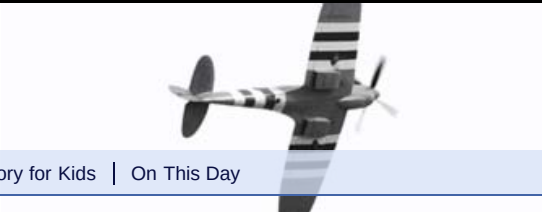


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Battlefield Archaeology

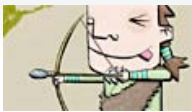
By Tony Pollard and Neil Oliver
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Battlefield sites provide rich seams of frozen history: skeletal remains, weaponry, artefacts and ammunition can bring skirmishes and conflict vividly back to life, and sometimes revise accepted views of history. Military archaeologists Neil Oliver and Tony Pollard describe the array of techniques employed to reveal the past.



Hands on History: Ancient Britain



Travel back in time to **Ancient Britain** and create your own stone circle.

Hands on History: Roman Britain



Eric (voiced by Daniel Roche) visits **Roman Britain**, where he lives a life of privilege.

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Voices from the field

'We've spent a whole rainy morning sweeping an exposed field near Flodden, in Northumberland, with a metal detector, when suddenly the detector emits a screech - there's a metal object buried in the ground beneath our feet. We dig carefully with our trowels and, out of the earth, pluck a soil-covered lump. We weigh it in our hands and marvel at its heft, smearing away the dirt to reveal a pock-marked lead sphere, a bit smaller than a tennis ball. It's a cannon ball.' Neil Oliver

Some time in the late afternoon of 9 September 1513, it had been fired by English gunners against the army of James IV of Scotland, who himself was to die before the day was done. Did it find its target, cutting its way through ranks of men? Or did it drop short, in front of the Scottish line? Whatever the case, we're the first people to touch this object for 500 years.

“ We dig carefully with our trowels and pluck a soil-covered lump ... smearing away the dirt to reveal a pock-marked sphere. ”

We came across these finds having embarked upon the biggest ever archaeological investigation of British battlefields. The project was ambitious, and we were fully aware that we would have to cut our own path through largely uncharted territory. What we needed was a new way of 'doing' archaeology - finding new techniques, new ways of thinking and taking advantage of the very latest technology at our disposal.

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Unearthing the finds

Battlefield archaeology is nothing if not a challenge. Much more than toy soldiers

that are moved about on a board, people in a battle are living out events of the greatest moment and greatest intimacy. As archaeologists we are uniquely qualified to look for traces of these events - and the archaeological remains of battle have much to tell us about the very real lives, and so often the deaths, of those who played their part in them.



On the battlesite of Flodden ©

Over recent years battlefields have become regarded more and more as important elements of the world's cultural heritage. As a result they have increasingly become subject to the scrutiny of archaeologists - who are concerned with understanding humankind's past through the examination of the physical remains of that past. Battlefields are ideal places to find debris abandoned by our forebears, although they are obviously a special type of site.

Many sites tell us about how people lived, perhaps through the remains of their houses, or about what they ate, from food remains deposited in middens. Others tell of how our ancestors treated their dead, through their tombs and graves - which have often been excavated by archaeologists. Battlefields, for their part, tell us about where, when and how people died.

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Battlefields tell us where, when and how people died.
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History written by the victor?

Battlefields may also provide evidence for events that occurred over very short periods of time, with the Battle of Shrewsbury, for example, lasting for less than three hours. In this they differ from most investigated archaeological sites, which (with a few exceptions, including hunter-gatherer hunting camps) represent repeated and long-lasting areas of activity. However, even though battles may have taken place within a short time-span, the events that preceded them, perhaps in campsites near the battlefield, are also important, as are those that took place in the battle's aftermath, which may have resulted in the creation of features such as graves.



British forces at the Battle of Peninsular, 1813 ©

The study of battles has long been the domain of historians, who obviously play a vital role in advancing our understanding of the past. There is a saying that goes 'history is written by the victor', and there is undoubtedly some truth to it. Particularly so in the case of a battle, where it is the victor who is most obviously left at

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...the victor is...at liberty to revel in post-battle glory
”

liberty to revel in post-battle glory, and to exaggerate the magnitude of his victory.

Victory in the long term can also ensure that short-term defeats are underplayed, or written about in such a way as to make them glorious and noble last stands against overwhelming odds. This point is often apparent in the case of colonialist conflicts, where indigenous people might have won some mighty battles against their invaders, but then gone on to lose the war as a whole, and much else besides.

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Piecing the evidence together

The historian relies greatly on documents and written accounts to describe warfare and place it within a social and political context, although it is recognised that these written sources are often biased or inaccurate. The archaeologist, on the other hand, deals with physical remains to piece together a version of historic events. On an ancient battlefield an archaeologist, rather like the forensic scientist at a crime scene, may be able to use physical evidence to piece together a quite objective picture of the battle. This can then be used to augment or question historical records, and provide a well-founded account of events.



