Investigating
The Wars of Independence:
1296–1357

The Wars of Independence is one of most exciting and important periods of Scottish history, and is widely studied in Scotland’s schools. Throughout Scotland today are the remains of many historic sites which bore witness to these events. This resource identifies those sites and shows how investigating the surviving historical evidence can inspire learning, help separate fact from fiction and bring the reality of this period to life for both young and old.

A statue of Robert the Bruce with Stirling Castle in the background
How to use this resource

This resource is aimed at teachers and designed to link classroom studies based on the Wars of Independence to the real historic sites where these events took place.

NB These notes are not intended to be copied and distributed to pupils.

The resource aims to provide:
• a clear indication of how visits to historic sites can bring to life a study of the Wars of Independence
• historical background information to the Wars of Independence for the non-specialist teacher
• maps and other information to show which sites are linked to the Wars of Independence
• information about potential historic sites to visit and other useful information.

Bringing the past to life

Historic Environment Scotland looks after many sites that saw action in the Wars of Independence or were involved in other ways. Visits to historic places fire the imagination and inspire learning. Pupils can stand on the site of a castle and experience the strategic position it holds. They can see the damage to buildings brought about by siege warfare and gain an understanding of what it might have been like to be trapped and under fire in a castle during the Middle Ages.

The list of sites on page 15 gives a brief summary of the involvement of each in the Wars of Independence and is intended to help you choose a site to visit which best supports your topic. It is also intended to raise awareness of important but lesser-known sites which may be on your own doorstep. Those in the care of Historic Environment Scotland are highlighted.

How to book a visit

Historic Environment Scotland operates a year-round free admission scheme for educational visits (except Edinburgh Castle and Stirling Castle where a charge is levied during May–August inclusive). To find out how to book a class visit please visit the Learn section of historicenvironment.scot or call us on 0131 652 8155.
Integrating a visit with a classroom study

Educational visits have the greatest value if they are built into the original planning of a topic. We recommend you plan your visit somewhere in the middle, giving your pupils time to become familiarised with the key characters involved and the events that took place there.

Before the visit
- Visit historicenvironment.scot/learn for more information about your chosen site and any site-specific or relevant themed resource material available. Many sites also offer programmes of curriculum-linked on-site activities.
- If possible, make a free planning visit before taking a class to your chosen site so that you familiarise yourself with the site and the evidence it offers. To book a free planning visit to Edinburgh Castle or Stirling Castle call us on 0131 652 8155. Planning visits to other sites can be booked direct with the site.
- In order to assess the extent of the learning which takes place, it is a good idea to conduct a benchmarking activity which records pupils' knowledge and understanding of the event and characters on which the visit focuses.
- Use the timeline (see page 6) to help pupils gain an understanding of at what stage of the Wars of Independence this event took place, who was involved and what the outcome was.
- With pupils, look at maps of the area around the castle and/or battlefields you are going to visit.
- Discuss with pupils why they think castles were built in that location and/or why battles took place in specific locations.
- Discuss with pupils what kinds of weapons would have been used and what the fighting would have been like.

Working on site
Your pupils' task should be to look for physical evidence of the site's involvement in the Wars of Independence.

As they explore the buildings, artefacts, plaques, statues and memorials commemorating battles or events, pupils can compile an evidence record in words and pictures about the site. The aim of the evidence record should be to encourage development of observational, descriptive and recording skills rather than to look for answers to specific questions which they can equally well find out from books in the classroom or online.

The evidence record can ask pupils to use the headings 'I see', 'I hear', and 'I feel' at chosen locations, to look for clues to explain what went on at the site, and to look for evidence of changes or damage to buildings. Pupils can record by:
- taking notes of factual information
- making quick diagrams of specific details
- taking photos of significant features or views
- using cameras or voice recorders to describe what they see, hear, feel and smell.

Suggestions for follow-up work
Following the visit your pupils should pool their findings to form a broad view of how the site they have visited featured in the Wars of Independence and what it would have been like for those who fought in the battles or were under siege in the castle. Pupils can be asked to look at the clues and work out what they definitely know and what they can reasonably guess.

