

## MOSSES, MAPS AND MUSKET BALLS: PINPOINTING THE LOCATION OF THE SHERIFFMUIR BATTLEFIELD

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### Introduction

This paper presents a summary of the results of an archaeological survey carried out by the author in 2006 in an attempt to establish the exact location of the Battle of Sheriffmuir, fought between government and Jacobite troops on 13 November 1715 in the Ochil Hills above Dunblane. The project was funded by Scottish Hydro-Electric Transmission Ltd and SP Transmission Ltd in advance of the construction of the 400Kv overhead power-line between Beauly and Denny.

The results of the fieldwork and associated research were first outlined in a preliminary 'grey literature' report by the author (2006a) and then in a published paper resulting from a battlefield archaeology conference in Halle, Germany (2009a), with the present contribution drawing especially heavily on the latter. Despite the previous appearance of much of the following the author is pleased to have the opportunity in the year of the battle's 300th anniversary to revisit the discussion and offer updated information where appropriate in a publication local to the battlefield.

### Historical Background

With the death of Queen Anne in 1714, sister of Mary and the last Stuart monarch to reign (William and Mary having died without issue), and her replacement by George of Hanover all hope of a peaceful Stuart restoration was lost. The scene was set for a Jacobite 'rising', the first since 1689, one in 1708 having failed thanks to the interception of a French fleet by the Royal Navy off the east coast of Scotland. Conflict was fomented further when John, 6th Earl of Mar, who had served both William and then Anne, was denied royal favour by George, in part for his Tory affiliations. Mar returned to Scotland and in his *chagrin* raised the Stuart royal standard at a gathering of the clans at Braemar on 6 September 1715. In return, James Stewart, who probably only learned of Mar's intentions after the event (Szechi 2006: 99), showed him favour by confirming him as commander in chief, a post that had been expected to be held by Atholl, and raising him to the Duke of Mar. Thus, the 1715 rebellion was set in motion. The Jacobite cause quickly gained momentum.

The Jacobites took Perth without struggle and there the army grew. By October, Mar had well over 7,000 men under his command. On the government side it was left to the Duke of Argyle (*sic*), who unlike Mar was an experienced soldier, to put down the rebellion. Taken somewhat by surprise, the government

army in Scotland at the time totalled only around 3,500 men. But the Jacobites did not intend to confine their operations to Scotland, and in late October some 2,000 Jacobites under MacIntosh of Borlum joined with a force of English Jacobites at Kelso, though not before they had failed to take Edinburgh castle on their way south. The English campaign was to be confined to the north as the network of Jacobites tasked with rising for James in the southwest were either arrested or fled before they could be. The combined Scots-English force got as far as Preston before they were forced to stand and fight. The battle, which in reality was a short siege, lasted from 12 November to 14 November. After a bitter struggle the Jacobites were forced to surrender just the day after the battle of Sherrifmuir had sealed the fate of the cause in Scotland.

After leaving Perth on 10 November, the Jacobites under Mar, numbering some 6,290 foot and 807 horse (Historic Scotland Battlefields Inventory) halted on the eastern banks of the Allan Water around three kilometres to the north of the small town of Dunblane, to the immediate north of which Argyle's government army was camped. On the morning of 13 November the Jacobites approached the high ground of Sheriffmuir to the east of the town from their position on Kinbuck Moor. The long, upward march in formation, which required a move into column from line and then back into line again, proved too much for some elements of the inexperienced army and coherence was lost by the time they reached the top of the moor. The government force under Argyle, consisting of 2,200 infantry and 960 dragoons, advanced onto the moor from Dunblane in the west. Due to topographic features, including marshy ground, poor lines of sight and the hurried nature of the advance both armies outflanked the other's left (Reid 2004: 115-117).

On the Jacobite right, a charge, which went in after a delivery of musket fire, threw back the government left wing as it was taken in the flank, with the Jacobites pursuing them off the field to the south and east. On the Jacobite left the opposite occurred; a government charge by the dragoons put the left and centre into retreat – though contemporary accounts suggest that their departure was a little less rapid than that of their government foes on the other side of the field. With a running fight stringing out to both north and south the field was essentially abandoned. The retreating Jacobites fought their way back as far as the Allan Water, the government pursuit ceasing only once the crossing was made. Refugees from the government left flank ended up as far away as Stirling but the Jacobites had given up pursuit long before then.

