



FLODDEN MEMORIAL.

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## FLODDEN.

BY JOHN CLARKE.

THE "Tale of Flodden Field" has been familiar to most of us since our schooldays. It may have been that the dramatic action and human interest overlaid and obscured in great measure the topographical factor. The latter alone is the relevant aspect of the subject for this *Journal*. Yet the poem is on the whole accurate in its description of the scene and of the course of events, including the chief historical figures and the part played by each. Indeed the identification of sites in later times and the restorations based on it have largely adopted Scott's narrative as their guide.

Flodden is a name of sad memories, but not one of which Scotland need feel ashamed. Never have Scottish loyalty and Scottish valour been more sorely tried, and never have they responded more heroically. The issue it is true was trivial, when the freak of a crazy knight-errant is weighed against the independence of Scotland. But in outcome, Flodden had been Bannockbourne had Scotland had a sane leader, not to say Wallace wight or well-skilled Bruce to rule the fight.

A fortunate accident afforded an opportunity of visiting the ground—all too hurriedly, it must be admitted—on May 2, 1931. The approach by the Tweed valley from Galashiels past Melrose, Kelso, and Coldstream enabled one to observe afresh from a new angle features already familiar along the banks of the "slow and silent stream," as it here



presents itself, and by the pastoral vale through which it winds its "fruitful fishy" way. The river with its affluents may be said to contain the clue to the movements of most of the Border warfare of olden times, no less than to the peaceful pursuits of to-day. Geographically mountain takes precedence of river, which derives from it alike origin, supply and current. But for the immediate purpose it may suffice to recall the fact that the basin of the Tweed is the main theatre of Border history and romance.

Rising at a height of 1,500 feet, the Tweed in its course of 96 miles has an average fall of little over 15 feet per mile. It is thus a noiseless and peaceful stream, suggestive of "quiet waters," and incidentally also of "pastures green," little in keeping with the strife and turmoil of which it has so often been the witness. Its gentle murmur is the very echo of

Flow on, sweet river, till I end my song.

In its progress it absorbs successively the Ettrick (cum Yarrow), Gala, Leader (or Lauder), Teviot, Till, and Whiteadder (cum Blackadder), together with endless "Waters," the burns that issue from every glen and dale. Its general direction is easterly, with an inclination toward north in its lower reaches. The Gala, Leader, and Whiteadder join on the left or north bank, the others on the south. The lower course of the river is through a broad, fertile strath originally known as the Merse, having its "going out" on the east at Berwick, where the waters drawn from Hart Fell at last mingle with those of the North Sea. Peebles, with Neidpath Castle hard by, is the first town of note situated on the river; then comes Selkirk, really on the Ettrick but so close to its junction with the main stream as to be included—in fact one of the most famous of the "tweed" towns. A little way down is Abbotsford, and after that, in succession, are Galashiels, Melrose (with Bemersyde not far off), St. Boswells (with Dryburgh close by), Kelso, Coldstream, and finally Berwick. Every name is a centre of interest. Excellent viewpoints are afforded by the numerous adjacent hills, notably by the Eildons. They command the whole valley of the river from Selkirk and up the Ettrick on the



west to Berwick on the eastern horizon. The indicator which crowns the central and highest peak also supplies the key to the many famous names of the Borderland. From Flodden Field itself the triple peak can be clearly discerned, even through the haze of the afternoon sun at its back, at a distance in direct line of  $21\frac{1}{2}$  miles.

The topography of Flodden connects chiefly with Coldstream and the Till, which falls into the Tweed two or three miles below it. It is a little above Coldstream that the Tweed becomes the boundary between England and Scotland.

The Till is thus a Northumbrian stream. It has its source right behind, i.e., south of, the Cheviot, whence it circles round the eastern extremity of the range. Blocked of direct exit seaward by the low ridge of north-eastern Northumberland, which faces toward Holy Isle and the Farnes, it turns north to discharge itself, as already seen, into the Tweed. Close to the junction with the latter stands Twisel (locally pronounced Twy-) Bridge, one of the focal points of the battle. Flodden Hill, on which prior to the fight the Scots were encamped, lies south-east of Coldstream at a distance of five or six miles. It is the last spur of the Cheviots eastward as they drop towards the Till valley. Piper's Hill, on which the monument stands, is a little round toward the west and north, close to the village of Branxton (or Brankstone). It faces north and is approached by a short, steep ascent from the plain between it and the Tweed. This is the only side from which it is accessible by an army.