This can form the basis for a wide range of language and Expressive Arts activities, such as role-play and drama, compiling their own guidebook or leaflet, or interviewing local historians/museum curators. These activities can:
- develop skills and techniques in language and the expressive arts
- consolidate and expand knowledge and understanding about people in the past
- help to develop informed attitudes about the ways in which our heritage is preserved.
Supporting learning and teaching

Citizenship, conflict and human rights

One possible introduction to a topic on the Wars of Independence could be to ask pupils:

- What causes people to fight? (In the school playground? In the street? In the world?)
- Who is involved? (Individuals? Groups of people? Countries?)
- What kinds of weapons do people use in war today?
- What is the outcome of war? (Peace? Political independence? Control of one country over another? Continuing unrest?)

The same questions can then start to be explored in relation to the Wars of Independence, providing a lead in to:

- why people fought in the Middle Ages in Scotland
- how and where people fought during the Wars of Independence
- who was involved in the Wars of Independence (Which individuals or groups of people? Which countries?)
- what the outcome was.

Learning activities that could support these themes include:

- looking at newspaper reports of modern conflicts to look at the reasons for conflict (for example disputes over land ownership, governance and natural assets or discrimination on ethnic or religious grounds)
- researching local evidence of the consequences of conflicts such as ruined buildings, plaques, statues, commemorative events, changes in local industries etc.
- using role play to 'try' William Wallace under current human rights legislation
- completing the Declaration of Arbroath illustrated activity booklet
- studying the timeline within this guide and creating a human timeline in the classroom through role-play
- making a model trebuchet using the guide in the 'make and create' page on historicenvironment.scot/learn
Timeline: the Wars of Independence

1292
John Balliol crowned King of Scots

1296
Edward I invades Scotland, defeats the Scots at Berwick and the Battle of Dunbar and marches unopposed up to Elgin

1297
Wallace and Moray defeat Edward I at the Battle of Stirling Bridge

1298
Edward I defeats Wallace at Falkirk. Robert the Bruce is made Guardian of the Realm

1305
Wallace is captured near Glasgow, later executed

1306
Robert the Bruce murders Sir John Comyn and is crowned King of Scots. He is defeated at Methven and flees into exile

1307

1312
Robert I invades northern England for the first time

1313
John Balliol dies in France

1314
Robert I defeats Edward II at the Battle of Bannockburn

1318
Robert I recaptures Berwick

1320
The Declaration of Arbroath

1322
The Treaty of Edinburgh between Scotland and England

1327
Edward II is murdered. Edward III becomes King of England. Scots invade England again

1328
David II returns to Scotland in exchange for a huge ransom

1329
Robert I dies. David II becomes king. Robert Stewart is made Regent

1332
Edward Balliol is crowned King of Scots at Scone but is driven out

1333
Edward III recaptures Berwick. David II is sent to France for safety

1337
David II invades England and is captured

1341
David II returns from France

1347
Edward Balliol invades Scotland, defeats the Scots at Berwick and the Battle of Dunbar and marches unopposed up to Elgin

1357
David II returns to Scotland.
After the Battle of Dunbar in 1296 Edward I of England marched northwards to Elgin. Castles captured by him changed hands many times during the Wars of Independence. This map shows some of the conflicts.

Major sites of conflict between 1296 and 1314

1. Battle of Dunbar (English victory) 1296
2. Berwick devastated by the English in 1296; recaptured 1314
3. Battle of Stirling Bridge (Scots victory) 1297
4. Elgin Castle captured by Scots 1297
5. Banff Castle captured by Scots 1297
6. Inverness Castle captured by Scots 1297
7. Urquhart Castle besieged in 1297
8. Battle of Falkirk (English victory) 1298
9. Stirling Castle captured by Scots 1299
10. Bothwell Castle captured by English 1301
11. Caerlaverock Castle captured by English 1300
12. Peebles Castle captured by English 1301
13. Selkirk Castle captured by English 1301
14. Dundee Castle captured by Scots 1312
15. Perth Castle captured by Scots 1313
16. Battle of Bannockburn (Scots victory) 1314
17. Edinburgh Castle captured by Scots 1314
18. Roxburgh Castle captured by Scots 1314
The Wars of Independence: historical background

How did the Wars of Independence start?
Although there had been previous conflicts with England, and occasional attempts by English kings to become overlord of Scotland, the country had effectively been at peace with England since the reign of Alexander II (1214–1249). He and his son Alexander III (1249–1286), were more concerned with the threat from Norway, which culminated in the Battle of Largs in 1263 and King Hakon of Norway’s death shortly after. Then, Alexander III felt confident to visit the English court and declare “for my kingdom of Scotland, none but God has right”.

