Session Three – Age of Conflict

EDWARD I and THE CAPTURE OF BERWICK

On the evening of 19th March 1286, Thomas of Ercildoune (Earlston), known in the Borders as Thomas the Rhymer, was dining with the Earl of Dunbar.

Story of Thomas the Rhymer

The Earl of Dunbar asked his guest if he could foresee any matter of importance in the offing for the next day.

Thomas is said to have replied: "Alas for tomorrow, a day of calamity and misery! Before the twelfth hour shall be heard a blast so vehement as shall exceed those of every former period – a blast that shall strike the nations with amazement – shall tumble what is proud, and what is fierce shall level with the ground! The sorest wind and tempest that was ever heard in Scotland!"

That very night, King Alexander III fell from his horse over a cliff at Kinghorn in Fife, leaving no male heir. The struggle for the Crown that followed was indeed to create a storm that would bring calamity and misery to Scotland, and an end to Berwick's Golden Age.

Alexander's only surviving heir was his infant grand-daughter Margaret, known as the Maid of Norway. Six guardians were appointed by the Community of the Realm of Scotland to run the country until she came of age.

In 1290, at the age of 7, Margaret set off in a ship from Norway for her coronation in Scotland and Scottish and English barons met near Coldstream to arrange a marriage between her and Edward, the heir to Edward I of England.

Margaret never made it to Scotland. She died in Orkney, leaving thirteen conmtenders for the Crown she never wore.

Recognising the feudal superiority of Edward I, based on the homage done by earlier Scottish Kings to the Norman kings of England, the bishop of St Andrews appealed to Edward to decide the matter that had become known as the "Great Case".

The first phase of the contest took place at Norham Castle in May 1291, where the serious players were whittled down to three – John de Balliol, Robert de Brus and John de Hastings – all of Anglo-Norman ancestry.

The final round was held in Berwick Castle in 1292, when King Edward chose John de Balliol, the great, great, great grandson of King David I.

Two years later Edward I called on Balliol to lead an army of Scottish knights to support his feudal overlord in his war in France. Balliol dithered and a year later a dozen Scottish barons took control secured an alliance with France, which became known in time as "The Auld Alliance".

This treaty between Scotland and France did not go down well with Edward. Added to this, England was effectively conducting a trade war with Flanders to protect the interests of the English wool and cloth industries. The continuing supply of raw wool from the Tweed Valley to the weavers in Flemish towns like Ghent and Bruges was a constant cause of aggravation for Edward I and he demanded the expulsion of French and Flemish merchants from Berwick.

Although Berwick's burgesses welcomed the wealth that foreign traders brought to the town, visits by English ships to the Tweed were greeted with increasing enmity. Matters came to a head in 1295 when, apparently without provocation, a gang of Scots attacked English ships in the harbour, slaughtering their crews and burning the vessels with their cargoes.

Edward I was not a man to be taunted. He wanted a military solution. In the spring of 1296, he came northwards and assembled a huge army of more than 25,000 foot soldiers and 4,000 cavalry at Wark Castle.

As the English marched along the Tweed Valley to Berwick it was said that the baggage train stretched for some 20 miles.

Edward made his headquarters in the chapter house of the Cistercian nunnery of St Leonard. His army took up positions on the foot of Halidon Hill and the area where Newfields stands today, while the English fleet entered the Tweed to attack the castle from the river.

The siege lasted only a short time. Berwick's defences were little more than a ditch and wooden palisade. It was reported that some of the English knights just rode over them.

At least 7,000 died in the ensuing slaughter. A chronicler wrote that "blood streamed from the bodies of the slain so copiously that mills could be turned by the flow."

Among the last to hold out were the 30 Flemish merchants in their Red Hall by the quayside, before they were finally overwhelmed and put to the sword. Berwick Castle was surrendered soon afterwards and there, on 5th April, Edward received John Balliol's official declaration of homage.

Edward sent for ditchers, masons, carpenters and smiths from all over England to strengthen Berwick's defences. The White Wall, or "Breakyneck Steps" running down from the castle ruins to the riverside today is one of Edward's works.

The capture of Berwick began an almost constant state of war between the English and the Scots that lasted for more than three centuries.

In its early stages, the conflict was virtually a civil war as Anglo-Norman barons with loyalties and estates on both sides of the Border struggled to decide which of their feudal sovereigns they would support with their military service.

For example, Robert de Ros held the barony of Wark on Tweed. He threw in his lot with the Scots – for the love of a Scots lady it was said. His uncle, William de Ros informed Edward I and Robert was declared a traitor. His estates in England were forfeited and were passed on to the loyal uncle. Robert de Ros died in exile, apparently abandoned by his lady-love. In 1317, after years of fighting that almost bankrupted both branches of the family, the Ros's swapped the barony of Wark for an estate on the Welsh Marches instead.

