

Act 4

Death on St Oswin's Eve –
The Battle of Otterburn, 5 (or 19) August 1388

The old song of 'Chevy-Chase' is the favourite ballad of the common people of England, and Ben Jonson used to say he had rather have been the author of it than of all his works. Sir Philip Sidney, in his discourse of Poetry [*The Defence of Poesie*], speaks of it in the following words: 'I never heard the old song of Percy and Douglas that I found not my heart more moved than with a trumpet; and yet it is sung by some blind crowder with no rougher voice than rude style, which being so evil apparelled in the dust and cobweb of that uncivil age, what would it work trimmed in the gorgeous eloquence of Pindar?' For my own part, I am so professed an admirer of this antiquated song, that I shall give my reader a critique upon it without any further apology for so doing.
—Joseph Addison¹

The Ballad of Chevy Chase (see Appendix 1) and the Battle of Otterburn, far more so than his other fights, were what really gave his legend its first major boost. Losing doesn't necessarily damage your mythic status, but a big part of the Hotspur saga rests on this minor and otherwise unimportant fight. What is it about Otterburn? Thanks to Froissart and poetic tradition, the battle has become synonymous with chivalry, Douglas dies a hero's death, most definitely *Kalos thanatos*; Leonidas couldn't have done it better and Hotspur, as even his enemies acknowledged, fought like Hector. To lose the fight in such circumstances was no disgrace, half of history's enduring legends champion the losers – Thermopylae, Watling Street, Hastings, Roncesvalles and all the way to the Alamo and Gloucester Hill.

On a rather wild and windy day in August 1988 and on the actual site (depending on whose account you believe), I was part of a team who'd organised a 600th anniversary re-enactment of the Battle of Otterburn. No high summer heat for us. To add spice, and highly likely real bloodshed, the MoD had furnished the day with a company each of English and Scottish junior leaders, trainee NCOs with a cadre of instructors. Thank goodness the weapons were wooden, as the

Scots took the whole business very seriously and if anyone doubted they'd won first time around, now it would be definite. It wasn't any wild melee but well-drilled and coordinated fury, with proper NCOs bellowing themselves hoarse and urging their charges on to closer drill and even more focused blood lust. In both they succeeded admirably and we *actual* reenactors in proper harness with nearly real weapons were glad of our armour.