When Argyle and Mar, who were heading the respective successful wings, returned from their forays, the Jacobites took up position on the hilltop and the government army in enclosures at the bottom of the hill. The day was drawing on and with a general unwillingness to re-engage, the battle drew to a close. Casualties on the Jacobite side are thought to be around 250 killed and wounded and on the government side, around 700 killed and wounded – around 600 were killed overall with the greater proportion being government troops (Historic Scotland Battlefields Register).

The battle is usually referred to as inconclusive, but there can be little doubt that Mar's failure to take the initiative and press home a second attack when the government army was still in disarray led to the failure of the short term strategic aim of the campaign, which was to cross the Forth and occupy the commercial and political heartland of Scotland. In turn, this failure led to the slow fizzling out of the uprising in the face of a continually reinforced government army. Even the arrival of the James from the continent in December was not enough to resuscitate the cause. But the Jacobites had only to wait until 1719 to rise again, though this time with Spain, not France as their ally.

### **Locating the battlefield**

Just as there have been long standing debates surrounding the location of battlefields such as Bannockburn, historians have also disagreed about the battlefield of Sheriffmuir, with no less than five sites proposed. In truth though, these are within the same general area and not scattered about the landscape as much as the alternatives suggested for Bannockburn. Not surprisingly for a battle fought in 1314 there are no maps for the battle of Bannockburn, but the same might not be the case for a battle fought in 1715, by which time military cartography was a developed field (Pollard 2009b). However, there are no known contemporary battle maps for Sheriffmuir, nor is there a written account giving the locational information to be found on a map. A map in the National Map Library of Scotland (MS.1645.2.3/45b: not reproduced here), drawn up just after the battle, shows the initial Jacobite position on low ground near the Allan Water. Rather frustratingly, annotations on this sheet inform us that there is a second half of the map which depicted the actual battle location on the moor, but this sheet went missing long ago (Pollard 2006a).

Most historians place the initial battle lines to lie west of the Sheriffmuir Inn. Some have proposed an east to west orientation for the opposing battle lines (Reid 2004; Inglis 2005; Szechi 2006), while others favour a north to south orientation (MacKay 1898; Seymour 1979; Smurthwaite 1995). In addition, these writers also provide slightly different battle locations. The uncertainty may at first appear inconsequential to anyone but the fastidious military historian, but recently, the need to know the core of the battlefield's exact location became a key issue when it was proposed to run a high voltage power line across the area. It would obviously have been beneficial to be able to gauge the threat, if any, posed by this development to the site and any archaeological remains that might exist, including graves. Pinpointing the battle's location is probably the most basic function that archaeological survey techniques, such as controlled use of metal detectors, can perform, and so, putting this claim to the test, the present author was commissioned to do just that at Sheriffmuir.

The exercise was to prove the true value of combining documentary research, topographic survey and metal detector survey as part of a focused research strategy. Though there is a lack of contemporary battle maps, which contrasts with the battles of Glenshiel (1719) and Culloden (1746), there is a

relative wealth of battle accounts, from participants on both sides, including the commanders, Mar and Argyle. Other accounts passed down into local oral tradition, and some were collected in the 19th century. One such account came from *'An old woman, then residing at the farm-house of Linns, in the immediate vicinity of the scene,'* who *'used to tell that she saw eleven red coats killed on her own midden – the poor fellows defending themselves to the last...'* (Monteath 1885: 18). As the farm of Linns still exists in the landscape today, this account may provide an important clue as to the location of the lines and indeed their orientation, as it was the government left that fled and it is this incident which appears to be described here.

A further source of information is provided by a contemporary painting of the battle which has been reproduced in a number of histories (e.g., Smurthwaite 1995; Inglis 2005) but has never been given serious consideration as a possible source of evidence for the battle's location. The identity of the artist is currently a subject of some debate, with John Wootton and Peter Tillemans variously suggested (Wills pers. comm.). Whoever the artist might be, the painting is generally agreed to have appeared quite soon after the battle and represents an important contribution to the portfolio of battle paintings from the Jacobite era, which also include depictions of the battle of Glenshiel (1719) and Culloden (1746), the former by Tillemans and therefore possibly by the same hand.

Although the painting shows the armies' lines arrayed with parade ground neatness, which was far from the reality, there are touches of detail, which do suggest familiarity with the events of the battle. The government army is shown in the foreground still marching past the Jacobite line, presumably having turned off the road to the left, where the line is outflanked by the Jacobite right. Very much in accord with eyewitness accounts, the Jacobite right is delivering fire into the government dragoons opposing them.

