



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY CIC

POST CONQUEST FYRD

& THE BATTLE OF THE STANDARD

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Post Conquest Fyrd

Introduction

It is often assumed that after the Norman conquest, that many Anglo-Saxon institutions became redundant or were replaced by others, of Norman origin.

County Levies

However, one Anglo-Saxon practice was maintained, namely that of the county levies, namely the Fyrd. As Norman rule spread across England there was still a need to be able to raise armies to deal with both internal and external crises, which would and did occur.

William the Conqueror's eldest son, known as Robert Curthose, fell out with his father, following a prank played against him by his siblings, William Rufus and Henry Beauclerc, both future kings of England. Robert had a difficult relationship with his father but an event in 1077, when his brothers emptied a chamber pot over his head. A vicious fight then took place and was only stopped by the Intervention of King William himself.

Robert was furious because his father refused to punish his brothers, so furious in fact, that the following day, Robert and his followers attempted to seize the castle of Rouen. They failed in their attempt and King William, then ordered Robert's arrest.

Robert and his followers took refuge and the court of his uncle, Robert 1st of Flanders. Robert then raided the French territory, known as the Vexin.

Robert caused so much destruction that his father, William, allied himself with the French King, Philip I. Further issues arose when King William discovered that his wife, Queen Matilda, was supplying Robert with large amounts of money.

Robert and his followers were holding Gerberoi castle on the borders of Normandy, when they were attacked by King William. Robert's cavalry met William's force in open battle and Robert actually unhorsed his, Father. William had to accept defeat and retreated from the field.

By 1080, Queen Matilda had persuaded William and Robert to reconcile. The truce only lasted for 3 years and following Matilda's death Robert spent several years traveling through Europe, siring several illegitimate children.

1087

In 1087, King William died. He had wanted to disinherit Robert of everything but was persuaded by his advisors to divide Normandy and England between Robert and William Rufus. Robert gained Normandy. In 1088, several Norman Lords in England rebelled against King William Rufus. They appealed to Robert for support but he failed to turn up in England and the rebellion failed, when William Rufus attacked and captured Rochester castle. We know that Rufus had summonsed the local Fyrd to support his attack on the castle. This is the first recorded use of the Fyrd under Norman rule.

1096

In 1096, Robert raised an army and went on Crusade to the holy land. In order to finance his expedition, he mortgaged the Duchy of Normandy to William Rufus for 10,000 marks.

Robert returned from the crusade in 1100, the same year that King William Rufus was killed in a hunting accident in the New Forest. He learnt that Henry had claimed the throne and that he was now King Henry I of England.

1101

In 1101, Robert landed at Portsmouth with an army but he failed to gain support from the English population and Henry, who was popular with the Barons forced Robert to sign a treaty at Alton, in which Robert recognised Henry as King. We also know that Henry had summonsed the Fyrds to deal with Robert, should it have been necessary.

1105

Relations between the two brothers did not improve, and in 1105, Henry invaded Normandy with an English army consisting of Norman knights and the English levies, the Fyrds.

1106

In 1106, The English army defeated Robert's army at the battle of Tinchebray and Normandy became an English possession. Robert was taken back to England and imprisoned in Devizes castle for 20 years. He was then taken and imprisoned in Cardiff castle, where he died in 1134. He was in his eighties and is buried in Gloucester Cathedral.



TOMB OF ROBERT CURTHOSE - GLOUSTER CATHEDRAL

THE BATTLE OF THE STANDARD (NORTHALLERTON)

22ND AUGUST 1138

The first battle between and Anglo-Norman army and Scotland.

In 1138, King Stephen was on the throne of England. This period is known as the anarchy as there was civil war between England and Normandy which would only end in 1153.

King David of Scotland saw an opportunity to seize English territory, whilst King Stephen was fighting against rebels in the south. He led an army of some 26000 men. David was also supporting his niece, Matilda, a daughter of Henry I, who was married to the future Holy Roman Emperor, Henry V. Matilda believed that she had a claim to the English throne.

On hearing of the Scottish invasion, Stephen sent a small force, commanded by William Aumale northwards. His force was too small to confront the Scottish army and as he went north he was joined by the English fyrds from the midlands.