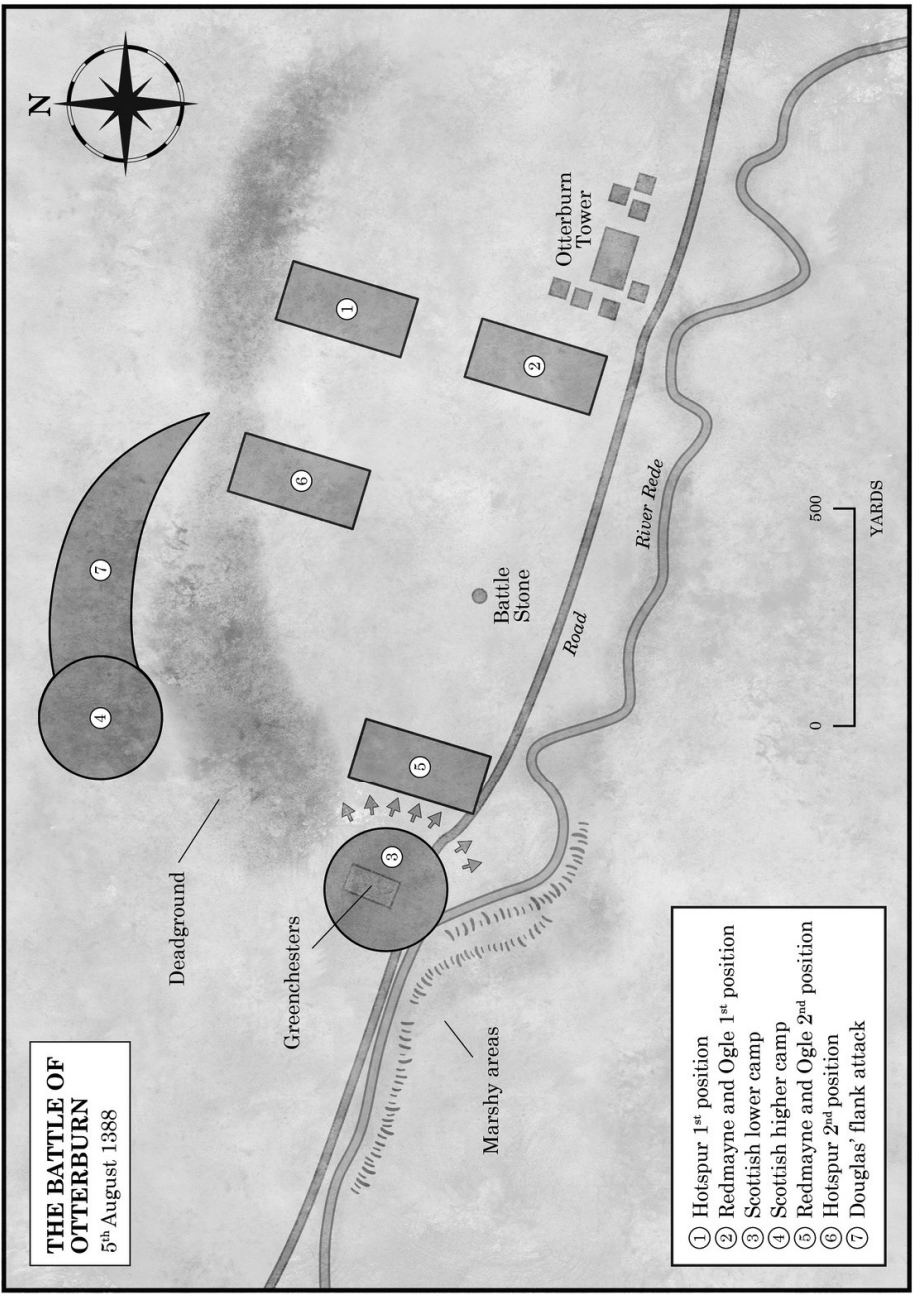
Ground

One day somebody will write a definitive account of the battle and much good work is being done, at the time of writing, by the Northumberland National Park Authority, Revitalising Redesdale, and the UK Battlefield Trust.² Otterburn field poses several problems which historians have struggled with and generally failed to resolve. Our main primary source is Jean Froissart, one of our main authorities for the 'chivalric revival' of the fourteenth century and he did travel widely across both England and Scotland. That said, he's a dreadful gossip and serial name dropper. Nonetheless, Hotspur owes him a good deal even if a lot of it is spin.

Of Otterburn Froissart says: 'Of all the battles and encounterings that I have made mention of heretofore in all this history, great or small, this battle that I treat of now was one of the sorest and best foughten without cowardice or faint hearts'.³ Yet the various descriptions are often sketchy and regularly contradict each other. These will be investigated thoroughly and conclusions offered. At first glance the ground appears straightforward though at least one credible writer, Charles Wesencraft, believes the battle was fought not at Otterburn but Elsdon and that the error is due to Froissart's confusion and cavalier approach to detail.⁴ In terms of modern sources, Andrew Boardman and Pete Armstrong are broadly in agreement with the views presented here.⁵ What can be added is an attempt to reconcile several of the anomalies in a way which may make sense.

George Ridpath, a comprehensive and redoubtable early compiler (1787), gives extraordinarily little detail and relies on Percy's *Reliques*.⁶ He affirms the fighting began at evening, continued under moonlight and lists casualties on both sides. Irritatingly, he says nothing about ground.⁷ White (1857) gives a far fuller account of the terrain. He describes the Scottish force as passing the 'tower' (Otterburn Castle, now the Towers Hotel), and taking up position on 'the eminence north-west of Hott-Wood above Greenchesters – this forms a kind of promontory, jutting out to the south-west from the high land behind'. He goes on to suggest that 'Hott' comes from 'Holt' indicating that the rise was previously wooded.⁸

