

Clarity and myth

Elsbeth Mackay and Mike Spearman look at the challenge of interpreting the battlefield at Culloden, where the last hand-to-hand battle in Britain was fought in 1745. The battle, and the uprising by Bonnie Prince Charlie that it brought to an end, are iconic events in Scottish history. Sometimes mistaken assumptions about them have become a part of national myth.

Few people today arrive at Culloden unburdened by presumptions. Descendants come to honour their ancestors and to see their ancestors honoured. Tourists visit to have their perception of Scotland confirmed. Students test their knowledge against what is presented on site. But on the battlefield, where thousands stood and fought, and where over 1500 men are buried, there is relatively little to see. It is down to interpreters to enable visitors to connect with their past in a way that satisfies their particular emotional need and which clarifies, rather than destroys, their preconceptions.

In developing the new visitor centre at Culloden, the National Trust for Scotland wanted to:

- challenge some of the dearly-held myths about Culloden,
- tell the story in an engaging and balanced way,
- do this with authority,
- enhance the battlefield and war graves' special atmosphere.

So how are we challenging the myths and national stereotypes of Culloden? And how are we doing this without offending or destroying visitor's cherished beliefs? Culloden was part of a civil war – the uprising of 'the '45' – with vast amounts of political spin. The exhibition attempts to explain that, and to provide insight into both Government and Jacobite propaganda while giving a balanced account of what actually happened. The opposing walls of the exhibition carry, against a single timeline, the views on one side of the Whig Government and on the other of the Jacobites. We have marshalled an unprecedented range of evidence for what was happening on both sides and we have let the evidence speak – often literally – for itself.

Within the exhibition, the story of the '45 is personalized by over fifty eyewitness accounts dramatised in English, Scots and Gaelic. John Roy Stuart expresses his doubt over the decision to invade England. John Daniel, an English Jacobite, is concerned about his horse's welfare in cruel winter weather. Mathematician Colin MacLaurin despairs over Edinburgh council's botched attempts to defend the city against the imminent Jacobites. As well as providing a 'handshake' with the past, these stories challenge some of the myths about Jacobite and Whig loyalties. We hear from humane Whigs, such as Duncan Forbes, and brutal Jacobites, such as Lord Lewis Gordon. On the battlefield we hear from Donald Campbell of Airds, a Gael, who describes the slaughter

of the Jacobites as 'the pleasantest sight I ever beheld'. The different languages and accents present a picture of the '45 as a multinational event. They draw attention to the wide range of people involved, and reveal that the story is nowhere near as clear cut as the English/Scottish confrontation of popular myth.

Objects provide a rich physical context for what the visitors will hear and read. The first and last thing visitors will see as they enter and leave the exhibition is a set of bagpipes, which belonged to a piper from North Uist. A key Jacobite object, surely? Maybe, or maybe not: this piper is thought to have been on the Government side. In just one object we show that across the Highlands, loyalties and families were divided; that objects of the '45 were treasured by their owners; and above all that, although changed, Gaelic culture was not destroyed by Culloden.

But the primary exhibit is of course the battlefield itself. Over the past ten years the Trust has worked to restore the site as far as possible to the moorland of the battle. To promote reflection, and in keeping with the site's status as a war grave, the Trust has kept physical interpretation on site to the minimum. Flag lines, relocated in line with recent archaeological discoveries, help to orientate the visitor, while low-level pathway panels provide basic interpretation of the key events of the battle.

For those that want more, a portable interpretive tool, triggered by GPS, is being developed as part of a three-year programme of work. This is not being undertaken lightly. Portable technology has and will continue to change rapidly, but the particular nature of Culloden Battlefield means that only a tour using this technology will provide the levels of interpretation needed without burying the site in panels and markers. The tour will include both audio and visuals, but we also want to give visitors the chance to look around them; to see the heather and hear the wind. The ultimate aim must be to tie all that they have seen in the new centre with the site of the battle itself, and to bring it alive through their own imagination.

*Dr Mike Spearman and Elspeth Mackay are members of CMC Associates, who are developing and managing the exhibition content and AV elements for the NTS's new visitor centre at Culloden. [http:// www.cmcassociates.co.uk](http://www.cmcassociates.co.uk)
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