In 1286, Alexander III was killed by a fall from his horse and the situation changed. His immediate heir was his seven-year-old granddaughter Margaret (‘Maid of Norway’) and when she died in 1290, King Edward I of England agreed to give a ruling on the person with the best claim to the Scottish throne, provided that his overlordship of the Kingdom of Scotland was recognised. Edward chose John Balliol (1292–1296) in preference to Robert the Bruce (grandfather of King Robert the Bruce) and Balliol was duly crowned King of Scots at Scone.

The First War of Independence (1296–1328)
The main characters were:
• John Balliol, the puppet Scots king
• King Edward I of England
• Sir William Wallace who led the resistance against England
• Sir Andrew Moray, Wallace’s co-leader
• Robert the Bruce (later King Robert I).

John Balliol failed to keep the agreement with Edward and made an alliance with France (the Auld Alliance), paying the penalty when Edward’s army invaded Scotland in 1296. Berwick, then Scotland’s chief burgh and port, bore the brunt of his wrath when two-thirds of the male population was massacred. The armed resistance which followed was inspired by several prominent men such as Sir Andrew Moray (in the north) and Sir William Wallace (in the south).
William Wallace (c.1270–ex.1305)

William Wallace was the younger son of a minor Scottish knight and landowner. Little is known of his life before the Battle of Stirling Bridge in 1297, but given his success in battle it is probable that he had some military experience.

There are no contemporary images of Wallace. Sculptor John Smith imagined him to look like this, carved in 1814 and erected at Dryburgh, Scottish Borders

A contemporary described Wallace: ‘There was a public robber named William Wallace, whom the king’s justiciar had exiled many times. He, since he was a vagrant fugitive, called all the exiles to him and made himself their prince – they grew to be numerous people. “(At Stirling) ‘the robber’ replied to the English, “Tell your men that we have not come for the benefit of peace but are ready to fight, to vindicate ourselves and to free our kingdom”’.

After Edward I invaded Scotland in 1296, deep resentments lay beneath the surface. Many Scots nobles were imprisoned, punished with very high taxes and expected to serve Edward in his military campaigns in France. The flames of revolt spread across Scotland and when Wallace killed William Heselrig, the English Sheriff of Lanark, men joined him ‘like a swarm of bees’.

From Wallace’s base in the Ettrick Forest (Selkirk), his followers struck at Scone, Ancrum and Dundee in the east. At the same time his co-leader, Sir Andrew Moray, took Inverness Castle in the north. Moray’s MacDougall allies liberated the west, Moray himself cleared the north-east and Wallace’s supporters drew strength from the south. With most of Scotland now liberated, Wallace and Moray faced open battle with the English.

The Battle of Stirling Bridge, 1297

Wallace and Moray fought a spectacularly successful battle against a better-equipped and well-trained English army at Stirling Bridge. The chronicle of John of Fordun describes what happened: ‘A battle was then fought, on the 11 September, near Stirling, at the bridge over the Forth. Hugh of Cressingham (the despised English treasurer) was killed, and all his army put to flight, some of them were slain with the sword, others taken, others drowned in the waters. But through God, they were all overcome, and William [Wallace] gained a happy victory, with no little praise’.

Stirling Castle, occupying the key strategic point between the highland and lowlands, was once again in the hands of the Scots. One month after the battle, Wallace and Moray were able to write about trade with the German Baltic ports of Lubeck and Hamburg: ‘Beseeching you that you cause it to be proclaimed among your merchants that they may have a safe access to all ports of the kingdom of Scotland, with their merchandise, because the kingdom of Scotland, thanks be to God, is recovered by war from the power of the English’.

Not long afterwards Moray died of his battle wounds. Wallace, rejected by the nobility of Scotland partly because he refused to fight by the normal rules of chivalry and ‘chose rather to serve with the crowd’, was left to carry on alone.

In 1298 Edward I returned to Scotland and won an unexpectedly easy victory at Falkirk. Lacking the Scots nobility’s cavalry support, Wallace’s brave venture was all but ended. He was restricted to guerrilla raids for seven years until his betrayal by fellow Scots and execution as a traitor in London in August 1305.
Robert the Bruce (b.1274–d.1329)

Whereas Wallace has been described as from ‘middling and common folk’, Robert the Bruce was Earl of Carrick, related to royalty and harboured ambitions to become king.