There is no compelling reason to argue with this and the 1:25,000 OS Map clearly supports White – the high ground is called the Holt still and Greenchesters Camp crowns the crest. He gives the distance from the Tower as a 1½ miles



(2.4km) and this is also correct. He goes on to say the Scots made camp here on this commanding rise which gave them the necessary 'long view' to warn of any approach by English forces. Based on Inherent Military Probability (IMP) this makes sound sense.⁹ The Scots wouldn't establish their main position on the low-lying, wet ground directly below them towards the Rede. They would see that as a natural trap if they were attacked (as indeed it became for those stuck there). White does confirm that pilfered beasts with the *bouches inutiles* ('useless mouths') were sent into the wet bottom.¹⁰

White also argues that the vicinity was dotted with scrubby trees and bushes, birch, alder, and hazel. This seems not unreasonable given botanical evidence from nearby Chattlehope Spout which he alludes to. He gives the date of the battle as 19 August and goes on to state that having failed in their efforts against the Tower the Scots dug in, throwing up earthworks on the north flank of the higher camp (this is unlikely as the ditches belong to the Iron Age site) and creating field defences, *abbatis*, to secure the lower enclosure, which is much more likely. White then goes on to assert that the Scots would have had few if any wheeled carts, relying instead on their hardy ponies, 'hobbyies' – this ties in with established principles of hobiler warfare, avoiding slow-moving baggage trains and using lances to prod recalcitrant beasts. Cattle were valuable booty, the profit element, and this was important.

White does suggest that this minor or lower camp extended across both sides of the Newcastle road, from where Greenchesters farm now stands down to the river.¹¹² Again, this conforms to Inherent Military Probability, no commander would want to leave a handy gap through which an enemy might infiltrate and turn his flank. He makes the point that the 'servants' would be hardy skirmishers, able to hold their ground at least for a while against men-at-arms until they could be reinforced. This turned out to be wrong, but the principle was sound.

Next, White covers the English approach to contact, coming over from Elsdon, swinging down past Davyshiels to reach Otterburn. He gives a highly accurate estimation of the view from the Scottish camp on the Holt and he's confident both sides fought on foot. However, he's also adamant that Hotspur told off a detachment led by Umfraville and Redmayne to skirt around the north flank to cut off any line of retreat.¹² The main body would then barrel along the road to attack the Scottish camp.

Owing to the existing scrub and woodland, together with fading light, White suggests it would be unlikely that Hotspur had seen Greenchesters but had assumed the Scots were all encamped on the lower ground. Clearly, he was determined to attack and hadn't spent time in reconnaissance. Then, he has Percy attacking the camp defended by the auxiliaries.¹³ For a while the defenders, protected by their improvised field works, hold out as Douglas feeds in infantry support to

bolster the line. Meanwhile, the Scottish earl leads his main strike force north-east, making full use of the contours and masking woods to deliver his own flank manoeuvre.

White credits Umfraville with a rather tortuous route, effectively passing Douglas by moving further north and attacking the newly dug entrenchments. Realising he's missed the bus, he abandons scrapping with those few reservists guarding the main Scottish camp and attempts to re-join the fight below but ends up colliding with the right flank of Percy's Brigade, just adding to the confusion. This account, as detailed as it is and correct in its analysis of ground, has influenced many if not most who've written about the battle since (including the author in my publication *Battle for Northumbria* (Newcastle upon Tyne, Bridge Studios, 1988)). Ramsay (1892) places the whole battle 1½ miles (2.4km) east of the (now) agreed site: Burne, Boardman, Armstrong, and I all disagree with this.¹⁴

Bates (1895) gives a fairly sketchy account, describes the Scottish camp as surrounded by marshes with an entrance facing east along the line of the Newcastle road; armed camp followers form a first line of defence. He says nothing about any English flanking attack.¹⁵ Sitwell (1925) just says: 'The Scots made themselves bowers of trees and branches in a strong position surrounded by marshes, the entrance towards Newcastle was occupied by varlets & foragers . . . the cattle could graze between the two camps'.¹⁶ Sitwell, who'd been a serving soldier, maintains the English battered their way into the camp which exposed them even more to Douglas' flank assault. He has Redmayne running from the fight pursued and captured by Lindsay, who is himself taken by the Prince Bishop.¹⁷

