



THE DECLARATION OF ARBROATH - 1320

The Declaration of Arbroath is seen as a key document in the Wars of Independence in Scotland when the Scots were attempting to re-affirm their independent ownership of Scotland against very forceful English claims of overlordship.

Neither Edward II who was King at the time of the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314, nor the Pope, recognised Robert I as King of the Scots. The letter to the Pope was to endeavour to get him to reconsider his approach to the long-running English/Scottish conflict.

It is surmised that the Declaration's content was probably planned at a meeting of the King and his council of advisors at Newbattle Abbey, just south of Edinburgh, in March, 1320. With arrangements presumably being made for the Barons to seal the letter.

The letter of the Declaration of Arbroath was written on sheep-skin in Latin and dated at the Monastery at Arbroath, Angus on 6th April, 1320. It was there that the King's chancery or writing office was located. King Robert's Chancellor, Bernard was the Abbot of Arbroath and the letter was probably written by one of his chancery scribes.

At a meeting at Newbattle Abbey Robert the Bruce bestowed the town, castle and forest of Jedburgh to Sir James, Lord of Douglas on 6 May, 1320. This particular charter emanating from Abirbrothoc (Arbroath) stated; “Robert, king of Scots has given his beloved faithful James, lord of Douglas, knight, for his faithful service and homage to the king, all the king’s merchant town of Jedburgh (ROX) with market place and castle tower of Jedworth and the whole town of Bonjedworth (Bonjedward) and the whole of his forest of Jedworth, in free forest, having and holding for James and his legitimate male heirs, in feu and heritage, with the homages and services of freeholders, in free barony, with pit and gallows, sake and soak, toll and teams, and infangenthef, saving to the king his suits and services, made at Roxburgh and the lands of Hassendean, Newland, Lessudden, and Alton, rendering annually in the name of the burgh ferme of Jedburgh, 100s on Pentecost and Martimass, and performing the service of one knight and his army”.

This was the fore-runner of the Douglas Emrauld (Emerald) Charter of November, 1324 in the name of Sir James Douglas.

The first English translation of the letter called the Declaration of Arbroath, appeared in 1689.

In the original letter to the Pope there are short quotations from the Bible and from the 1st Century BC Roman author and politician Sallust (his quotations were re-phrased to emphasise the argument).

This letter emphasised Scotland’s long history as an independent Christian Kingdom. It contains a brief description of the mythical history of the Scots in their journey from Greater Scythia, to the North of the Black Sea, via Spain to Scotland. The Pope is asked to persuade Edward II to leave the Scots in peace. In closing the letter threatens the Pope that he will be answerable to God if the war continues.

The letter was from 8 Earls and 39 Barons of the Realm of Scotland and the whole Scottish Community to Pope John XXII asking him to recognise Scotland’s independence and acknowledge Robert the Bruce as the country’s lawful King.

The letter implied that the Scots were steadfast in their support of Robert, but that was not a reality. The majority of the Barons were supporters but not all. Within weeks of the letter being drafted a conspiracy against Robert

was uncovered. Its leaders were savagely dealt with at Parliament in August, 1320.

Sir James Douglas, Lord of Douglas was one of the 40 to 50 earls, barons and nobles and freemen who each added their name to the letter, many by means of waxed seals which were of both heraldic and personal natures.

The most important Barons had red seals and those of less importance had green seals.

Sir James Douglas, Lord of Douglas was listed a Baron in 1314 in the Parliamentary Records of Scotland.

Only 19 seals now remain of what might have been 50, and many are said to be in poor condition. Of these 3 seals are equestrian showing knights on horseback.

The seal of Sir James Douglas, Lord of Douglas is not amongst the seals which have survived. (National Records of Scotland).

About the Earls - the original seven earldoms were Angus, Atholl, Caithness, Fife, Mar, Moray and Strathearn, but these were increased to nine during the 10th Century when Argyll was added and when Buchanan separated from Mar a Century later. Later six more earldoms were created - Monteith, Garioch, Lennox, Ross, Carrick and Caithness as part of King David First's efforts to introduce the Feudal system into Scotland. (lochnesstitles).

Scottish Barons are lower down the rank orders... Scottish barons usually own a piece of land with a castle or manor house, but holders of this title don't qualify for a seat in Parliament, as do the other noble ranks... since changes to the law in 2004 which separated the title from the land to which they belong – a title can be bought. One can become a Baron if one of the titles, all of which were created hundreds of years ago, comes up for sale. (lochnesstitles).