The whole position is somewhat reminiscent of the commanding Dunbar heights, from which in a later age Leslie, against his better judgment, was coerced by his clerical associates to descend, when "the Lord" delivered him into Cromwell's hands and the tender mercies of the Ironsides. In the Flodden débâcle it was the lord paramount who was the responsible agent.

It is no part of the geographer's task to describe the battle. For that, reference may be made to "Marmion," always worth re-reading, and the historians, of whom there is no lack. The main action, and such strategy as preceded

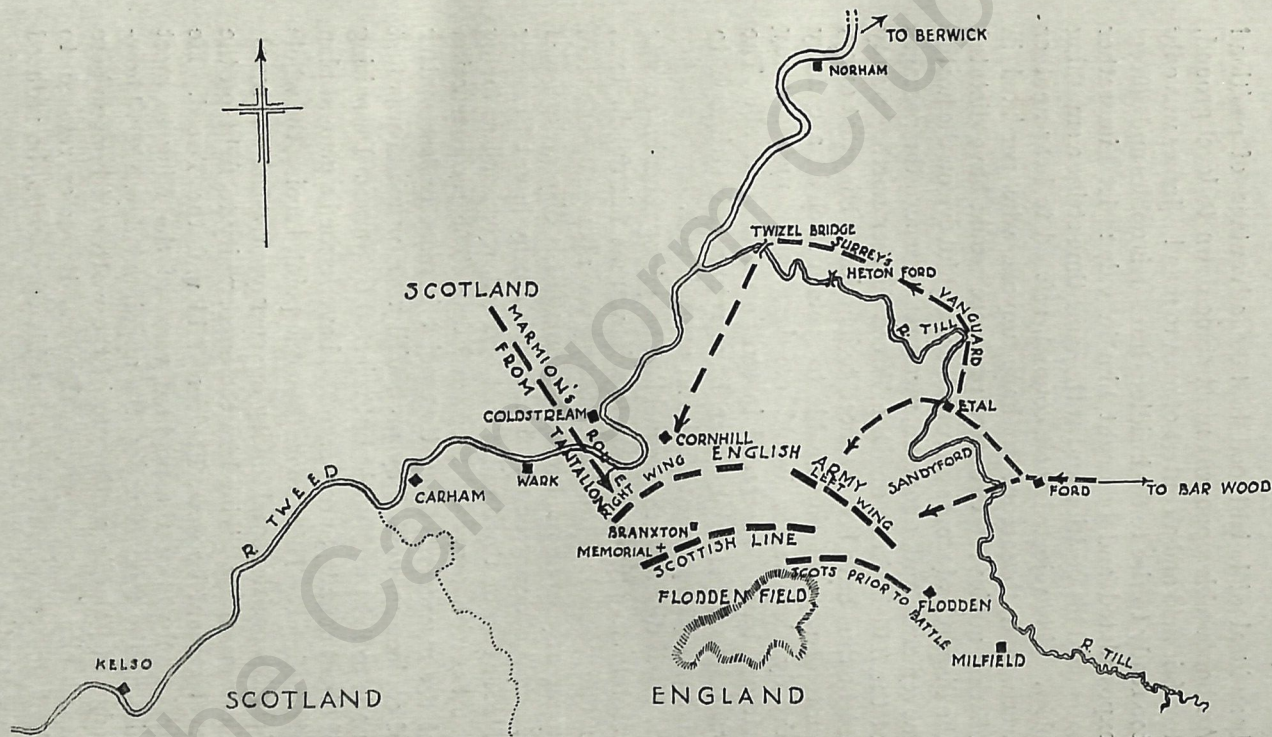


it, may perhaps be most readily understood by means of a sketch plan of the ground. (See opposite page.)