John Balliol was soon captured and stripped of his regalia as King of Scots.

In 1297, William Wallace, son of a Renfrewshire knight, stood up for John Balliol from his base in the heart of the Ettrick Forest around Selkirk. He won a stunning victory against the English at Stirling Bridge and was hailed as the sole Guardian of Scotland. The Scots took the town of Berwick soon afterwards, though the castle remained in English hands. They quickly abandoned the place in the face of a strong English relief force.

Edward established Berwick as his seat of government in the Borders and set about gaining pledges of loyalty from the Scottish lords, who were made to fix their seals to the document that came to be called the "Ragman Rolls". His campaigns in Scotland gained him the nickname the "Hammer of the Scots".

BANNOCKBURN- EDWARD II and ROBERT THE BRUCE

The devious politics of Scotland threw up a great national hero, Robert the Bruce, grandson of the Robert de Brus who was an unsuccessful claimant to the throne of Scotland in 1292.

At first, Bruce had supported Edward I against John Balliol, but he switched sides to join William Wallace in 1297. In 1306, he murdered his way to the throne and was crowned by at Scone by his cousin, Isobel the Countess of Buchan.

Within a few months, Bruce's fortunes were waning. He had lost several battles against the English, his brother had been captured and executed, and his cousin, the Countess of Buchan was imprisoned in Berwick Castle – displayed in an iron cage it was said, until she was released into the care of the Carmelite nuns in Berwick in 1310.

Edward I continued to "hammer" the Scots until his death in 1307. He was succeeded by his son Edward II, who was not made of the same stuff as his father.

After a few half-hearted forays into Scotland, Edward retired to a more comfortable life in the south. Gradually, Bruce began to gain the upper hand in Scotland and, by 1313, only Berwick and Stirling remained in English hands.

Edward II came northwards in the early summer of 1314 and gathered a large army at Berwick. On 17th June, Edward led 20,000 men on a fateful march to relieve Stirling. Bruce met him at Bannockburn, within sight of the beleaguered English garrison in Stirling Castle. Bruce's tactics won the day and Edward fled back to Berwick.

Berwick held out against the Scots until 1319. Edward II made an attempt to recapture it, but he was repulsed and Berwick remained in Scots hands during the ineffectual rule of Edward II. Northern England collapsed into a state of near anarchy and the Scots were able to maraud at will throughout Northumberland and Durham.

FAMINE AND DISEASE

During the 14th century, the people of the region not only suffered a period of almost constant warfare, but also a number of natural disasters.

Between 1100 and 1300AD Western Europe had enjoyed excellent weather conditions. The climate was about 3 degrees higher than today. However, conditions deteriorated from about 1300 until the early 19th century, a period known as the "little Ice Age" Between 1315 and 1322 the atrocious weather conditions resulted in a succession of failed harvests and widespread famine.

To make matters worse, there were recurring outbreaks of an animal disease known as "murrain" which affected both cattle and sheep. When Edward II attempted to recapture Berwick in 1319, it was reported that "all the oxen being led to the siege of Berwick Castle died suddenly". Two years earlier, the monks of Holy Island were complaining that the amount of tithes of wool and lambs could not be ascertained "for the sheep are everywhere dying".

The miserable conditions continued until the death of Edward II and the Treaty of Edinburgh/Northampton in 1328, which brought a brief period peace.

Robert the Bruce died in the following year and was succeeded by his 6 year old son David II.

In 1332, Edward Balliol, son of the dispossessed John Balliol, seized the throne of Scotland with the support of a group of exiled Scots barons.

EDWARD III and THE BATTLE OF HALIDON HILL

The following year, Edward III arrived at Berwick with a strong English army, in support of Edward Balliol. The three-month siege that followed became known as the Great Siege" of Berwick.

Edward III threw everything at the town, including the first recorded use of cannon against a fortified place in Britain. Huge siege engines were brought by shop from York and the siege was supervised by John Crabb, a Flemish engineer.

Finally, Sir Alexander Seton, the Governor of Berwick was obliged to negotiate terms of surrender. To secure a truce, Seton gave up his sons Thomas and Alexander as hostages. On hearing that a Scots relief force was close by, he withdrew his offer of surrender. The furious King Edward II hanged Seton's sons within sight of the town walls, at a spot still known as "Hang-a-dyke Neuk" and threatened to continue executing hostages each day until the town was given up.

