William Wallace

Use the information in this two-page worksheet, and any other relevant information from your textbook, to complete the activities on the second page.

William Wallace, Guardian of Scotland

Much of what we know about William Wallace was recorded by the fifteenth-century medieval knight Henry the Mistral. Since then, Wallace has been immortalised in the poem ‘Scots wha hae’ by Robert Burns, Scotland’s most famous poet, and in an 1898 book by A. F. Morison. Most recently, his story was brought to life in the award-winning movie Braveheart.

Wallace was thought to have been born in 1272, the same year that Edward I (nicknamed Edward Longshanks) became King of England. Wallace grew to be a brave, intelligent, very tall and striking young man.

Edward seizes a power vacuum

In 1286, Alexander III, the King of Scotland died. He wanted his grand-daughter (the then four-year old daughter of the King of Norway) to succeed him, but she died four years later. Left without a ruler, Scottish nobles asked Edward I to decide who should be their next king. Two obvious candidates were John Balliol and Robert the Bruce. Secretly, though, Edward I planned to take control in Scotland, so took his time to reply.

In 1288, Edward I made his decision. The next Scottish ruler would be Balliol, who became John I of Scotland. But Edward I treated Balliol as little more than a ‘puppet’, and continued to insist on certain feudal rights. By 1291, for example, every Scottish castle was under English control, and English officials held most of the positions of power. Edward I also persuaded a great number of Scottish nobles to swear homage to him, including Robert the Bruce. Many who opposed Edward I were murdered, including William Wallace’s father.

King John I was not happy about Edward I’s actions, and rebelled against the English king at the Battle of Dunbar in 1296. However, John I lost, and was captured. Scotland was again without its own king.

Wallace strikes back

Since 1291, Wallace had lived an outlaw’s life, after killing the Englishman who murdered his father. Whenever he could, he and his small band of followers attacked English outposts. He wanted to free Scotland from the English. Some attacks, though, were more revenge killings, such as his slaying of the English Sheriff of Lanark (who had murdered the woman he loved). These attacks increased the hate of the English and the support of the Scots for William Wallace.

The Battle at Stirling Bridge

In 1297, Edward decided to take strong military action. He sent a force of 50,000 into Scotland to put down the resistance. By this time, the Scottish supporters of Wallace and another rebel, Andrew Murray, had recaptured most of Scotland’s northern regions. A key battle was fought near Stirling. Wallace waited until about half the English force had crossed the bridge leading towards Stirling Castle, before attacking, thus dividing the English force. The English suffered a huge defeat. For this, Wallace received a knighthood and was made Guardian of Scotland.

Wallace – betrayed by jealousy
Wallace was not so lucky the following year, losing to the English at a battle at Falkirk. The problem was that many Scottish nobles were jealous of his success and growing power, and did not support him. Although Wallace escaped with his life, he was a wanted man by the English. When Edward I appointed a new Scottish king in 1304, he pardoned many of the Scottish nobles who had opposed him, but not Wallace.

In 1305, Wallace was captured outside Glasgow where he had arranged to meet Robert the Bruce. Traitorous Scottish knights had passed on his whereabouts to the English. Wallace was paraded in chains before English crowds before being hung, drawn and quartered. He was hung until semi-conscious, his entrails were removed and burnt (while he was still alive), and then he was mercifully beheaded. His body was cut into parts. Wallace’s severed head was stuck on a post on Westminster Bridge, and his other body parts were sent to four different towns in the country. Edward I was back in control of Scotland.

Wallace’s legacy – an independent Scotland
Wallace’s death was meant to be a warning to those who dared to oppose the rule of England. However, his bravery rallied the Scottish people. Under Robert the Bruce (1274 to 1329) – who became King Robert I of Scotland in 1306 – the Scots defeated the English at the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314. The English finally recognised Scottish independence in a treaty called the Peace of Northampton, signed in 1328.

1. Construct a timeline to depict the key events in the life and times of Scotland’s medieval national hero, William Wallace.

2. What different actions did King Edward I take to establish and strengthen his hold over power in Scotland? Explain for each action why this was likely to succeed.

3. Explain why:
   (a) Edward I hated Wallace so fiercely
   (b) many Scottish nobles refused to support Wallace
   (c) the common Scottish people regarded him as a hero.

4. Suggest why Edward I decided on such a horrific death for Wallace. What purpose did this serve? How typical was this sort of treatment of medieval justice?