The movements of the opposing forces are not always easy to determine, and some of them prior to the battle, which vitally affected the issue, are in part conjectural. In the first place, the part played by the witching Lady Heron is not altogether beyond dispute. She is popularly supposed to have been a sinister influence, but whether she was the Delilah that led to James's ruin must remain matter of speculation. So much is certain. In absence of her husband, the castellan, she was found by him at Ford, a place which, together with Norham and Wark, he had at great sacrifice of time captured in his preliminary operations. Her society proved very attractive, and he spent much time in it. A very competent investigator, who has comparatively recently examined all the evidence, pronounces the charge of more intimate relations between them "not proven." That still leaves strong and justifiable ground for suspicion. The character of the Scottish monarch and his record on similar occasions previously, unhappily afford too much presumption of its truth. At any rate, there seems little doubt that the wily lady insinuated herself into James's confidence, ascertained, probably delayed, his plans, such as they were, and at the critical moment slipped off to her own people. The most probable inference is that she was able to reveal essential portions of the Scottish military dispositions, which enabled Surrey to act accordingly.

Not wholly unconnected with this was another determining factor, the King's quixotic ideas of knightly honour. Surrey, it may be recalled, was coming from the south-east, with large forces gathered chiefly from the northern counties of England. Finding the invaders encamped in a position almost hopeless of direct attack, he set about playing on the vanity of the foe. James's chimerical notions of chivalry gave him the opportunity. He had challenged James to meet him on a certain date, and the Scottish monarch had agreed. Now he claimed equality of conditions, a recognized rule of the tournament. It was unworthy of the





SKETCH PLAN OF FLODDEN FIELD.

beau-ideal of knighthood to take advantage of position ! An honourable opponent must come down to level ground, to a fair field and a contest of man to man ! James was only too ready to rise to the insidious lure. His nobles and officers expostulated and besought him in vain : let him rather safeguard his position and at the same time strike a smashing blow. He rejected their counsel, refused to hear another word, and threatened to hang anyone who persisted in offering advice ! Ordinary prudence would have dictated the dispatch of scouts all round, a watchful eye on the hostile movements, and, above all, measures to secure the passages of the Till in front and the Tweed further north. Surrey might thus have been reduced to inaction. His great army, short of supplies and unable to sustain itself in a country already devastated, would ere long have melted away without having succeeded in striking a blow at all. The victorious King might then have returned in triumph to Holyrood, honour satisfied and army intact.

How different the sequel ! The young Lochinvar was resolute to prove as dauntless in war as faithful in love, but he scorned precautions. Surrey was allowed unmolested, apparently even unobserved, to make his dispositions and choose his own ground. The English army lay at Barmoor Wood, two or three miles east of Ford, more or less facing the Scottish army on Flodden Edge. The reconstruction of the movements from that point is more or less matter of conjecture, guided by probability. A proposal was first made to fight at Milfield but rejected by James. Despairing of direct assault, Surrey seems to have formed a general plan of crossing the Till at more than one point, turning the whole Scottish position, and forcing the enemy, or, what was much the same thing, giving him the opportunity to fight on the level ground between Flodden Hill and the Tweed. He might rely upon the plighted word of the King to meet him at the rendezvous on the appointed day. His knowledge of James's sentiments in the matter of honour here stood him in good stead. Besides, if James refused to fight, his army must soon, like his opponent's, be reduced to starvation.



At the same time, a feint may have been made by Surrey of the invasion of Scotland by crossing the Tweed below Coldstream. The most charitable view of James's inactivity in face of the possibility of being surrounded is indeed that it was due to uncertainty as to the enemy's real intentions. Did the latter mean to face the encounter as he had professed? Or was he playing a double game, his real design being to cross the Tweed and invade Scotland? Even, however, in this event James might have kept a watchful eye on him, hurried north along parallel lines, and crossing the river above Coldstream, have headed off the invader east.

What actually happened was that he waited upon the English without taking any effective step to ascertain their intentions or frustrate their plans. Surrey got all he desired, accomplishing his object according to plan at his own time. So James rose—one can hardly say awoke—on the morning of September 9, 1513, to find his position turned, the English ranged in front and flank. He had got his heart's desire, he had no advantage, fair or unfair, over his opponent.