Seton was forced to enter into a new agreement that the town would be surrendered, unless by 19th July the Scots won a pitched battle or inserted a force of at least 200 men into the town by an agreed route across the Tweed.

On 18th July, in the nick of time, the Scots relief force commanded by Sir Archibald Douglas was seen approaching the town from Norham. The English army was drawn up on Halidon Hill, which guards the approaches to the town from the North and the West.

The opposing forces took their positions the next morning.

Before the battle began, a giant Scots champion, Ralph Turnbull challenged the English to send forward a knight to fight him in hand-to-hand combat. Turnbull had his great mastiff dog at his side as a young knight from Norfolk, Sir Robert Benhale accepted the challenge and moved to attack. In a David and Goliath contest, Benhale first struck down the vicious dog then killed Turnbull outright.

Soon afterwards, the Scots began their advance up the hill, but they were hit by a storm of arrows. Halidon Hill was the first major battle where the longbow proved its effectiveness as the "machine-gun" of its day – the forerunner of Crecy and Agincourt. It was a one-sided fight. One account recorded the losses on the Scots side as 30,000, with only one English knight, one squire and 12 foot soldiers killed!

As a result of Halidon Hill, Berwick was surrendered to the English and the town lost its status as a Scottish Royal Burgh in 1338.

In 1349, the Black Death arrived in the Tweed Valley – the Scots borderers called it the "English Pestilence". Perhaps 30% of the population of Berwick died.

Anglo-Scottish warfare continued, on and off, for the next 150 years, complicated at times by politics and civil war in England.

A Scottish army advanced on Berwick in 1355, but the walls were too strong to attempt a frontal assault. Thomas Steward, Earl of Angus, devised a commando-style raid. Under cover of darkness, he landed with 200 men from the sea at the Meadow Haven, surprised the sentries at the Cow Gate and quickly took the town. The castle also fell to the Scots soon afterwards. Realising they could not hold the fortress for long, they destroyed what they could and burned the flooring and the drawbridge.

Within a few months, the Scots abandoned Berwick when King Edward marched northwards with a strong English army.

Despite the ravages of warfare, disease and famine, Berwick was thriving again under English rule. Successive English kings continued to grant the rights to the burgesses of Berwick that they had enjoyed under the Kings of Scotland.

It was at this time when Peter of Lannercost described Berwick as "a city so populous and of such trade that it might justly be called another Alexandria, whose riches were the sea and the waters its walls".

The town walls were 35 feet high and up to 17 feet thick, with 19 towers.

Despite these massive defences, 7 Scotsmen managed to capture Berwick Castle in 1377. They took it by surprise, even though the Earl of Northumberland and Sir John Gordon, the Wardens of England and Scotland, were in the town at the time, negotiating a truce. When, eight days later, an English army of 10,000 arrived to retake it, the Scots had been reinforced to the number of 48. The Castle was quickly stormed and it is said that the first Englishman, or boy over the walls was the 12 year old Henry Percy, earning him his nickname "Harry Hotspur".

The Scots burned the town of Berwick in 1384 and the castle was taken, probably betrayed by its governor in return for a bribe, but it was soon returned to the English for a payment of 200 marks

In 1461, during the Wars of the Roses, Henry VI handed Berwick to the King of Scots in return for his giving him sanctuary as he fled from his Yorkist enemies.

The town remained in Scottish hands for twenty years, but its fortunes declined and its trade decreased. Berwick was never again to be compared with Alexandria. In the 13th century, the revenue from trade in the port amounted to £2,000 a year. In 1461, the total was only £21 and never exceeded £200 in the next two decades.

In 1482, Berwick was decisively and finally captured by Richard, Duke of Gloucester, the future King Richard III.

The town was to remain permanently in English hands, although the Treaty of Perpetual Peace, agreed in 1502 by Henry VII of England and James IV of Scotland, acknowledged Berwick as an independent borough "of" England but not "within" it.

"Perpetual Peace" lasted for all of eleven years! In September 1513, the armies of the two kingdoms met on Flodden Field, when James IV became the last British monarch to die on the battlefield.

Berwick became established as a garrison town and the operational base for the English armies that constantly harried the Scottish Borders.

The devastation was at its most ruthless during the so-called "Rough Wooing", which accompanied Henry VIII's attempt to persuade the Scots to agree to the infant Mary Queen of Scots marrying his son, the future Edward VI. The campaigns of 1544 and 1545 resulted in the destruction of the great Border abbeys at Kelso, Dryburgh, Melrose and Jedburgh, and the torching of towns, villages and farms throughout the Tweed Valley.