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In recent times 3D casts have been made of some of the seals and these are held in the Court of the Lord Lyon Office.

The Declaration of Arbroath letter is one of Scotland's most treasured and historical artefacts and documents.

This letter is well recorded and its historical importance well explained at;

- the National Records of Scotland - the only copy of the original letter is held in their records at HM General Register House, Edinburgh.
- historicensevironment.scot
- the 'community of the realm in Scotland' project (COTR). This is a collaborative digital project which is researching and presenting new ways of representing medieval texts in digital media. For their project on the Declaration of Arbroath they have discovered at least 26 copies of the letter, which are said to all be different in emphasis and hence wording. Only one is a copy of the original and it looks to be on sheep-skin too. Differences in the copies were due to the fact that over the 14th and 15th Centuries copies were individually written by scribes and thus were copies of copies, with mistakes, omissions, deliberate amendments and alterations. It is said that of the at least 25 copies of the original that no copy is the same as any other copy.

The presentation by COTR is a dynamic interpretation of the Declaration of Arbroath which is said to give it new meaning and new value compared to the original letter which went to Pope in April, 1320.

The original letter to the Pope disappeared long ago.

In his reply the Pope urged a reconciliation between the warring sides. In 1329 the Pope issued a bull, permitting the anointing and crowning of Robert by the Bishop of St Andrews as the Pope's representative.

But the Anglo/Scottish conflict recommenced in 1332.

The letter's most potent lines are: "It is in truth not for glory, nor riches, nor honours that we are fighting, but for freedom – for that alone, which no honest man gives up but with life itself".

An English translation of the letter is as follows;

To the most Holy Father and Lord in Christ, the Lord John, by divine providence Supreme Pontiff of the Holy Roman and Universal Church,

his humble and devout sons Duncan, Earl of Fife, Thomas Randolph, Earl of Moray, Lord of Man and of Annandale, Patrick Dunbar, Earl of March, Malise, Earl of Strathearn, Malcolm, Earl of Lennox, William, Earl of Ross, Magnus, Earl of Caithness and Orkney, and William, Earl of Sutherland; Walter, Steward of Scotland, William Soules, Butler of Scotland, James, Lord of Douglas, Roger Mowbray, David, Lord of Brechin, David Graham, Ingram Umfraville, John Menteith, guardian of the earldom of Menteith, Alexander Fraser, Gilbert Hay, Constable of Scotland, Robert Keith, Marischal of Scotland, Henry Sinclair, John Graham, David Lindsay, William Oliphant, Patrick Graham, John Fenton, William Abernethy, David Wemyss, William Mushet, Fergus of Ardrossan, Eustace Maxwell, William Ramsay, William Mowat, Alan Murray, Donald Campbell, John Cameron, Reginald Cheyne, Alexander Seton, Andrew Leslie and Alexander Straiton, and the other barons and freeholders and the whole community of the realm of Scotland send all manner of filial reverence, with devout kisses of his blessed feet.

Most Holy Father, we know and from the chronicles and books of the ancients we find that among other famous nations our own, the Scots, has been graced with widespread renown. It journeyed from Greater Scythia by way of the Tyrrhenian Sea and the Pillars of Hercules, and dwelt for a long course of time in Spain among the most savage peoples, but nowhere could it be subdued by any people, however barbarous. Thence it came, twelve hundred years after the people of Israel crossed the Red Sea, to its home in the west where it still lives today. The Britons it first drove out, the Picts it utterly destroyed, and, even though very often assailed by the Norwegians, the Danes and the English, it took possession of that home with many victories and untold efforts; and, as the histories of old time bear witness, they have held it free of all servitude ever since. In their kingdom there have reigned one hundred and thirteen kings of their own royal stock, the line unbroken by a single foreigner.

The high qualities and merits of these people, were they not otherwise manifest, shine forth clearly enough from this: that the King of kings and Lord of lords, our Lord Jesus Christ, after His Passion and Resurrection, called them, even though settled in the uttermost parts of the earth, almost the first to His most holy faith. Nor did He wish them to be confirmed in that faith by merely anyone but by the first of His Apostles - by calling, though second or third in rank - the most

gentle Saint Andrew, the Blessed Peter's brother, and desired him to keep them under his protection as their patron for ever.