Close correlations between the actual and painted landscapes at Sheriffmuir were noticed by the author. A similarity is seen between the hills in the background of the painting and the road which runs down its left side, on which the Jacobite right and government left flanks are anchored, and the range of hills to the east of the site and the old road which can still be seen today as a footpath skirting the north side of the field, to the west of the MacRae monument (Plate 4a – photo taken from west). This appears to be the same road which is shown on the 1766 Division of Commons map by J. Lesslie (Figure 1) running to the south of the Gathering Stone and to the north of Linns. The date of the present road to the west of the MacRae monument is somewhat uncertain (the old road and new road merge at the MacRae monument but further to the west the newer road runs roughly parallel about 200 metres to the south of the old road, at least in the vicinity of the survey area – Figure 2). The newer road first appears on the 1817 map of the Kippendavie estate, which clearly shows it running past Stonehall Farm (this map is not reproduced here). Whenever it came into being, it does not appear on the

painting, which shows a distinct bend in the road which could be taken to correspond to the site of the MacRae monument built in 1915 (Plate 4b).

There is no trace in the modern landscape of the substantial ditch which runs alongside the road in the painting. This might represent one of the mill lades which appear on the 1766 Division of Commons map and the 1817 estate plan. On the 1766 map (Figure 1) two lades are shown, running parallel to one another in an east to west direction. The most northerly of these is marked as 'vestages of an old Water lead to Ardnbee Mill, Kippandavie', while the one not far to the south is labelled, 'Mullins new water lead to Kippandavies mills.' Of the two, the most likely to be on the moor at the time of the battle is obviously the old lade, which, as in the painting, runs quite close to the road. The new lade also appears on the 1817 estate plan and then on the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey map of 1866. This later feature can still be seen today as it passes across the moor to the east of Linns (running through Area 3 in Figure 2) and in places has been recently re-cut as a drain.

The apparent relative accuracy of the features depicted suggest that the artist might have visited the battle site, although this does not necessarily mean he portrayed the battle in the right place within the landscape. But based on this interpretation of the landscape, as depicted by the painting, the opposing sides would appear to be oriented north to south. This position accords with the locations of the initial battle-lines previously proposed by several historians (Smurthwaite, MacKay and Seymour), though matching most closely to MacKay's and Seymour's placements.

The assumption that the painting depicts a view which could be relocated in the landscape motivated the next stage of the survey. This was an attempt to recover evidence for the delivery of fire from the Jacobite left, which according to contemporary accounts must have resulted in the deposition anywhere on the field of the most concentrated quantities of musket balls, and which therefore might provide a location which could be tied down archaeologically through metal detector survey.

Some idea of the heavy nature of this fire can be gleaned from a description of the situation on the Jacobite left by a government officer, Colonel Blackadder: *'The Highlanders fired by ranks each rank retreating and not in platoons. They were fifteen man deep. My Lord Argyle seeing this disposition and that they did not endeavour to outwing him though so numerous concerted with Major Cathcart who commanded the Grays that he should march to the right leaving about 100 paces open and so flank them as they stood 15 man deep'* (Steuart 1910: 70-71). It should be noted that Blackadder was the commander of the Glasgow Militia, which during the battle was tasked with protecting Stirling Bridge, so his accounts of the fighting, though collected almost immediately, are second hand. The annotation to the contemporary map notes that in forming the Jacobite second and first lines became confused and *'made but one line 6 or 7 men deep'* (MS.1645.2.3/45b). This heavy fire from the Jacobite left is also alluded to by

others. Rae, drawing on various accounts states: *'The Highlanders, as was there custom, begun the fire, levelled particularly at the Dragoons (the weight whereof fell most up Evans's, which made that brave corps reel a little) was as good, perhaps as ever came from any disciplined troops'* (1718: 305). Rae is the only person to place a time on events, stating: *'...the constant fire of the Platoons of Foot in less than half an hour, put the Left Wing of the Front Line and the whole of second line of rebels to the rout'* (ibid: 305).

Rae's 'The History of the Late Rebellion,' published in 1718 is important because it is in part based on interviews with those present. Frustratingly, neither book includes a map of the battlefield though the author does make reference to a plan (which could be the 1715 map discussed above).