Record show that in 1545 alone the English "burned, razed and cast down" 7 monasteries, 16 towers, 5 large towns, 243 villages, 13 mills and 3 hospitals in the Borders.

In 1551 Berwick was made a self-governing "county corporate" and, by the end of the decade, Queen Elizabeth I was on the throne of England and the massive circuit of ramparts and bastions was under construction to ensure the town would never again fall into Scottish hands.

THE WARDENS OF THE MARCHES

In the decades that followed Flodden, Berwick was the headquarters of the Lord Warden of the English East March.

The borderlands of England and Scotland were divided into Marches, three on each side of the Border – the West, Middle and East Marches.

Each March was governed by an officer appointed by his respective monarch.

On the Scottish side, the office of Warden was all-but hereditary, held by the Maxwells and the Johnstones in the West March, the Scotts in the Middle March and the Humes in the East March.

On the English side, the notable families that held Wardenships included the Dacres, Greys, Nevilles and Percies. However, rebellions by the northern lords in the reigns of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I prompted fears that a too-powerful Lord Warden could negotiate his own terms and hand over the North to the Scots. In the early 16th century, it was said that the people of Northumberland would obey "no prince but a Percy". This led to the practice of the Wardens' posts being given either to relatives or to men who did not have major dynastic powers in the region. The Prince Bishops of Durham was also seen as a counter-balance to the powerful northern lords.

Since the 13th century, the Borders had its own system of March Law to regulate the return of fugitives, recovery of debts and the resolving of cross-Border disputes. If an Englishman was robbed by a Scot, he would complain to his March Warden, who was obliged to summon the accused to the next Wardens' Truce Day or Tryst.

These matters were dealt with at meetings held at agreed places on the Border. Tryst sites on the Tweed included the ford at Norham, Wark, Carham and the Redden Burn.

Anyone travelling to or from these Wardens' Trysts was supposed to be safe from attack or arrest until sunrise the following morning.

THE BORDER REIVERS

During the last thirty years of the 16th century, in particular, the borderlands were virtually lawless, despite the efforts of the Wardens and their deputies.

This was the heyday of the Border reivers, the men who kept their families by robbing their neighbours on either side of the Border of their moveable "gear" – horses, cattle and sheep. The verb to "reive" means to take a possession. The ultimate possession is a life – hence "bereavement".

"Blackmail" is another word that originates in the 16th century borderlands.

Reiving became a large-scale business and few in the region living more than a few miles from the walls of Berwick could sleep soundly in their beds.

As late as 1597, the village of Kilham in the Cheviot foothills suffered an attack on a poor man's house and his cattle were stolen. The Kilham men gave hot pursuit and took three wounded prisoners and recovered the cattle. However, an escaped Scots reiver returned the next day with 40 men. They were beaten off and two further prisoners were taken. Within two hours, over 100 reivers came to the village. One Kilham man was killed, seven moiré left for dead and others less severely wounded. The Scots prisoners were released and the cattle taken acoss the Border.

Primary loyalty in the borderlands was to the "headman" of the family. Many of the reiving families, or "riding surnames" spread on both sides of the Border like the Armstrongs, Croziers, Dods, Elliots, Halls and Nixons.

Fierce family quarrels led to feuds which sometimes lasted for decades. The Herons and the Kerrs were at feud for over 60 years, the Kerrs and Scotts for 26 years and the Scotts and Elliots conducted what was effectively a small war that began with a Scott being accused of stealing an Elliot's sheep.

The end of the days of the Border Reivers was signalled by the Union of the Crowns of England and Scotland in 1603, when James I of Scotland became James VI of England on the death of his cousin Elizabeth I.

In March1603, King James VI/I visited Berwick for three days on his journey to be crowned in London. He was greeted with enthusiasm, and more usefully with a gift of gold sovereigns from the burgesses of Berwick. To prove the changed situation, the King of the newly united kingdoms inspected the garrison, knighted two local gentlemen and fired a cannon from Brass Bastion.

The Border was effectively done away with. King James wanted to rename Northumberland "Middle-shire" and royal officers were ordered to set about clearing out the nests of reivers in the borderlands.

Some families were fortunate. They were friends with the king at the right time. So the notorious Scott of Buccleugh became the very wealthy and respect Earl of Buccleugh (the greatest landowner in Scotland today). The equally naughty Kerrs became the Earls of Roxburghe, adding an "e" to their title to distinguish them from the defunct ancient royal burgh of Roxburgh, without an "e".

Berwick-upon-Tweed was able to settle down to a peaceful life and a modest recovery of its trade, under the governance of the burgesses of the Guild.