At first Robert sided with Edward I when his arch-rival John Balliol revolted, but he changed sides several times over the next ten years. In 1306, Robert made his bid for the crown when he murdered his chief political rival, John Comyn of Badenoch, before the high altar of Greyfriars Kirk, Dumfries. Robert was crowned king at Scone in 1306 but he made serious enemies of Edward I, the powerful Comyns and the Pope, who excommunicated him for committing a murder in a holy place.

Edward retaliated by sending an army to Scotland where Robert was heavily defeated at Methven. His troops were scattered, some of his most powerful allies were butchered and he was forced into hiding. But Robert persisted and a year later returned, gaining victories with the support of more powerful allies.

In 1307 Edward I died leaving instructions for his successor Edward II (1307–1327) to finish the conquest of Scotland.

The Battle of Bannockburn, 1314

Eight years after Robert’s coronation, Stirling Castle was still in the hands of the English. Until Stirling was retaken, Robert did not hold Scotland. As the English troops holding the castle were running short of supplies, the Governor, Philip de Mowbray, offered to surrender if not relieved by an English army by midsummer’s day, 24 June 1314.

The Chronicle of Lanercost describes it: ‘an evil, miserable and calamitous day for the English – after their advance from Torwood; the English in the rear could not reach the Scots because the leading division was in the way. And soon took to flight. They fell in great numbers and had to re cross a great ditch called Bannockburn. Many nobles and others fell into it with their horses in the crush, and many were never able to extricate themselves. The king and others to their perpetual shame fled like miserable wretches to Dunbar Castle and took ship for Berwick, leaving all the others to their fate’.

After Bannockburn, Robert ordered that all castles which had been held by the English and which could again be strategically valuable if the wars were resumed, were slighted (dismantled). Meanwhile, the war switched to northern England where Robert turned the tables, destroying towns, villages, churches, castles and crops, just as the English had done in Scotland.
The actual site of the Battle of Bannockburn is still in debate, but to date this is the best guess.

Map to show the position of the English and Scots armies at the outset of the Battle of Bannockburn.

Stirling Castle and Bannockburn from the air.

The Wars of Independence 1296–1357
The Declaration of Arbroath, 1320

In 1320, Edward II tried to gain the support of Pope John XXII by inviting him to reconfirm Robert’s excommunication, provoking a strong reaction from nobles, the Church and the Scots. A meeting took place and the Abbot of Arbroath Abbey drafted a declaration describing the treatment England served upon the Scots and how Robert brought salvation to his people:

‘through the safeguarding of our liberties … Yet, even the same Robert, should he turn aside from the task and yield Scotland or us to the English king or people, him we should cast out as the enemy of us all, and choose another king to defend our freedom; for so long as a hundred of us remain alive, we will yield in no least way to English dominion. For we fight, not for glory nor for riches nor for honour, but only and alone for freedom, which no good man surrenders but with his life.’

Although the Pope still refused to recognise Robert as king, he agreed to annul the excommunication.

After Arbroath

Edward II was murdered in 1327 and succeeded by Edward III. England was now growing tired of the war and in 1328 a truce was signed recognising Scotland as an independent kingdom and Robert I as king. The Pope also acknowledged Scotland’s sovereignty by granting its king the right to anointment at the coronation. Robert’s son David was married to Edward III’s little sister Joan, and after Robert’s death in 1329, was the first king of the Scots to be crowned and anointed. The future however, was far from secure.
The death of Robert I

On his death bed, Robert I instructed that his body be buried in Dunfermline Abbey, the royal mausoleum, and his heart be taken on a journey to the Holy Land. The heart’s guardians were defeated in Spain on the way, but it was bought back and it is thought to be buried in front of the high altar at Melrose Abbey.

The Second War of Independence: 1333–1357

The main characters were:
- King Edward II of England
- King Edward III of England
- King David II of Scotland.

David II (1329–1371)

David II was five when he became king so Thomas Randolph, Earl of Moray, was appointed Regent. But trouble was already brewing. Several Scottish nobles who had their lands confiscated for siding with the English, rose in revolt and in 1332 succeeded in putting Edward Balliol (son of John Balliol) on the throne. By 1333 only five castles were in David II’s hands.