Redoubtable Colonel A.H. Burne (1952) was the first since White to have a serious look.¹⁸ He points out that the present road, the turnpike (A696) follows the line of the old medieval way. He rightly points out that the Scots defensive position covers the 'pass' between the river and rising ground north. He identifies two key problems: 1. Location of the Scottish camp; and 2. Flank marches by both armies. Burne argues that the English flank attack struck out northwards from the right of Hotspur's army in a wide flanking movement which today would take Umfraville past Otterburn Hall as far as Hopefoot (the way they'd just come), westwards, skirting Blakeman's Law to attack along a north-south axis, hitting the north flank of the higher camp. Burne projects the line of Douglas' own flank attack as an inside track, west to east around Greenchesters, parallel with Otterburn Hall.

The colonel had walked the ground and is confident Douglas was able to strike, initially undetected, against the right flank of Hotspur's main brigade at a point close to the current marker. Burne admits he struggled to work out what then happened to Umfraville, or how these two flanking manoeuvres failed to collide.¹⁹ He rejects any notion that Umfraville attacked on the left and not on the right – he feels the river prevents this.

This is a touch of *deus ex machine* and might be suspected that Burne was adapting the possibilities to suit his own hypothesis. He rejects Greenchesters as any site for a second camp on the basis it's too ancient, but this is not a reasonable hypothesis. It is difficult to disagree with so respected an authority, but Burne's vision is wrong. The idea of two large bodies of armoured men passing each other without noticing, even allowing for poor light and scrub/tree cover just doesn't add up. If Umfraville had to march back up the Davyshiels Road then strike out cross country, that's over 3 miles (4.8km) in distance. Yet, if he'd tried a tighter angle, he'd have smacked into Douglas.

Macdonald (2000) specifies the date as 5 August and he says that Percy sent Redmayne and Ogle off on a flanking manoeuvre but omits to specify which flank, the implication being this was a northwards move and the camp they attacked being that at Greenchesters.²⁰ He airily dismisses the idea of night fighting. He does credit Redmayne and Ogle with 'success on another part of the field' and of capturing Lindsay. This really doesn't add much. Nor does Moffatt's account (2002) which contains a rather bare and vague summary.

Boardman considers the battle in considerable detail and carefully analyses both ground and sources; he gives the date as 19 August. He points out that the area generally agreed upon was known on early maps as Battle Riggs.²¹ He further observes that the line of the river is an important constraint and narrows the area available to the combatants. Now he says, quite rightly, that Froissart asserts the castle 'stood in the marsh'.²² This is a different marsh to that at Greenchesters or, more likely at the time, a continuous belt of low-lying alluvial bog. Boardman asserts, and Colonel Burne would have approved, that it was this very marsh which had partly frustrated Douglas' attempts to take the Tower which is after all built close to the confluence of the Otter Burn and Rede and none of this can be criticised. He confidently accepts the idea of two Scottish encampments one on higher, another on lower and that the defence of one could be supported by reserves from the other.

Boardman cites Oman and his analysis of Scottish fourteenth-century tactics, based on 'King Robert's Testament'.²³ This is important because it strongly implies, as the accounts seem to support, that the Scots were not relying just on defence. This was a clever diversion to pin the English while Douglas circled their flank. Boardman is adamant that Redmayne and Ogle attacked the lower camp by the river. He goes on to suggest that light from cooking fires would have alerted Hotspur to the reality of two enemy camps and he intended to strike at the upper base with the bulk of his forces, having divined that the lower camp was not his prime target.²⁴

Boardman is confident (and the author concurs) that Redmayne's success outpaced Hotspur's own advance. Bearing in mind the scrubby, wooded nature of the ground and failing light, this is understandable ('time spent in

reconnaissance is never wasted'). He didn't know, could not see, exactly where the main camp stood. Despite being taken by surprise, Douglas' men formed up, as they'd been schooled to do and carried out their own flanking tactics, knowing exactly the ground over which they'd advance. He does say Redmayne's force remained mounted, but this unlikely. He dismisses the idea of a separate flanking move to the north led by Umfraville, which seems correct.²⁵

