltrons mobile, and able to co-operate with each other: his handling of his reserves was masterly and timeous.

By any standard Bruce proved himself at Bannockburn not only a great national leader, but a great general.

ABBREVIATED TITLES USED IN THE REFERENCES.

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