Although Edward Balliol was quickly driven out of Scotland, Edward III marched to Berwick, recaptured the town and reinstated him as a puppet king. David II, now aged ten, was sent to France for safety and Sir Robert Stewart, Robert I’s grandson and an able leader, was appointed Regent.

Robert Stewart rallied support and succeeded in driving the English out. Six years later David II marched with an army to England where he was soundly beaten and imprisoned in the Tower of London. But by now the outbreak of the Hundred Years’ War with France distracted Edward and an agreement was reached whereby

By this time the only English garrisons holding out in Scotland were at Lochmaben, Roxburgh and Berwick. In 1371 David II died without an heir and his nephew Robert Stewart, was crowned Robert II, the first Stewart king.
Historic Scotland sites with links to the Wars of Independence

1. Arbroath Abbey, Angus
2. Bothwell Castle, Lanarkshire
3. Caerlaverock Castle, Dumfries and Galloway
4. Dunonald Castle, Ayrshire
5. Dunfermline Abbey and Palace, Fife
6. Glasgow Cathedral
7. Dunstaffnage Castle, Argyll
8. Dirleton Castle, East Lothian
9. Edinburgh Castle
10. Kildrummy Castle, Aberdeenshire
11. Lochleven Castle, Perth and Kinross
12. Lochmaben Castle, Dumfries and Galloway
13. Melrose Abbey, Scottish Borders
14. St Andrew's Castle, Fife
15. Stirling Castle, Stirling
16. Urquhart Castle, Highland
Additional information

Historic Scotland website: www.historic-scotland.gov.uk
Downloadable images of many Historic Scotland sites are available for educational use from www.scran.ac.uk

Sites with links to the Wars of Independence

*In the care of Historic Scotland – further information about these sites is available on the Historic Scotland website.

*Arbroath Abbey, Angus: The Declaration of Arbroath was probably drafted by Abbot Bernard in the scriptorium

Berwick Town and Castle, Northumberland: the scene of bloody sieges and massacre

*Bothwell Castle, Lanarkshire: besieged in the Wars of Independence

*Caerlaverock Castle, Dumfries and Galloway: besieged in the Wars of Independence

*Dundonald Castle, Ayrshire: built by Robert II, the first Stewart king

*Dunfermline Abbey and Palace, Fife: the body of Robert I was buried in the choir

*Glasgow Cathedral: the resting-place of Bishop Wishart, one of Robert I’s staunchest supporters

*Dunstaffnage Castle, Argyll: besieged in the Wars of Independence

*Dirleton Castle, East Lothian: besieged in the Wars of Independence

*Edinburgh Castle: the favoured royal palace during the Wars of Independence

*Kildrummy Castle, Aberdeenshire: after Robert I’s defeat at Methven, his queen was sent here and narrowly escaped capture

*Lochleven Castle, Perth and Kinross: used as a royal residence and state prison in the reign of Robert I

*Lochmaben Castle, Dumfries and Galloway: the ruins include the remains of a peel (enclosure) built by Edward I

*Melrose Abbey, Scottish Borders: Robert I’s heart is said to be buried here

*Roxburgh Castle, Scottish Borders: besieged in the Wars of Independence

St Andrew’s Castle, Fife: Robert I held his first Parliament here

Scone Palace (Moot Hill), Perth and Kinross: where John Balliol and Robert the Bruce were crowned

*Stirling Castle, Stirling: occupied a key strategic position in the Wars of Independence; it overlooks the battlefields of Stirling Bridge and Bannockburn

Stirling Old Bridge: the scene of Wallace’s first great victory in 1297. (Research suggests the likeliest site for the major part of the battle lies close to the playing fields of Bannockburn High School, south-east of Stirling Castle.)

*Urquhart Castle, Highland: besieged in the Wars of Independence.

Museums and other sites

Bannockburn Heritage Centre: built near the site where King Robert the Bruce raised his standard before the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314. For further information, contact the National Trust for Scotland tel. (01786) 812664

Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh: displays on power in medieval Scotland including William Wallace and Robert the Bruce. For further information tel. (0131) 225 7534.

The Wallace Monument: a massive Victorian memorial built near the spot where Sir William Wallace is said to have directed his men to victory in the Battle of Stirling Bridge in 1297. For further information tel. (01786) 472140.

Acknowledgments

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