

At the Point of the Sword: archaeology and the Battle of Culloden

by Tony Pollard, Glasgow

There was no better test-bed than Culloden, the last battle fought on British soil, for the nascent discipline of battlefield archaeology when this was introduced to Scotland ten years ago. The final showdown between the Jacobites and the British Army, popularly remembered as the Hanoverians, took place on 16 April 1746, on what is often imagined to be featureless moor east of Inverness, in the highlands of Scotland.

Eye-witness accounts

The site is well preserved, thanks to its rural location and the care of the National Trust for Scotland, and the battle involved military technologies likely to leave a recoverable signature in the topsoil, in the form of lead musket balls, cannon shot, buttons, buckles etc. Another attraction of Culloden was the wealth of documentary evidence, with the mid-18th century seeing an upsurge in literacy levels and military bureaucracy. Thus we have at least half a dozen maps of the battle drawn by people who were there, letters from combatants, action reports and even magazine and newspaper articles. These, it was hoped, would provide a historical framework within which archaeological data could be assessed and comprehended, and also eye-witness accounts which could be tested through forensic analysis of the battlefield. There are numerous history books on the Battle of Culloden, and we wanted to use archaeology to challenge some of their interpretations.

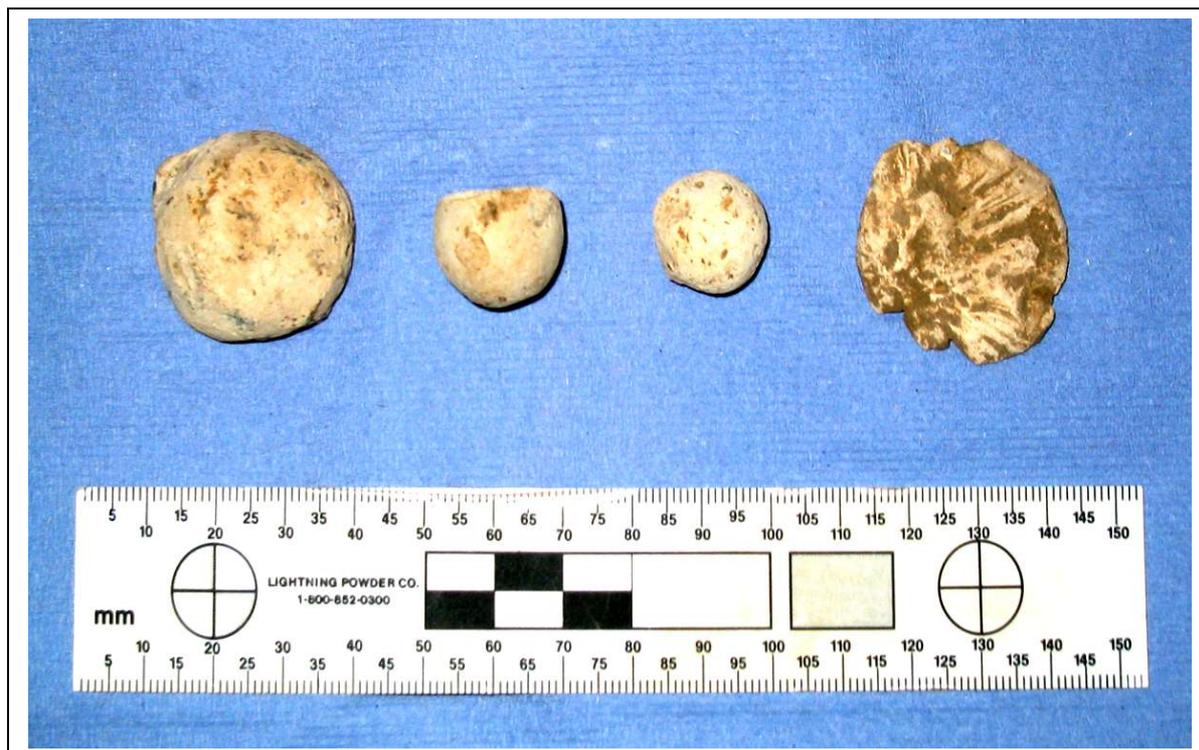
Vicious hand-to-hand fighting

The first opportunity to apply a multi-faceted methodology to the site came in 2000, with BBC's *Two Men in a Trench*. Filming the first episode of that ground-breaking series involved topographic survey, metal detector survey, geophysics and limited excavation. The fine-grained topographic survey revealed a landscape which, far from being the 'level playing field' portrayed in many histories, contained undulations and ridges which helped to explain why the battle unfolded as it did. We now know that the Jacobite charge veered to the right because it followed a ridge of high ground which provided sure footing and some cover from incoming fire. A scatter of musket balls, broken weaponry and other debris marked the location of the vicious hand-to-hand fighting which occurred where the Jacobite charge hit the left of the Hanoverian line – establishing that interpretation markers were in the wrong place. Another misconception

was exposed when a structure believed to be the ruins of a barn put to the torch with Jacobite wounded inside it was exposed to be nothing more than a 19th-century walled kitchen garden.

Ensuring accuracy of interpretation

The National Trust for Scotland enthusiastically took these results on board, and when the decision was made to build a new visitor centre archaeology was seen as a way of ensuring accuracy of interpretation and display. So it was, that in 2005 and 2006 the Centre for Battlefield Archaeology at Glasgow University was commissioned to carry out a more detailed investigation. The return to the site yielded a fresh swathe of revelations. These included the realisation that the Jacobites had been using a greater amount of musketry than previously believed (Jacobite musket balls were slightly smaller than those of the Brown Bess used by Hanoverian troops). The ferocity of the Jacobite attack on the left flank of Hanoverian regiments was brought to light by fragments from mortar shells close to where the hand-to-hand fighting took place – these explosive bombs had been fired over the heads of the front line into the mass of Jacobites in a desperate attempt to push them back. Once again, geophysics shed light on buildings present during the battle and shown on the contemporary maps, leading us to remains of a long-demolished structure.



Various types of lead projectiles (from left to right - grape shot from cannon, Brown Bess musket ball, Jacobite musket ball and flattened musket ball which has hit something solid. © T. Pollard.

The project demonstrated how techniques could augment one another. Viewed together, the geophysical and the metal detector surveys may have located unmarked graves of Hanoverian soldiers, though this discovery has yet to be tested. Analysis of the finds has also advanced our understanding, with experimental firings of muskets and cannon providing a fascinating insight into the deformation and impact damage displayed by the lead projectiles which have been recovered in their hundreds. In 2008 the new visitor centre opened, and the recovered artefacts took pride of place. It is however the landscape of battle which has undergone the most striking transformation, with footpaths and markers now highlighting the correct locations of various actions.



A socket from a French (Jacobite) bayonet. © T. Pollard

Culloden has become an international flagship for the investigation and display of battlefields but, more than that, it is a laboratory in which the techniques of battlefield archaeology continue to be refined.

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