Tony and Neil investigate the site at Flodden ©

Before we get too carried away, however, it should be said that archaeological techniques are not infallible, and in these post-modern times most of us are aware that interpretations of archaeological evidence are influenced by the time and the place inhabited by the archaeologist. Battlefield archaeologists cannot operate usefully without historians - without a historical framework the evidence floats around as meaningless data - but they can help to test historical accounts and accepted truths.

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Battle archaeologists ... can help to test historical accounts and accepted truths.
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Battle of Little Bighorn

The archaeological investigation of battlefields has been pioneered in the United States, with the best-known work being that undertaken at the site of the battle of the Little Bighorn. During that project the recovery and mapping of discarded weapons and ammunition - through metal detector survey - allowed archaeologists to recreate a vivid picture of how



Re-enactors at the site of Little Bighorn in 1876 ©

the battle unfolded. The survey even provided, through ballistic analysis, an impression of the movements of individual weapons and their users across the battlefield. Other techniques can also be used, including topographic survey, Geographical Information System (GIS) modelling, geophysical survey and the analysis of human remains.

The main form of archaeological evidence from most battlefields takes the form of metal artefacts dropped during the fighting, sometimes scattered over a wide area. The metal detector has a vital role to play here, but although archaeologists over the past few years have come to recognise the usefulness of this tool, there can be no doubt that its image has not on the whole been a good one. Metal detectorists have been viewed with suspicion, sometimes with just cause, as protected sites are plundered and important elements of the archaeological resource disappear into private collections. Many detectorists, however, welcome the opportunity to work alongside archaeologists and are willing to learn the techniques that ensure finds are accurately recorded.

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Our work established...the exact location of the left flank of the Hanoverian line.
”

An example of successful deployment of metal detectors on a battlefield would be at Culloden, in Scotland, where permission to use them was granted to this writer by the National Trust for Scotland. Our work established not only the exact location of the left flank of the Hanoverian line, but also the point at which this was hit by the Jacobite right as it charged onto the Hanoverians. We also established that the battlefield covered a much wider area than is traditionally thought.

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Bringing the battlefield to life

There was a dedicated team of specialists who joined us to uncover the secrets of these battlefields. Topographical scientists create detailed contour maps of the battlefield and its place within the wider landscape. Geophysicists analyse sub surface features using state of the art machinery that are otherwise invisible to the eye. Local teams of metal detectorists mark the locations of dropped metalwork; field directors and senior excavators reveal sections of the buried landscape, keeping detailed notes, making scale drawings and taking photographs as they delve deeper into the ground. Conservators detail the artefacts recovered by the excavators and metal detectorists and make sure that they are damaged as little as possible by exposure to the air. Physical anthropologists study any human remains and glean information about the age and sex of the people who died in the battle - as well as their physical health at the time of death and historical weapons experts assist in making sense of all the metal artefacts we recover. Little by little, this small army of experts can build up a picture of the events which took place on this epic sites and profiles of the people who fought there.



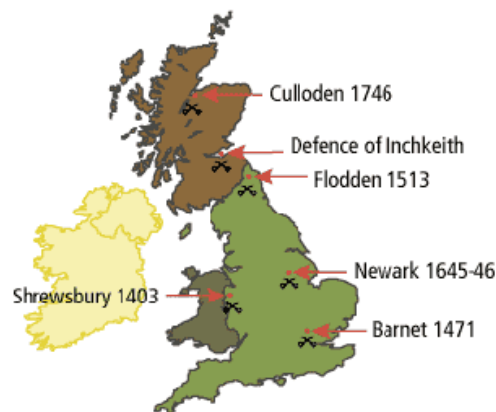
Neil and Tony survey the scene at Culloden 

A battlefield is a unique place that represents a special moment in the lives of the people involved - a point well understood by social historians, novelists and others, who have given a great deal of thought to the lives and personalities of these warriors and their families and communities. The historians who make it their business to understand warfare and battle, however, have tended to overlook the fact that the figures moving about on the landscapes of war were people just like us - and it is at this point that the archaeologist steps in.

“...figures moving about on the landscapes of war were people just like us.”

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Battlefield sites



Shrewsbury, 21 July 1403

The bloody slaughter at Shrewsbury on a hot afternoon in July marked the climax of Henry 'Hotspur' Percy's attempt to overthrow King Henry IV. The battle took place less than a mile outside the town of Shrewsbury, close by the border between Wales and England. Percy's rebel army took up a strong position along the crest of a ridge, overlooking the massed Royal army on the relatively flat ground below. For the first time in British history longbow faced longbow, and a devastating rain of arrows from both sides signalled the start of what would prove to be the bloodiest battle fought in England during the whole period of the Hundred Years War. Hotspur was killed by an arrow to the face as he led an ill-fated attack on the King, and in the rout of the rebels that followed as many as 3,000 are said to have been slain.