The author's previous account in *Border Fury* (Cambridge, Pearsons, 2004) is broadly consistent with Boardman, except it being more likely that Redmayne's Brigade attacked dismounted; wet ground and field obstacles would have frustrated any attempt at a mounted charge. Whether, having beaten up the camp, the English on this flank mounted up for the pursuit could, however, be a strong possibility. Armstrong (2006) takes a similar line.

If you approach Elsdon from the south along the straight-as-a-die road past Harwood, coming up from Cambo, you reach the high ground of Steng's Cross, the tarmac then winding and curving down towards the settlement. Directly in front you, angular and uncompromising against a grey winter's sky, is the sinister shape of the gibbet. This significantly postdates the bad old days of the reivers and was erected as late as 1791, built to cage the mortal remains of William Winter who'd been hanged at the Westgate in Newcastle.

By this date Elsdon was already ancient, the traditional town of turbulent Redesdale – the name's derived from the old English 'Elli's Valley'. Below the castle is a well-restored Vicar's Pele, an impressive tower house, deluxe by border standards, much extended and given a less military makeover in the nineteenth century. St Cuthbert's is a charming and surprisingly large church, an early foundation and one of the resting places for St Cuthbert's coffin on its extended travels. It was rebuilt in the later medieval period and there's some suggestion it might have been trashed by the Scottish army prior to the Battle of Otterburn in 1388.

What most would say about Otterburn itself is that a road and, if they notice, a river run through it. It has a distinctly unloved look with the MoD camp lying behind. Nonetheless, the current Otterburn Towers Hotel, mainly *c.* 1830, stands on the site of the original Umfraville castle, though no visible traces endure. The later Otterburn Hall *c.* 1870) was built for Lord James Douglas who was apparently gifted the site in recompense for the death of his ancestor in 1388 (see Map 2).²⁶ For a detailed examination of the primary sources, please refer to Appendix 3.

The Battle

Though not a major fight, the very intensity of the battle and the balladry this inspired guaranteed its lasting fame (see Appendix 1). And though he lost, Hotspur's legend began to flourish. Froissart lets us know that while Harry

might have been beaten, his ransom (7,000 marks) was soon raised and paid over. Hotspur suffered no fallout from the defeat. How then do we summarise the facts as they appear to us and reconcile the various anomalies? We can accept the facts of the Scottish invasion as the sources broadly agree and that there was some skirmishing outside the walls of Newcastle near the extended timber outer barbican or barrier; whether knightly pennons changed hands is open to speculation. What we can accept is that Percy, realising he was facing far fewer numbers than he anticipated, decided to seize the initiative, which the Scots had so far monopolised, and go after them.

That Percy's force at about 6,000–7,000 was substantively larger seems reasonable. On that afternoon, to cover 32 miles (51km) given that most would be mounted on hobbies and travelling at about 7 to 8mph probably means they could have covered the distance in perhaps five to six hours. If they marched at noon that means they could be approaching Otterburn by late afternoon/early evening, the hour of Vespers, plenty of time to deliver a knockout blow in daylight given dusk would have been at about 2100 hours.

To risk an immediate assault and avoid leaguering for the night made tactical sense. The Scots, being outnumbered, would, in all probability, have used the cover of darkness to clear off, content with keeping their loot intact. Given how far the beasts had been driven and at a rapid pace, they had probably needed to rest before going on to make that long climb to the border, so hanging on at Otterburn and pummelling the Tower didn't appear to entail much risk as the speed of Hotspur's reaction was partly unanticipated.

Let's also assume Douglas and March were, in part, surprised to find themselves under attack, their dispositions were still sound. The livestock was guarded by the ad hoc defences of the lower camp and the watchers could be relied upon to give a decent account of themselves; holding out long enough to be reinforced. Douglas had clearly trained his men-at-arms in the flanking manoeuvre they'd execute if attacked frontally. Walking the ground confirms the feasibility of this and we know the scrub and tree cover was denser at the time. Hotspur was relying on speed and dash rather than careful reconnaissance and he'd be aware of the risk that entailed.