If a north to south orientation is assumed, then a likely location for the Jacobite line was along a ridge which runs south of the Macrae monument and rises to the west from the Linns field. This area fits well with the painting and would certainly provide an advantageous position for the Jacobites, giving them a slope down which they could launch one of their infamous Highland charges into the face of their foe (a reputation most obviously earned at the Battle of Killiecrankie in 1689).

In order to test this orientation, a metal detector transect was established on the south end of the ridge, commencing on the ridge itself and running down slope to the west. The transect location was in part dictated by gaps in the vegetation and also influenced by the presence of a watercourse that ran down the slope from a marshy depression. Many accounts mention a morass, which disrupted the Jacobite left, preventing the deployment of the cavalry on that wing and forcing the infantry to stand in deep ranks. It was hoped that the transect would provide at least some impression of the Jacobite fusillade in the form of musket balls and perhaps the government assault in the form of horseshoes shed during the charge up the relatively gentle slope. Alas, not a single find related to the battle was recovered.

To maximise the possibility of recovering evidence, a second transect was set up on the same orientation further north. Once again, not a single relevant find was made. It is possible that the musket balls landed on the level ground at the base of the ridge slope, which unfortunately at the time of the survey was covered by a screen of trees. Beyond the trees in the field itself, just two musket balls were recovered from a transect running along the eastern edge of the field (Area 1 on Figure 2). These might have been fired by Jacobites on the ridge but the fact that only two were recovered is not suggestive of the massed volleys fired by the Jacobite left into the oncoming dragoons.

This absence of battle material related to the action on the Jacobite left did not fit with the orientation of the battle lines portrayed in the painting, which of course may have been subject to some artistic licence by the painter. Counter to the earlier argument for accuracy in 18th century battle paintings, it would

not be the first time that an artist had taken liberties with the landscape when depicting a battle. In his depiction of the battle lines at Culloden, for instance, Thomas Sandby, who was at the battle and created a very accurate map, chose to depict the view from the north but showing the Moray Firth in the background to the south, when actually it was to the north of the battlefield. This movement enabled Sandby to not only show the battle to best advantage but also the British fleet anchored in the Firth.

Although it is important to note that the metal detector survey's extent and location was in some cases severely limited by the availability of suitable ground, large tracts of which are today covered by conifer plantations or tall grasses and dense moorland vegetation, the total absence of finds did cast doubt on this north to south orientation for the battle lines. The field at the base of the ridge, occupied by the farmstead at Linns did contain some battle-related artefacts, with the first survey transect running across it containing musket balls, a complete horse bit, and several coins and buttons. However, the dispersed patterning of this material was suggestive of peripheral action, possibly related to the retreat of Argyle's left, rather than the intense fighting expected closer to the initial action.

In order to expand these early results, the survey was extended to the field north of the modern road (Figure 2). The old road, apparently used by the government army to get onto the moor, and thought to be depicted in the painting, runs along the field's northern edge. After finding three musket balls on a single transect running through the centre of the field, it was decided to detect as near 100 % of the field as possible. Five more musket balls were recovered: local information suggested that more had been recovered in the past by a metal detectorist. Other finds that could be associated with close quarter fighting, including buttons were also recovered here. A number of horseshoes possibly dating to the time of the battle were encountered. Horseshoes are problematic as they could be expected to appear in any farmer's field. At Sheriffmuir, however many horseshoes appear to be of some antiquity, on the basis of their rough and ready style. They were certainly present in far greater numbers than one might expect for a typical field, on the basis of many metal detector projects carried out across agricultural land in the UK. Perhaps tellingly, the horseshoes were accompanied by two broken snaffle bits, one of them from close to Linns farm, which might indicate violent action. They are certainly not something usually lost in casual use.

Overall though, relatively low concentrations of battlefield material were recovered from this part of the site, and their location and character suggested that they related to the retreat of the government's left flank. Perhaps the most striking find was a silver shilling of William III, which dates to around 1695-1700; it is not possible to be more specific in date as the coin is well worn, with only the top of the king's head visible (Plate 5). Despite its poor condition, or perhaps because of it, the coin is of some interest as it possibly represents an example of the proverbial 'king's shilling' given to a recruit when he joined the

army. Some soldiers kept these pieces as charms and this appears to have been the case here, with the coin rubbed almost flat between its owner's fingers; similar examples have come from Culloden and the site of Fort George. There seems little doubt therefore that this coin was dropped by a government soldier as he fled the field; it may even mark the site of his death.