Thurstan, the Archbishop of York summonsed the Fyrds of Yorkshire which soon joined with the forces of Aumale. A large cart carrying the flags of the minsters of York, Ripon, Beverly and Durham accompanied

the Anglo-Norman army as they deployed for battle on Cowton Moor, near Northallerton, in Yorkshire. The English army numbered about 10000 men, mostly Anglo-Saxon militia.

Part of the Scottish army had already raided as far south as Lancashire and they had defeated an English force at the battle of Clitheroe before returning to Yorkshire and joining the main Scottish army.

The Chronicler Richard of Hexham wrote the following.

An execrable army, more atrocious than the pagans, neither fearing God nor regarding man, spread desolation over the whole province and slaughtered everywhere people of either sex, of every age and rank, destroying, pillaging and burning towns, churches and houses.

For the sick on their couches, women pregnant and in childbed, infants in the womb, innocents at the breast, or on the mother's knee, with the mothers themselves, decrepit old men and worn-out old women, and persons debilitated from whatever cause, wherever they met with them, they put to the edge of the sword, and transfixed with their spears; and by how much more horrible a death they could dispatch them, so much the more did they rejoice.

Remember what they did in the lands across the Tyne, and hope for nothing gentler if the Scots conquer. I am silent about the slaughter, the rapine, the fires that the enemy employed in something like a human way. I would tell such acts as no stories tell and no histories relate of the fiercest tyrants. I would tell them, I say, if words did not fail before such horror, or the listener flee. They spared no age, rank or sex. The high born, boys as well as girls were led into captivity.

Then (horrible to relate) they carried off, like so much booty, the noble matrons and chaste virgins, together with other women. These naked, fettered, herded together; by whips and thongs they drove before them, goading them with their spears and other weapons. This took place in other wars, but in this to a far greater extent.

The Scottish army

The Scottish army was now reduced to some 16000 men, with David having had to leave garrisons at Carlisle, Wark and Bamburgh. Garrisoning these locations as well as losses incurred at Clitheroe and by desertions had reduced his army by 10000 men.

The Scots initiated the battle by having the Galwegian spearmen charge the English shield wall. The Galwegians, men from Galloway, famed for their savagery led the first charge having demanded that position of honour from King David. The attack failed as the English had deployed archers and their arrows caused devastation amongst the Galwegians. Two of their leaders were killed, Domnall and Ulgric, along with hundreds of their men.

Another chronicler records that the men of Galloway looked like hedgehogs as the arrows thundered into them

The Archbishop, Thurstan, stood on the cart carrying the Holy banners, cursing the Scots and imploring the English to slaughter them. This battle would be named the 'Battle of the Standard' and the 70-year-old Thurstan would ensure that history would record his deeds for prosperity.

The men of Lothian and the Highlands broke under an English counter attack and the Scottish army began to flee. The English slaughtered them in their thousands. King David and his personal retinue fled the field. The battle had lasted for just three and a half hours.

The Scottish dead numbered some 12000 men whilst English losses are only described as light.

The aftermath of this first battle between the Scots and an Anglo-Norman army resulted in a truce between the two Kingdoms. King Stephen allowed David to keep Carlisle and

The site of the battle of the Standard (Northallerton) 1138

Cumberland as long as he gave homage to the English King. This arrangement stayed in place for over 20 years.

Despite a humiliating defeat, the Scottish King achieved his aims as he was granted the territory that he initially wanted but his successor, Malcolm IV prudently gave up Carlisle and Cumberland to Henry II, knowing that England was no longer burdened with civil war and that her territories in France were secure.

He knew that England would now be a powerful and unbeatable enemy so he acquiesced to paying homage to Henry and to acknowledging him as his overlord.

The Battlefield Today

The battlefield today is still farmland and the high ridge as shown above, is where the Scottish army positioned themselves. The battle monument lies in a layby some two miles from Northallerton on the A167. The land has changed since the battle and farmland now lies where once there were areas of bog.



The Battle of Northallerton monument



Scot's pit lane, a sunken highway at the time of the battle was utilised as a mass grave with the dead Scots being thrown into it and then the embankments were collapsed over them. Human remains have been recovered here though no official archaeological examination has yet taken place.

The battlefield and what is believed to have been the position of Thurston's wagon with the four Ecclesiastical banners were positioned. This site is known today as Standard Leeze.

