

Summary of the period of the Guardians, 1298–1304

Outline of events

- **Improvisation, 1298–1300**
- **John de Soules, 1301–1302**
- **Edward I re-conquers Scotland, 1303–1304**

Key factors

- **Edward I's troubles**
- **France**
- **John Balliol**

Improvisation, 1298–1300

Robert Bruce and John Comyn as joint guardians

After the Battle of Falkirk (22 July 1298) Edward I went no further north than Stirling, and then returned to England, leaving only the south-east of Scotland in his control. Wallace was replaced as Guardian by Robert Bruce, earl of Carrick (the future king) and his rival, John Comyn the younger, representing the two most powerful families in the kingdom. (The head of each family at the time was Robert Bruce's father, Robert lord of Annandale, d. 1304, and John Comyn's father, John Comyn, lord of Badenoch, d. 1302). Wallace and five other knights went as an embassy to the French king, Philip IV—presumably on Bruce's orders, because one of Comyn's followers claimed that Wallace had gone 'without permission'. This came to a head at a meeting at Peebles in 1299 when John Comyn seized Bruce by the throat, and his cousin, John Comyn earl of Buchan, grabbed hold of William Lamberton (the bishop of St Andrews appointed by Wallace when he was guardian).

New guardians: William Lamberton, bishop of St Andrews, and Ingram de Umfraville

After the scuffle at Peebles William Lamberton was appointed as chief guardian, while John Comyn and Robert Bruce remained as guardians. The fighting against remaining pockets of English-controlled Scotland was intensified, leading to the recapture of Stirling by the end of the year. At a parliament held at Rutherglen in May 1300 tensions resurfaced when Comyn refused to work with Lamberton anymore. In the end, it was Bruce who resigned as guardian and was replaced by Ingram de Umfraville, a kinsman of John Balliol and associate of the Comyns. There were still three guardians, but the balance of power had shifted to the Comyn side.

In July and August Edward I led an army into Galloway, taking Caerlaverock Castle, but achieving little else apart from strengthening his control of lowland Dumfriesshire. In October a truce was agreed with the guardians for seven months.

John de Soules, 1301–1302

Diplomatic pressure

In their negotiations with Edward I in 1300 the guardians had demanded the restoration of John Balliol as their king. This was not an empty gesture. John Balliol had already been released by Edward I into papal custody near Cambrai (France) (but he kept hold of John Balliol's son and heir, Edward Balliol). At the beginning of 1301 John Balliol took an active interest in the government of unoccupied Scotland in his absence, and appointed John de Soules as sole guardian. The main successes were diplomatic. In May and June a Scottish delegation to the pope, led by Baldred Bisset, put pressure on Edward I to justify his claim to Scotland. In the summer of the same year John Balliol was transferred from papal custody to the king of France, who allowed him to settle in his ancestral home of Bailleul-en-Vimeu in Picardy.

Edward I's invasion

Between July and September Edward I mounted a dangerous assault on southern Scotland, driving into Clydesdale while his son and heir, Edward Prince of Wales, led a force into Galloway. They planned to meet at Inverkip, trapping John de Soules in a pincer movement. Soules, however, campaigned vigorously, attacking Lochmaben, and preventing the two English armies from joining up. Edward I had to make do with taking Bothwell Castle on 24 September 1301. The Bruce stronghold of Turnberry also fell. On 26 January 1302 Edward I agreed a truce for 9 months.

Bruce submits to Edward I

The truce with Edward I in January 1302—which covered the campaigning season that year—made the prospect of John Balliol's return to Scotland all the more likely. This put Robert Bruce in a very awkward position. His family had never reconciled themselves to the award of the crown to Balliol in 1292, and had developed a strong rivalry with the Comyns, who were Balliol's closest supporters. He calculated that he could lose everything if Balliol returned to power. An immediate concern was what would happen to Annandale when his father died: would he be allowed to inherit the ancestral Bruce lordship? Also, Turnberry, the chief stronghold of his earldom of Carrick, was in English hands. He decided that his best course of action would be to submit to Edward I. The chief point of this was not necessarily to gain Edward I's protection. His immediate intention was to marry Elizabeth de Burgh, the daughter of the earl of Ulster, and so form an alliance that would help protect his earldom of Carrick. An Irish force had helped the English to take Turnberry in October 1301. The same military strength could now be used defensively to his advantage if need be. But he could only do this by entering Edward I's peace, because the earl of Ulster recognised Edward I's sovereignty.

Soules's hopes undermined by the Flemish

The fatal blow to Soules's efforts to restore Scottish independence with John Balliol back in Scotland as king was not delivered by an English army in Scotland. It was the massive defeat inflicted on Philip IV of France by the Flemish at the Battle of Courtrai on 11 July 1302. This weakened Philip IV in his war against Edward I, leading ultimately to peace with Edward I in May 1303 excluding the Scots. Without French support, the hopes of restoring John Balliol to Scotland were doomed.

