

The Canter of Coltbridge

In 1745 there were only two regular cavalry regiments in Scotland, Gardiner's (13th) and Hamillton's (16th) Dragoons. When the Rising began, Gardiner's were at Stirling and Hamilton's at Leith Links. On the approach of the Jacobite Army to cross the Forth at the Fords of Frew, Gardiner's Dragoons retired to Linlithgow whither they were pursued by a large Jacobite force before retiring again to Corstorphine on the outskirts of Edinburgh where they were joined by Hamilton's Dragoons.

Before daybreak on Monday 16 September 1745 Brigadier Fowkes sent his major to ask the Lord Provost of Edinburgh (Archibald Stewart) for permission to march out the town-guard and the Edinburgh Regiment for the support of the dragoons at Coltbridge, The provost granted the request and the men duly arrived at the dragoon's camp in a field east of Coltbridge. Here they learned that Colonel James Gardiner had come in during the night with his regiment in a terrible state of fatigue after their hasty retreat from Stirling. Fearing surprise by the pursuing Jacobites Gardiner had kept the men under arms all night and they could scarcely keep awake. Their horses were equally exhausted. Brigadier Fowkes therefore sent his brigade-major to inform Lieut-General Guest, at Edinburgh Castle, of the condition of the men and horses and to request supplies from the Lord Provost. Fowkes also requested permission to advance with the cavalry to attack the Jacobites. This last request was refused, as the ground was considered unsuitable for cavalry and owing to their poor condition the General thought it would be better if they retired eastwards to join Sir John Cope, whose landing at Dunbar was imminently expected. Fowkes, however, sent out a small scouting party to discover the position of the Jacobite outposts.

The scouting party returned in mid-afternoon with the alarming news that the enemy was at Corstorphine and had fired upon them as they approached. This news caused panic among the troops which their officers could not appease. Fowkes, therefore, marched off the front squadrons more or less in order but those in the rear, fearful of the proximity of the enemy, broke ranks and galloped off as fast as they could. The panic then became general and the whole cavalry brigade, thrown into disorder by the cowardice of the rear squadron, rode wildly along the north side of the city, on what is now George Street, towards Leith Links where it was hoped they might bivouac for the night, but the lack of food or forage there made it necessary for them to continue their flight to Musselburgh. The hasty flight of the dragoons had been observed by many Edinburgh citizens from the castle hill and the news spread rapidly through the city where it created great alarm. This disgraceful incident has become known as, "The Canter of Coltbridge".

Norman H. MacDonald, September 2009