Barnet, 14 April 1471

One of the pivotal battles of the Wars of the Roses took place just outside the village of Barnet on the outskirts of London. Fighting to reclaim his throne from the Lancastrian Henry VI, the Yorkist warrior king Edward IV brought an army of around 10,000 to bear against perhaps 15,000 led by the legendary 'Kingmaker' Warwick. The two opposing forces struggled to find one another on a battlefield wreathed in early morning fog. There was confusion throughout the fighting - which took its most severe toll on the Lancastrians, who eventually fell to fighting one another. In the rout that followed, Warwick the

Kingmaker was among those cut down as he attempted to flee the field.

Flodden, 9 September 1513

A defeat that struck at the very heart of the Scottish nation was dealt here, on a Nothumbrian hillside, when the Scottish King James IV himself fell in the thick of the fighting, surrounded by thousands of his nobility and his subjects. With Henry VIII making war in France, the English force was led in his stead by the septuagenarian Earl of Surrey. Disastrous tactics on the part of the Scots, coupled with an unsuitable choice of weapons, assured an English victory and a death toll among the Scottish army that was to affect the national psyche for many generations to come.

Siege of Newark 1642 - 1646

While the English Civil War is famous for set-piece battles such as Edgehill, Marston Moor and Naseby, the eventual victory was decided by the long-running sieges that were waged to gain and keep control of the principal towns and cities of the land. Among the most famous and long-lasting of these sieges is that which beset the Royalist stronghold of Newark, on and off, for four years. The Parliamentary screws were tightened further between October 1645 and May 1646 - through the orders of General Poyntz - and this finally secured the surrender of the town. The legacy of that bloody period is marked today by some of the most impressive and well-preserved field fortifications anywhere in Britain.

Culloden, 16 April 1746

Of all the battles that resonate in the hearts and minds of Scottish patriots, none has a greater effect than that of Culloden. The culmination of the attempt by the House of Stuart to wrest the Scottish crown from the House of Hanover, the battle took place on a rain-blasted moor outside Inverness, and has been romanticised almost since the day and hour when the fighting stopped. Led by the charismatic Bonnie Prince Charlie, the second Jacobite rebellion was finally crushed by the now infamous 'Butcher of Cumberland', the Duke of Cumberland, son of George II, in the last pitched battle ever to be fought on British soil.

Defence of the Forth, 1939 - 1945

In the early days of World War Two, the invasion of Britain by German forces seemed a very real threat. The Firth of Forth on Scotland's east coast had, since the early 20th century, served as one of the most important naval bases on the British coastline, and was therefore considered by many to be one of the most obvious targets for such a move. The story of how the tiny island of Inchkeith, which had been fortified for centuries, played a role in defending the Forth at this time, reveals how quickly even relatively recent military sites can vanish from the landscape and provide a challenge for archaeologists.

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Find out more

Books

Archaeological perspectives on the Battle of Little Big Horn by D

Scott, R Fox, M Connor, D Harmon. University of Oklahoma, 1989

Two Men in a Trench by Tony Pollard and Neil Oliver. Michael Joseph, 2002

Battlefield Archaeology by John Laffin, Ian Allen, 1987

Battlefields of England by A Burne, Methuen, London 1950

The Complete Guide to the Battlefields of Britain by D Smurthwaite, Penguin, London, 1984

Battlefield Archaeology by John Laffin, Ian Allen, 1987

Places to visit

Site of the Battle of Shrewsbury: now farming land, bordered by the A5124 to the south, the A528 to the west and the A49 to the east. The battlefield is most accessible from the A49 north out of Shrewsbury itself.

Site of Battle of Barnet: accessible from the London Underground station of Barnet; a ten minute walk in a northerly direction brings you to Hadley Green.

Site of Battle of Flodden: more accurately known as Branxton Hill. Take the A698 out of Berwick-on-Tweed and turn left at the roundabout on to the A697 to Wooler. After about two miles you will see Branxton village and the battlefield sign posted to the right.

Newark: the Civil War siege-works of Newark are without equal. The Queen's Sconce was the scene of the most stubborn resistance, are just south of the town centre.

Culloden: Culloden battlefield is located three miles to the south-east of Inverness, which sits next to the A9. Take the B9006 and follow the signs. The battlefield is owned by the National Trust for Scotland who have done much to preserve the site.

Firth of Forth: for a grandstand view of the defences, take the A90 road out of Edinburgh.

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About the author

Tony Pollard is one of Britain's leading battlefield archaeologists. He has worked with the Field Archaeology Unit of University College, London, and is currently a senior project manager at the University of Glasgow. He has carried out pioneering work on battlefields in Zululand and North Africa, and as a forensic archaeologist he has worked with police forces throughout Britain.

Neil Oliver read archaeology at Glasgow University, where he met Tony Pollard. A leading archaeologist, he has worked on many sites, including the battlefields of Zululand - often in collaboration with Tony Pollard.

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