Edward I re-conquers Scotland, 1303–1304

Comyn's finest hour

The end came only gradually. The English forces of occupation could be challenged. John Comyn and Simon Fraser won a notable victory at Roslin, south of Edinburgh, on 24 February 1303, in which they killed Ralph Manton, an important figure in Edward I's government in Scotland, and briefly captured Sir John Segrave, one of Edward I's foremost captains, who was rescued before the battle was finished. It has been argued that this victory may have made John Comyn (and others) start to think that he, as John Balliol's nephew, could lead the resistance not just as a guardian, but potentially as King John II. This is only speculation, of course. Alexander Grant has argued that it could help to explain why Robert Bruce, who definitely had his eye on the throne, decided that John Comyn had to be killed when the time came, in February 1306, for Robert Bruce himself to make a bid for the crown of Scotland.

Edward I invades Scotland

On 20 May 1303 Edward I and Philip IV of France made peace. The Scots were excluded from this, and were left to feel the full force of Edward I's power on their own. By the middle of June he was in Perth. On 23 August he arrived in Aberdeen. In less than a fortnight he had reached Banff. After stopping at Kinloss on 14 September he returned south, past Lochindorb and probably over the Cabrach and Cairn O'Mount, arriving at Dunfermline on 5 November for the winter. Edward met no significant resistance. This show of force, going north to gaze again over the Moray Firth as he had in 1296, was sufficient. John Comyn opened negotiations 'on behalf of the community of Scotland', and agreed terms of surrender at Strathord on 9 February 1304. This was the last act of government in the name of King John Balliol, and formally brought his reign to an end. (His personal rule, of course, had never been restored since he humiliatingly surrendered his kingdom to Edward I at Montrose on 8 July 1296.)

Final resistance

Not all Scots had capitulated. William Wallace and Simon Fraser led bands of desperados. John de Soules withdrew to France. One stronghold held out in the name of 'the lion' (as its captain announced to Edward I: the lion, then as now, was the symbol of the Scottish king). Stirling Castle alone stood against Edward I's might. He pounded it mercilessly with the latest design of siege engines, until it finally surrendered on 24 July. While Edward was at Stirling he received the homage of Robert Bruce for the lordship of Annandale, which he had inherited on his father's death on 21 April 1304. Robert Bruce was now head of his family. With his father's death he inherited not only the ancestral Bruce lands but also the Bruce claim to the throne. He lost no time in laying plans. A day or two before his homage as the new lord of Annandale to Edward I, Robert Bruce formed a secret pact with William Lamberton, bishop of St Andrews. It has been argued by Geoffrey Barrow that this was Bruce's first move to build support for a future bid for the throne.

Edward I's troubles

Why had it taken so long for Edward I to impose his will on Scotland again after most of his conquest of 1296 was undone in 1297? One key factor was his war with France. This required more money than he could raise by ordinary means, which meant that he had to resort increasingly to unpopular measures, like seizing wool (with a promise to repay in the future) or ruthlessly enforcing his royal rights (particularly over areas designated as royal forest, which he could expand). The greatest source of revenue was a direct tax on the moveable wealth of his subjects. It was customary for this to be granted in a parliament that included local representatives. In July 1297, however, he tried to avoid this, and provoked serious resistance. In the following years Edward I had numerous disputes in parliament over his oppressive demands, leading eventually to concessions that John Maddicott has described as his 'final defeat' in 1301. Between October 1302 and February 1305 Edward I had no need to call parliament. Peace with France meant he could devote his resources to re-conquering Scotland, and the money he could raise without parliament was enough for this task. Before the French were defeated at the Battle of Courtrai (11 July 1302) by Edward's Flemish allies, however, he was severely stretched financially and weakened at home. There was certainly no opportunity for him to build massive castles in Scotland like those he had erected in Wales to subdue it after his conquest of 1282-3.

France

It was Scotland's alliance with France in 1295 and John Balliol's refusal to join Edward I's forces that led to Edward I's invasion of 1296. It was obviously in France's interests to support Scottish resistance to Edward I. This helped in promoting Scotland's cause in the court of European opinion at the papal curia. This was vital in securing Balliol's release into papal custody in July 1299. France only helped militarily in an indirect way by diverting Edward's strength away from Scotland. Unfortunately if the king of France fell out with the pope, as happened towards the end of Pope Boniface's reign (1294–1303), then this would inevitably turn the pope towards England. So close was the connection between France and the fortunes of the Scots that the broad course of the war in the period between 1297 and 1304 in Scotland cannot be understood without knowing about Philip IV's conflict with Edward I. Philip IV's defeat by the Flemish at Courtrai on 11 July 1302 can, therefore, be seen as a pivotal event for Scottish history, leading eventually to the final failure of those fighting for the hope of John Balliol's return as king.

John Balliol

Soules and the other Scottish leaders understood that the fight for an independent kingdom needed a king to lead it. You cannot have a kingdom without a king. All except the Bruces had accepted John Balliol's right to rule in 1292. It was very difficult—probably inconceivable—after 1297 for them to think of any alternative in the long term other than the ultimate restoration of King John in Scotland. When John Balliol was released first into papal custody in July 1299 and then to his ancestral estates in France in the summer of 1301 there must have been a genuine hope that he might return. Although there is evidence that King John took an active interest in Scottish affairs in 1301, Amanda Beam has suggested that, by the end of 1302, it was clear that he had given up any intentions he may have had to regain his kingdom. By then, she argues, he was seriously in debt. He continued to be addressed as 'king of Scots' in France, and died in late November 1314.