The pattern building up in the detected fields certainly tied in with the accounts which referred to a running fight, which given its location around Linns seems associated with the collapse of the government left. However, the evidence was not enough to establish the two armies' orientation, as the government line could effectively swing through the pivot point provided by the left, not far, from the foregoing, from the Macrae monument, which could therefore lie either north to south or east to west.

### **The Morass (Location B)**

The earliest known map, the 1766 Division of Commons, depicts the traditional 'crossed swords' symbol for a battle site not far south-east of the Gathering Stone and north of the old road. The Gathering Stone is a collapsed prehistoric standing stone today popularly associated with the location of the Jacobite standard, which was known in 1766 as the Karlingstone. Although either location A or B could be interpolated from this pinpoint location (which does not show battle lines), the only morass shown which was likely to have interrupted the Jacobite left's deployment (the Black Moss of Cairnstoun) would place the Jacobite line in Location B. No areas of moss or morass are shown in the area corresponding to Location A, although a series of water courses shown running off the moor here might suggest wet ground and there was some indication of this during the survey.

The position of the morass or moss, which appears to be quite extensive, in relation to the roads on the moor (as shown on the map) suggests that it was not far from the Sheriffmuir Inn, the construction of which post-dates the map. It should be noted that no areas of morass or moss are shown on the mid 19th century 1st Edition Ordnance Survey map in either location. The location of the moss/morass suggested by the 1766 map would place it somewhere in the forest north and west of the Inn. Even at the time of the survey in 2006, the ground within this woodland was so wet and mired as to make passage down firebreaks and through clearings almost impossible, with considerable standing water in places. It therefore seems likely that this overly wet ground corresponds to the moss shown on the 1766 map.

In different circumstances, the Jacobites could have used the morass to their advantage, protecting their left, but the fact that the government army was matching them in line almost as soon as they crested the hill gave them little opportunity to pick their ground. However, the ground did not make the fight on the Jacobite left a walkover for the government right, as Anstruther, a government dragoon, describes: *'...my horse got on end and his hind feet sunk in*

*the marshy ground we were formed which made him fall back upon me and I concluded he had been killed dead but he immediately got off me, I kept the reins and got him mounted again with great difficulty for the balls were flying so thick that the horse did not stand long in one posture and I had the good fortune to escape with some bruises'* (quoted in Inglis 2005: 48).

The Division of Commons map may also hold a further vital clue to the exact location of the armies when battle commenced. In his account of the battle General Whitman, who was in command of the infantry on the government right and followed up Argyle's pursuit of the Jacobite left, wrote: *'The right of their line, which vastly out-wing'd us, lay in a hollow Way, which was not perceived by us, nor possible for us to know it, the enemy having possession of the Brow of the Hill; but the Left of their army was very plain to view* (Patten 1717: 159). Given the east-west location of the armies proposed above, could it be that the hollow way Whitman refers to is the 'old water-lead' shown in the location where the Jacobite right is likely to have been positioned. The lead crosses the road from the north, opposite the Black Moss of Cairnstoun and then runs in a roughly westerly direction to the north of the old road. Although a 'vestage' in 1766 it might well have represented a ditch of some substance in 1715, and thus provided some concealment for Jacobites as the government army marched across their front.

The reality of accepting an east to west orientation (location B) is that much of the battlefield had, at least in 2006, been lost beneath the tree plantations which then extended to the west of the Sheriffmuir Inn and surround the Gathering Stone. Pockets of archaeological survival do exist, as demonstrated by this project, but these in the main appeared to relate to the periphery of the main battle site.

Since the survey took place in 2006, a large area of forest (probably well in excess of 400 metres by 500 metres) has been cut down in the area to the west of the Sheriffmuir Inn. The impact of this clearance on the perception of space is dramatic, exposing as it has an impressive area of flat open ground with the capacity to accommodate large numbers of men in battle formations. This makes it much easier to envisage the core battle taking place in this location. Alas, an attempt to locate the mill lade shown on the 1766 map failed, the most likely conclusion being that thanks to the impact of forestry planting it no longer survives as a visible feature. Likewise an attempt to locate battle artefacts through metal detecting also failed. The destructive impact of forestry on battlefield remains has already been identified at Culloden, where not a single relevant artefact has been recovered from within the area formally occupied by forest (Pollard 2009a).

