

The
Declaration
of Arbroath



700th
Anniversary Display

1320–2020



The Declaration of Arbroath, dated 6th April 1320, is widely seen as Scotland's most iconic document. One of the treasures of National Records of Scotland, it is regarded as the key Scottish document from the Wars of Independence when the Scots attempted to re-affirm the independence of the kingdom of Scotland against English claims to overlordship.

The Declaration is a letter from the barons and the community of the realm of Scotland to Pope John XXII. It is a carefully crafted appeal designed to persuade the Pope to reconsider his approach to the long-running Anglo-Scottish conflict.

The Declaration's stirring language, and its evocative sentiments of nationhood and freedom, have given it a special distinction since then, not just in Scotland but worldwide.



Why was the Declaration needed?

Despite the Scottish victory over English King Edward II at the Battle of Bannockburn in June 1314, and continued Scottish raids on the north of England, Edward would not drop the long-standing English claim to overlordship of Scotland. Neither Edward nor the Pope recognised Robert I as king of Scots.

A papal attempt to secure peace failed when King Robert recaptured the border town of Berwick in 1318. The Pope issued letters in November 1319 summoning the King and four Scottish bishops to attend the papal court. Their refusal to obey the summons led to their excommunication. The Declaration was part of their diplomatic counter-offensive.

Left, right: Initial letter and seals of the Declaration of Arbroath



Drafting the Declaration

The Declaration's content was probably planned at a meeting of the King and his council of advisers at Newbattle Abbey, just south of Edinburgh, in March 1320. Arrangements were presumably made then for the barons to seal the letter.

The Declaration was written in Latin on sheep-skin, and is dated at the monastery of Arbroath in Angus, the location of the king's chancery or writing-office. King Robert's chancellor, Bernard, was abbot of Arbroath. The letter was written by one of the chancery scribes.

It is about 1000 words long. Its author included short quotations from the Bible and from the 1st century BC Roman author and politician, Sallust, re-phrased to emphasise the argument.

Content of the Declaration

The Declaration emphasises Scotland's long history as an independent Christian kingdom. It contains a brief account of the mythical origins of the Scots: they had overcome many difficulties in their journey from Greater Scythia (to the north of the Black Sea) via Spain to Scotland. It explains that they had lived in freedom and peace until King Edward I (father of the present King Edward II) invaded Scotland and caused widespread havoc.

The Declaration asserts that the Scots were saved by their present King, Robert Bruce, whom they will defend as their king unless he seeks to make their kingdom subject to the English king. The Pope is asked to persuade Edward II to leave the Scots in peace, and Scotland's support for a crusade is pledged if peace should be achieved. The letter closes with a threat to the Pope – that he would be answerable to God should war continue.

■ The people of the Declaration

The Declaration was sent in the names of eight earls and 31 barons of Scotland. It implies that all Scots were steadfast in their support of Robert I as king. But in reality that support was not universal. The majority of the barons named in the Declaration were King Robert's loyal supporters, but not all. Furthermore, Robert's dynasty was fragile – his heir, grandson Robert Stewart, was only four years old.

In December 1318 an act of Parliament had been passed against anyone spreading rumours against the king or his government, and within weeks of the Declaration being drafted, a conspiracy against King Robert I was uncovered. Its leaders were savagely dealt with at Parliament in August 1320.

The conspirators intended to oust Robert, but it is not clear whom they wanted as his replacement. Historians speculate that they preferred to have Edward Balliol (son of King John Balliol, deposed in 1296) as king, rather than Robert.

■ Sealing the Declaration

Documents at this time were not signed. To authenticate documents, wax seals were attached. Seals were commonly used by the king and his officials, landowners, churchmen, and merchants.

There are nineteen seals currently attached to the Declaration. Perhaps as many as 50 seals might once have been attached, but seals are easily lost or damaged. Depicted on the seals is a mixture of heraldic and personal motifs. Three seals are equestrian, showing knights on horseback. They are the seals of some of the more important barons, and are in red wax. The seals of the less important barons are in green wax.

No royal seal is appended because it was a letter sent in the name of the barons. A separate letter was sent by the King, and by the bishop of St Andrews, but those letters have been long lost.

Multi-sealed documents like this are rare but are not unusual for a document of national significance.

■ What did the Declaration achieve?

In his reply to the letter, the Pope urged a reconciliation between the warring sides. Following the deposition of Edward II in 1327 and consequent discord in England, an opportunity arose to negotiate a settlement. The treaty of Edinburgh-Northampton in March 1328 was supposed to effect a “final and perpetual peace”. It included the recognition of Robert I as king, and of Scottish independence.

In 1329 the Pope issued a bull permitting the anointing and crowning of the king of Scots by the bishop of St Andrews as the Pope's representative, a very important concession.

The Declaration on its own did not cause all this: it was just one step in a long campaign. Alas, the Anglo-Scottish conflict recommenced in 1332.

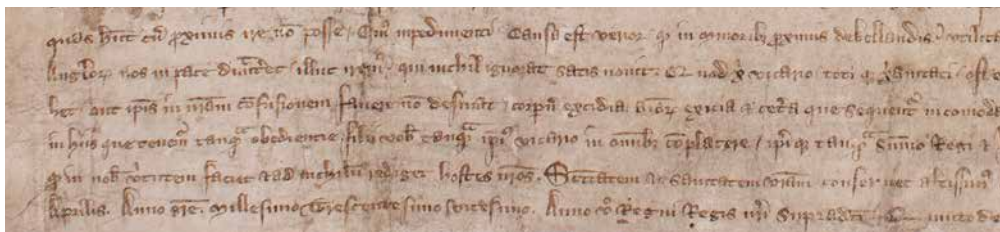
■ History of the Declaration

The original letter sent to the Pope has long since disappeared. The document held by National Records of Scotland is what is regarded as the Scottish “file copy”, but it was undoubtedly written at the same time as the original letter.

This copy of the Declaration was held amongst the Scottish national archives in Edinburgh Castle. During building work there in the 17th century the Declaration fell into private custody. In 1829, the Declaration was restored to its natural home amongst the national archives in their then-new repository, H M General Register House, Edinburgh.

The text of the Declaration was copied into some medieval manuscripts, such as histories of Scotland. The first English translation appeared in 1689. Subsequent publication in either Latin or English brought the letter to a wider audience.

Its name “Declaration of Arbroath” is relatively modern, inspired by a perceived connection with the United States Declaration of Independence of 1776. The link between the two Declarations continues to be debated by historians. In 1998 the US Senate passed a resolution, stating that 6th April “has a special significance for all Americans, and especially those of Scottish descent”. Many signers of the US Declaration had Scottish ancestry. As a result, 6th April has been designated Tartan Day in the USA, an occasion for a festival of Scottish heritage.



Left: Part of the Declaration of Arbroath's text



Habens aut Josue labores + redit
in Consensus + assensus nrm fecit
Istet Regi Anglorum + Anglias
Omnia qd in Carta omnium se
tenende pnt + Dne qd sacratam coram
+ Scoti + Anglia + Ebulaciones
ib; monere + exhortari dignemur



Clockwise from above: The Declaration of Arbroath, Seal of Alexander Lamberton, 'as long as a hundred of us remain alive' text, Seal of Alexander Fraser

Translation of the Declaration of Arbroath, 6 April 1320

National Records of Scotland, SP13/7

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 Declaration has been translated into English on many occasions. This version of the translation was compiled by National Records of Scotland staff in 2005, and is based on the version of Sir James Fergusson in his book *The Declaration of Arbroath, 1320* (published in 1970).



nrsotland.gov.uk/declaration