The Most Holy Fathers your predecessors gave careful heed to these things and strengthened this same kingdom and people with many favours and numerous privileges, as being the special charge of the Blessed Peter's brother. Thus our people under their protection did indeed live in freedom and peace up to the time when that mighty prince the King of the English, Edward, the father of the one who reigns today, when our kingdom had no head and our people harboured no malice or treachery and were then unused to wars or invasions, came in a guise of a friend and ally to harass them as an enemy. The deeds of cruelty, massacre, violence, pillage, arson, imprisoning prelates, burning down monasteries, robbing and killing monks and nuns and yet other outrages without number which he committed against our people, sparing neither age nor sex, religion nor rank, no-one could describe nor fully imagine unless he had seen them with his own eyes.

But from these countless evils we have been set free, by the help of Him who though He afflicts yet heals and restores, by our most tireless prince, King and lord, the lord Robert. He, that his people and his heritage might be delivered out of the hands of our enemies, bore cheerfully toil and fatigue, hunger and peril, like another Maccabaeus or Joshua. Him, too, divine providence, the succession to his right according to our laws and customs which we shall maintain to the death, and the due consent and assent of us all have made our prince and king. To him, as to the man by whom salvation has been wrought unto our people, we are bound both by his right and by his merits that our freedom may be still maintained, and by him, come what may, we mean to stand.

Yet if he should give up what he has begun, seeking to make us or our kingdom subject to the King of England or the English, we should exert ourselves at once to drive him out as our enemy and a subverter of his own right and ours, and make some other man who was well able to defend us our King; for, as long as a hundred of us remain alive, never will we on any conditions be subjected to the lordship of the English. It is in truth not for glory, nor riches, nor honours that we are fighting, but for freedom alone, which no honest man gives up but with life itself.

Therefore it is, Reverend Father and Lord, that we beseech your Holiness with our most earnest prayers and suppliant hearts,

inasmuch as you will in your sincerity and goodness consider all this, that, since with Him Whose vice-gerent on earth you are there is neither weighing nor distinction of Jew and Greek, Scotsman or Englishman, you will look with the eyes of a father on the troubles and privations brought by the English upon us and upon the Church of God. May it please you to admonish and exhort the King of the English, who ought to be satisfied with what belongs to him since England used once to be enough for seven kings or more, to leave us Scots in peace, who live in this poor little Scotland, beyond which there is no dwelling-place at all, and covet nothing but our own. We are sincerely willing to do anything for him, having regard to our condition, that we can, to win peace for ourselves.

This truly concerns you, Holy Father, since you see the savagery of the heathen raging against the Christians, as the sins of Christians have indeed deserved, and the frontiers of Christendom being pressed inward every day; and how much it will tarnish your Holiness's memory if (which God forbid) the Church suffers eclipse or scandal in any branch of it during your time, you must perceive. Then rouse the Christian princes who for false reasons pretend that they cannot go to the help of the Holy Land because of wars they have on hand with their neighbours. The real reason that prevents them is that in making war on their smaller neighbours they find a readier advantage and weaker resistance. But how cheerfully our lord the King and we too would go there if the King of the English would leave us in peace, He from Whom nothing is hidden well knows; and we profess and declare it to you as the Vicar of Christ and to all Christendom.

But if your Holiness puts too much faith in the tales the English tell and will not give sincere belief to all this, nor refrain from favouring them to our undoing, then the slaughter of bodies, the perdition of souls, and all the other misfortunes that will follow, inflicted by them on us and by us on them, will, we believe, be surely laid by the Most High to your charge.

To conclude, we are and shall ever be, as far as duty calls us, ready to do your will in all things, as obedient sons to you as His Vicar, and to Him as the Supreme King and Judge we commit the maintenance of our cause, casting our cares upon Him and firmly trusting that He will inspire us with courage and bring our enemies to nothing.

May the Most High preserve you to His Holy Church in holiness and health for many days to come.

Given at the monastery of Arbroath in Scotland on the sixth day of the month of April in the year of grace thirteen hundred and twenty and the fifteenth year of the reign of our King aforesaid.

The Battle of Bannockburn from a 1440s manuscript by Walter Bower. It is the earliest known depiction of this 1314 battle.



Sally E Douglas - 6th November, 2025