

The search for the Sandy Ford

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN this article I would like to focus on the place named by the Middle English ‘Romance of Thomas the Rhymer’ as the location of the last battle, Sandyford. Where is it?

First of all it is as well to check exactly what the ‘Romance’ has to say. It exists in five manuscripts. The earliest was written in Yorkshire in the 1430s, but most of the last page of the ‘Romance’, containing the Sandyford prophecy, has been torn out. The next was written about 1450 and has been called ‘a Southernized version of the original’; it is now in Cambridge. This is what it says:

*Off that laste battel I the say,
It [shall] be done at Sandeford:
Nere sendyforth ther is a wroo,
And nere that wro is a well;
A [ston] ther is the wel euen fro;
And nere the wel, truly to tell,
On that grounde ther groeth okys thre,
And is called sondyford;
Ther the last battel done shal be.*

In other words, it spells the place variously *Sandeford*, *Sendyforth* and *Sondyford*, and tells us that after the ford you come to a brae (*wroo*, *wro*), then a well, then a stone, and that three oaks grow near the well.

The other three manuscripts are all in the British Library in London. The first, also written about 1450, spells the place *Sandyforde* and gives the same information: after the ford you come to a brae (here *bro*), then a well, a stone, and three oaks. The second, written much later (about 1524-30) calls the place *Sawdyngford* and says that after the ford you come to a brae (again *bro*), a well, a stone, “And at that stone Ar craggis ij”, presumably three crags or rock faces — after which the writing ends abruptly for no obvious reason. The third, written in 1547, has a modern look: the place is *Sandyford*, and after the ford you come to a brae (*braye*), then a well, a stone, and three oaks.

Now it is worth pointing out that this last manuscript, called the Sloane MS, also quotes a couple of Sandyford prophecies unconnected with Thomas the Rhymer. The first goes like this: “Ouer Sandiford shalbe sorowes sene / On the southe side on a Mondaye, / Wheare gromes shall grone on a grene; / Besides Englefield there standethe / A castelle on a mountaine clif / The which shall doo yeir enemies tene [grief] / And save England that day.”

This is the other one. “At Sandiford betwix ij parkes / A pallace and a parishe churche, / A hardy prince downe shall lyghte. / Troye vntrue then shall tremble and quake / that daye for feare of a deade man / When yei heare him speake. / All th’ offyiceris therin shall caste him the keys, / From Vxbyrdge to Hownslowe ye bushment to breake, / And fare as a people that weare wudd. / The ffather shall sleye ye sone, ye brother ye brother, / That all London shall renn bludde.”

It is clear, then, that the writer of the Sloane MS, at least, thought that Sandyford was in England. So did John Geddie, the author of ‘Thomas the Rymour and his Rhymes’ (1920), but there the similarity stops. Geddie placed Sandyford not in Middlesex but in Northumberland. Remarking that the editor of the ‘Romance’, Sir James Murray, “could offer no suggestion, even, of the place hinted at,” Geddie pointed out that the Sandyford was a ford on the Till, “the scene of the most critical movement in the battle of Flodden — the crossing of the stream by Surrey’s rearguard, and their attack on James’s host drawn up on the adjoining Branxton Hill.”

That is all very well, but as we have seen, the Sandyford prophecy dates from about 1430-50, while the Battle of Flodden was in 1513. In other words, Geddie was suggesting that the author of the ‘Romance’ *successfully predicted the battle*. That I am not willing to believe. In any case, an alternative location is suggested by Gaelic tradition. As Sìleas na Ceapaich said in 1715:

*Dh’fhalbh a’ chòir agus thàinig an eucoir:
Amhairc fhéin air feum an t-sluaigh!
Gu bheil Tòmas ag ràdha ’na fhàistneachd
Gur h-iad na Gaidhil a bhuidhneas buaidh;
Bidh fallas fala air gach mala
A’ cur a’ chatha aig uisge Chluaidh;
Nì Sasann srìochdadh, ge mór an inntleachd,
Ag iarraidh sìth air an rìgh tha uainn.*

(“Justice has gone and injustice has come: / Look for yourself at the worth of the army! / Thomas says in his prophecy / That it’s the Gaels who will win the victory; / Every brow will be sweating blood / Fighting the fight at the river Clyde; / England will yield, though big be their strategy, / Seeking peace from the king who’s not with us just now.”)

Now Gaelic tradition never mentions Sandyford or any Gaelic equivalent of the name. What it *does* tell us is summed up by John Gregorson Campbell in his ‘Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands’ (1900) like this: “Thomas is in Dunbuck hill (*Dùn buic*) near Dunbarton. The last person that entered that hill found him resting on his elbow, with his hand below his head. He asked, ‘Is it time?’ and the man fled . . . He attends every market on the look-out for suitable horses . . . When his complement is made up he will become visible, and a great battle will be fought on the Clyde.

*Nuair thig Tòmas le chuid each,
Bidh latha nan creach air Cluaidh,
Millear naoi mìle fear maith,
'S théid rìgh òg air a’ chrùn.*

(‘When Thomas comes with his horses, / The day of spoils will be on the Clyde, / Nine thousand good men will be slain, / And a new king will be set on the throne.’)

Campbell continues: “You may walk across the Clyde, the prophecy goes on to relate, on men’s bodies, and the miller of Partick Mill (*Muilionn Phearraig*), who is to be a man with seven fingers, will grind for two hours with blood instead of water . . . A stone in the Clyde was pointed out as one, on which a bird (*bigein*) would perch and drink its full of blood, without bending its head, but the River Trustees have blasted it out of the way that the prophecy may not come true.”