The importance of the peripheral areas should not however be underestimated as the battle of Sheriffmuir was characterised by running fights to which much evidence seems to relate. The retreat routes would certainly benefit from further investigation, with local accounts suggesting the

presence of burials in the vicinity of Linns, and large open areas suitable for detector survey still remain un-examined. With this in mind, it should also be noted that areas some distance from the core of the battle might also contain archaeological evidence for fighting. Most notable is the area close to the Allan Water, east of Kinbuck, where the Jacobites were hard pressed by Argyle's army as they tried to cross the river.

### **Afterthoughts**

The archaeological survey at Sheriffmuir resulted in the recovery of a low-density scatter of battle-related material from across a relatively wide area. When viewed in isolation it would be difficult to apply much in the way of a meaningful interpretation to this pattern. However, when viewed in conjunction with the written accounts, the cartographic evidence and the topography a clearer picture emerges. An east to west orientation seems far more likely than the north to south position suggested by the painting and some of the modern historical interpretations of the event.

This conclusion does not accord with the best visual correlation between the painting and the landscape, or rather, that was until it was pointed out to the author by local land-owner Richard Stirling-Aird that the hills in the painting may in fact represent a range some further distance away to the north west of the battlefield, a perspective which would make the orientation of the armies depicted as from east to west, as appears to have been the reality. Such a conclusion might also tie in with the depiction of a body of troops on one of the hilltops. These most likely represent Rob Roy's men, who according to tradition were positioned at Culling, near Cromlix, to the west of the battlefield, from where they observed events and remained neutral due to the apparent inability of either side to secure a victory (Reid 2014: 162). This location would certainly tie in with the hills in the painting being to the north-west of the battle rather than the east, as was first proposed, and therefore with the battle lines oriented east to west. This does, however, place the road in the wrong place, as it runs perpendicular to the alignment of the armies rather than parallel to them. What this latter point perhaps emphasises is that there will always be some artistic licence in such paintings and that too much reliance should not be placed on them as sources of information.

An unfortunate implication of this conclusion, that the battle lines were drawn up in position B rather than A, is that today the site of this initial encounter lies beneath forestry which covers the northern flank and summit of the moor. It may be possible to get a better impression of the landscape as it existed in 1715 if areas of forestry were removed: indeed at the time of writing trees were being cleared from the area of the Black Moss of Cairnstoun as the wet ground does not provide a stable foundation and the trees are prone to toppling in high winds. However, work carried out at Culloden (Pollard 2006b) has suggested that metal artefacts do not survive well in areas which have been previously commercially forested – the deep ploughing causes serious damage

and then the acid soils promoted by the trees can cause accelerated metal erosion. Pockets of archaeological survival do exist outside the forested areas but most of these are likely to relate to the pursuit of the right and left flanks by their opposing numbers.

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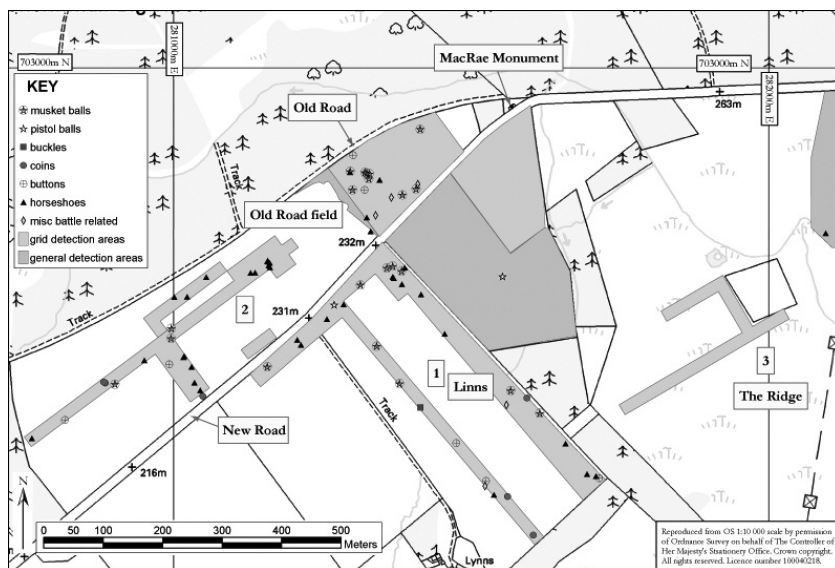


Figure 2. Areas surveyed and the finds.