The topographical interest centres chiefly round Surrey's movements leading to the position now occupied by the two armies. Moving from Barmoor Wood he had apparently done what only the supineness of the foe, if even that, could justify, divided his forces in face, and possibly in sight of, the enemy. His right wing he had sent round north to cross the Till by Twisel Bridge, while he had thrown the rest, probably the main body, of his forces across the stream at a ford or fords higher up and, therefore, nearer the Scottish position. The name Sandyford, as well as Ford itself, indicates the site of one of the crossings. The Scots would appear to have concurrently, or a little later, slewed round their battle front toward Branxton Hill, in front of which is Piper's Hill, the eminence on which the memorial cross now stands. But "the auld carle in a carre," an ancient Foch in this regard, had got his pincer grip. One wing was right between James and Scotland, the other on his flank. The condemnation of history has concentrated



itself on the King's fatal blunder of allowing the enemy to cross the Till unmolested. But it is practically certain that Twisel Bridge was not within range of the Scottish ordnance. It was on one of the higher fords, probably Sandyford or Ford, that the master gunner, Borthwick, had trained his cannon, which on pain of death he was forbidden to fire.

Incidentally the disposition of the English right wing affords an explanation of the ease with which Marmion in the story was able to join his own army. Escaping from "the lion in his den" at Tantallon, he had hurried south over the Lammermuirs, and crossing the Tweed at the dangerous ford above Coldstream, he found himself among the rearguards of his friends. There was no *tour de force* such as the youthful imagination may on first perusal of the poem have supposed. It may also be observed that "Norham's castled steep," with which "Marmion" begins, is a little further down the river, so that the opening and the closing scenes of the poem effect a unity of place. To Marmion's view on crossing the river

Their marshal'd lines stretch'd east and west,  
And fronted north and south.

The latter was the English line.

The rest is soon told. James must fight or flee. But was it to be thought of that the *preau chevalier* should shrink in face of the foe? "The better part of valour" might even yet have saved the situation. The Scots after their fashion might have eluded the toils. They might have slunk off through the hilly ground to south and west, to reunite at some safe meeting place nearer the capital, and so have lived to fight another day. But the die was cast, and the monarch rushed to his doom.

No part of James's life became him so well as the leaving of it. That is literally true and only just. He fought with heroic valour, and by his example he inspired his followers to deeds of bravery never surpassed. The foe had most cause to know it, and derived no great joy from his victory. The King's body, covered with many wounds, was next day



found among heaps of slain in the thickest of the battle. The result, if a disaster, was no disgrace to Scotland. It was more or less indeed a drawn battle, at least until the King's death was known. Even then, the English were so crippled that they were unable to follow up their success.

The echoes of the battles long ago may still stir a sympathetic regret. The wail of wives and sweethearts is even to-day repeated in the sad tones of the *Flowers of the Forest*, surely one of the most poignant laments the world has known. War is war whatever its age and folly is folly whoever its author. But, thank Heaven! the former things are passed away. The old, unhappy far-off times can no more return. Carham, close by Flodden, had been the scene of a still earlier clash of nations, nor is it to be denied that both learned lessons of mutual respect from meeting foemen worthy of their steel. But Celt and Sassenach are now at one. The federation is, and has long been, complete. Scotland in her own end of the island tries to keep that end, if not uppermost, at least on level terms with her more richly endowed sister. But it is in goodwill and service, not in the strife which entails common destruction. "Olim noster, nunc fratres" fitly symbolises the changed parts.

On the battlefield stands a Celtic cross of Aberdeen granite, with a base of rough blocks of the same material, the total height being 18 feet 6 inches. It is surrounded by an enclosure of eight granite posts joined by stout iron bars, the area being in all 66 square yards. The general effect may be judged from the accompanying reproduction of a photograph. The cross bears the inscription: "Flodden, 1513. To the Brave of both Nations. Erected 1910."

[Cordial thanks are due to the City Engineer, Mr. T. F. Henderson, for the accompanying sketch plan, and to the Rev. C. E. Hoyle, Branxton Vicarage, for much kindly assistance, including the revision of the proof.]