Dumbuck; Partick Mill; a stone in the Clyde that has been blasted. It is pretty circumstantial. *Dumbuck* is the volcanic plug on the north shore of the Clyde where the A82, squeezed between it and the shore, forks right for Loch Lomond and the North and left into Dumbarton. *Dumbuck Shoal* was the lowest of the Clyde fords and, until a passage seven feet deep was made through it in 1775, the greatest single obstacle to Clyde navigation.

Partick Mill was on the Kelvin, and is mentioned several times in MacGregor’s ‘History of Glasgow’. During 1508-24 a waulking mill was built at Partick by a Donald Sym; in 1568 the Regent Moray granted the bakers of Glasgow, which was two miles to the east, permission to build a wheat-mill there, the “gentlemen’s corn-mills upon Kelvin” being unsuitable for grinding wheat; in 1577 Archibald Lyon’s mills on the Kelvin were bought by the city council when their own mills on the Molendinar “were found to be in a ruinous condition”.

A stone in the Clyde that has been blasted. The nearest I can find to this is a description in John F Riddell’s book ‘Clyde Navigation’ of how in 1854 the liner *Glasgow* shuddered to a halt about a mile upstream of Renfrew ferry, that is, at Elderslie (Scotstoun), about two miles down from Partick. It was the site of the long-removed Blarthill Shoal. The Clyde Navigation Trust was quite accustomed to removing stones by dredging or even by hacking away from a diving bell, but this proved to be a seam of hard volcanic lava, and in 1860 the Trustees decided that it would have to be broken up by means of explosives. Underwater blasting was then in the earliest stages of development, but as Riddell says, “soon the channel at Elderslie was resounding to the muffled thump of the exploding powder,” and the process was so successful that it was continued until the Clyde in 1907 was 28 feet deep as far up as the Broomielaw. Perhaps it was this that Campbell recalled. It had been a long, long struggle since 1556, when the river was so clogged with fords and shoals as to be barely navigable for even the smallest craft, and work had begun at *Dumbuck*.

The search for the Sandy Ford begins with Blaeu’s Atlas of Scotland, *Theatrum Scotiae*, of 1662, which includes Timothy Pont’s map of Renfrewshire c. 1600, and a ‘portrait’ of Glasgow prepared by a James Colquhoun — on 12 June 1641 the city treasurer was instructed to pay Colquhoun five dollars (about £1 sterling) for drawing a ‘portrait’ of the town to be sent to Holland. Blaeu shows, from Dumbarton to the Cart, islands called Acklaw, Bodinbo and Newshot, with ‘Sandifury’ on the south shore at Newshot; from Cart to Kelvin there are meadowlands called Sand Inch, King’s Inch, Buck Inch, Whyt Inch and Water Inch, of which Sand Inch and Whyt Inch are islands. This is in addition to other names familiar today such as Inchinnen, ‘Yochijr’, Scotstoun, Partick and ‘Gouan’.

On the White Cart west of Renfrew, Blaeu shows New Ynch on the left bank (subsequently Abbotsinch, now Glasgow Airport) and Sandifurd on the right bank. This particular Sandifurd was clearly on the White Cart, and is commemorated today by a Sandyford Road which leads towards it.

Successive surveys of the river made in 1755, 1768 and 1769 say nothing of Sandyford. The fords they mention are, from Dumbarton to the Cart, *Dumbuck Shoal*, *Kilpatrick Sands* and *Newshot Isle*; from Cart to Kelvin, the *Puddock Shoal*, *Spoydach Ford*, *Blarthill Sand*, *Marlin Ford* (of which more next time) and *Holme Sand*; and from Kelvin to Glasgow Bridge, the *Pointhouse Ford* and *Hirst Shoal*.

There is good reason to believe, however, that a shoal called the Sandy Ford existed on the Clyde at one time just upriver from the Kelvin, in the neighbourhood of Pointhouse Ford. A map of 1843 shows the Sandyford Estate where the Kelvin Hall and Kelvingrove Art Gallery lie today. According to Robert Reid’s ‘Glasgow Past and Present’ of 1884, the lands of Kelvinbank and Sandyford were purchased by the Corporation about 1843 for £33,000. “These lands are to a certain extent unproductive; but they are admirably adapted for feuing purposes, and, as the city presses westwards, they will, no doubt, become highly remunerative.”

Susan Miller’s ‘Guide to Glasgow Addresses 1837-1945’ describes Sandyford as an area at the north-west end of Anderston — that is, west of the Kingston Bridge approach road. She lists Sandyford Buildings, Anderston, on the north side of Dumbarton Road, between Berkley St. and Kelvingrove St.; Sandyford Cottages in Sandyford St., which was later incorporated into Sauchiehall St.; and Sandyford Place, which she gives on the south side of Sauchiehall St. between Claremont St. and Elderslie St., and which still exists. There was also a ‘Sandyford Home for Orphan and Destitute Children’ in 1905.

But the best clue of all to the location of the eponymous Sandy Ford is, I think, the Sandyford St. which survives today. It forms the fulcrum of the old Sandyford district, sloping straight down as it does from Yorkhill to the river. Could this post-industrial desolation be the brae of the well, the stone and the three oaks? Nowadays you can’t even see the Clyde from it: cut off by Pointhouse Road, the so-called Clyde Expressway, it has been turned into a backwater containing only Kelvinhaugh Primary School, the West Fire Station, and the Cullen Packaging factory — “For Quality Cartons Quickly”.

If the Sandy Ford was indeed down there beyond the Expressway, as I think it was, it was finally transformed out of all recognition in 1877 and 1897 when it became respectively the entrance to the Queen’s Dock and Prince’s Dock.

That blood has flowed on the Sandyford, then, there is little doubt. That it was shed in the last great battle for Britain is also true. But it is the blood not of Thomas’s mounted warriors but of working men.

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