Hotspur's plan to divide his forces does make sense if we accept he knew the location of the Scots' lower camp but not that of their main fighting base. What developed were almost two separate battles. Redmayne and Ogle performed their allotted task admirably and beat up the Scots guarding the camp; even reinforcements of men-at-arms couldn't finally stem the rot. Fatally, however, the flank attack developed into a wild pursuit, and they were unable to come to Hotspur's aid. As Percy hesitated, and this would be necessary to marshal his men for the second prong of his assault, Douglas gained the respite he needed. If, as has been suggested, Hotspur commanded up to 7,000 men and that these

were mounted, his column in line of march would have stretched back for up to 8 miles (13km) and taken a deal of time and sweat to deploy for the attack. We are ready to surmise that a large part of his strength never in fact engaged.

As the column came north from Elsdon, they'd know the enemy was close, both sides would. Much has been said of the Scots being surprised but both sides would have had their pricklers ranging. What the English would notice would be the absence of livestock and only the mournful dirge of curlews punctuating summer's evening. The Scots would have lifted whatever they could and whatever locals had failed to spirit away or conceal and that creates a feeling of unnatural calm. This was experienced in Northumberland again as recently as 2001 when foot and mouth disease resulted in mass culling and emptied fields. A rural landscape suddenly cleared of livestock is uncanny, and the extent of this is not realised until it happens. It feels like a harbinger.

At what point did the fighters dismount? We think Hotspur dismounted his men as he prepared to deploy. This would take time. We don't think Douglas mounted for his flank attack; the Scots tradition was to fight on foot in dense, packed spear phalanxes – the schiltrun. That short distance over difficult ground must imply the Scots came down on foot, already marshalled into battalions so they could deliver their own counterattack while maintaining an element of surprise and with it tactical initiative.

At first the English were caught off guard but soon rallied and were able to hold their ground. The fight degenerated into stalemate in which the English possibly still had an advantage in numbers, though they'd be bone-weary after their exhausting yomp while Douglas' men were fit and rested. Both sides had reason to feel confident in their officers and neither at this stage could claim any morale advantage.

If the Earl of Douglas had been following Robert the Bruce's example he'd have done what the great man did at Bannockburn and kept one battalion in reserve to deal a decisive blow. We're thinking that is what Douglas did in fact do; his attack was no berserker rush but a sound and well-executed strike against Percy's extreme right flank which was effectively in the air. Clearly, the earl led from the front, and it cost him his life, but he died unrecognised, so his men didn't lose heart. This whole tactic was a well-rehearsed manoeuvre and his charge the signal for a renewed effort along the line with serial bruisers like Swinton showing the way. It worked.

We look at plans of troop deployments and moves on maps, but we must always bear in mind that while careful cartography and writer's hindsight appear to make sense of the whole thing, it was never like that on the day. Medieval commanders had no means of controlling a fight once it began other than by flags or messenger. 'No plan ever survives contact with the enemy' is a sound military maxim and the face of battle changes everything. It's also very ugly and confused.

Finally, after much hard fighting, Percy's line faltered and then broke, knots of fighters spilling untidily in the gathering dusk. If we assume the English reached the battlefield at about 1800 hours and were attacking on their left by 1830 with Douglas' counter punch ramming home at about 1900–1930 hours that's over an hour of decent daylight to win the day. We don't think the battle was, at any salient point, fought by moonlight but the pursuit would have been.

So, on the English left, Redmayne and Ogle pelted after their beaten opponents, losing all contact with Hotspur on their right and playing no further significant role in the overall decision. They cheered after the fleeing Scots, jubilantly relieving them of anything that was worth nicking or perhaps re-nicking. On Hotspur's right it is presumed there was no rout and that while many men were captured, a large part of Percy's 'tail' would have got off in good order and retreated towards Elsdon, harried all the way but still in fighting trim.

How do we explain the apparent interment of so many, presumably English dead, at Elsdon? Bodies were buried where they fell not carted for several miles. We're going to get even more heroic in our assumptions suggest that this came about because of a negotiated truce. These were not uncommon and while it cannot be proved, it is a tantalising possibility. After the battle, the Scots remained in possession of the field, but they may have agreed to allow English survivors access to the ground to remove their dead and inter them elsewhere. Now, we don't even know who the dead of Elsdon are. It was thought at the time they had to be casualties and while this makes every good sense, we'll know nothing more until, or indeed if, further forensic archaeological work is undertaken to open and investigate the supposed mass grave.

What does the Battle of Otterburn tell us about Hotspur as a commander? Winners are usually labelled as decisive; losers are plain impetuous. Harry Percy lost and is invariably described as rash and impetuous. His decision to attack at night or at least evening is routinely cited as evidence of folly. This isn't necessarily so. Having tracked the Scots and regained, for the first time in that campaign, a measure of tactical initiative, he really had no choice but to press this advantage or see it vanish. Besides, if he did attack at Vespers, he had well over two hours of daylight, medieval battles rarely lasted that long.

Hotspur had never led a sizeable field force into battle, medieval commanders didn't like battles, they were too unpredictable, impossible to control, and failure meant catastrophe. Percy had made his formidable reputation as a leader of light cavalry, hobiler warfare, now perfected by both sides on the Border Marches. Success, as he'd demonstrated, demanded dash and vigour. He had plenty of both. It took nerve. He had that, and it took fine judgement, luck helped as well. Trying to translate hobiler tactics onto a larger battlefield was tricky, different dynamics applied as command and control was far, far more difficult.

A key element in conventional combat was, as ever, intelligence gleaned through sound reconnaissance. This was lacking and proved a serious flaw; he would be attacking while not knowing exactly where his main enemy was stationed and the clear potential of dead ground which Douglas had previously spotted. We could say the Scots won because their close knowledge of the ground was superior.

Another serious failing on Percy's part was his inability to coordinate the two pincers of his assault. Redmayne and Ogle did well at the outset, achieved their key tactical objectives but seemingly had no orders or possibly just couldn't control their men when it came to reforming. Whatever the reason, he lost perhaps a third or more of his force who, had they been able to support his wing, might well have tilted the balance and it does seem to have been a fine balance. What we can say is that Hotspur gambled, he took a significant risk and he lost. History tends to be hard on losers. Yet his contemporaries didn't seem to blame him.

An even more famous loser, American Confederate General Robert E. Lee, noted that: 'there is always hazard in military movements, but we must decide between the *positive* loss of inaction and the risk of action'. James Wolfe, a posthumous winner, said very much the same: 'In war something must be left to chance and fortune, seeing that it is in its nature hazardous and an option of difficulties'. Hotspur, had he left us any written testimonial, would doubtless have concurred.

The Elsdon Burials

One of the most tantalizing aspects of the battle, which I referred to earlier are the presumed remains of those found beneath the floors of St Cuthbert's Church in Elsdon in the nineteenth century. These interments were known about by 1810 but no full excavation took place until 1877 when floor levels within the nave and transepts were being dug out and re-laid. A local doctor, E.C. Robertson, attended the site after remains had been discovered and wrote up his findings.²⁷ Workmen confirmed they'd uncovered a total of 996 bodies from what appeared to be a single mass burial, overlaid with many others from a mix of later periods. Robertson noted that the wall of the nave (*c.* 1400) had been built *over* part of the mass grave and therefore, he guessed, had to predate re-building – the fifteenth-century church replaced a smaller predecessor.

Robertson judged that the remains were all male and relatively young. On one skull he found evidence of healed battle injury. On the basis of this he came to the conclusion that these were English casualties from the Battle of Otterburn. This was supported but the fact that no females seemed to lie among them and the presumed age range ruled out plague or any other natural cause, besides no record of an outbreak of disease exists. How fascinating it would be to exhume some of these bones and have them analysed using modern scientific methods.