

## The Athelstaneford Doocot

Doocots such as at Athelstaneford were once common in Scotland, but are now rapidly disappearing from the rural scene.



The doocot - "dovecote" in England - has a long history. To the Romans it was a columbarium; to the French they were colombiers. The Normans introduced them to these islands, and they were soon to be found as far north as Caithness.

Pigeons were a highly desirable addition to the winter diet at a time when fresh meat was not available. Farmers were not able to keep their cattle and sheep alive throughout the winter, and the practice was for flocks and herds to be killed off and the meat salted. Only a few breeding animals were kept alive. The doocot filled the role of today's deep-freeze!

The birds had many advantages - they were prolific,

they needed little space, and they foraged for their own food. They were also totally unconcerned as to who owned the grain which they ate. Tenant farmers often had to look on helplessly while the pigeons of the

landed proprietor ravaged their crops.

In the 18th century, Fife had no fewer than 360 doocots, with 36,000 birds making havoc among the grain. A wry proverb summed up the possessions of a local laird as "a puckle land, a lump o' debt, a doocot and a law plea".

Feudal privilege is said to have been a factor in the French Revolution, and there, figuratively at least, the doocot may be said to have come under the guillotine in 1789.

In Scotland, the end was less violent - it was the turnip which rendered the doocot a thing of the past. The introduction of this root-crop made it possible for the farmer to winter his beasts. Pigeons gradually disappeared from the menu, and doocots fell into disuse and dilapidation.

The doocot at Athelstaneford is one of the earliest surviving Scottish examples from the 16th century. It was built in 1583 by George Hepburn, whose son, Sir John Hepburn, was the founder and first colonel of the Royal Scots. This famous regiment, the First of Foot, has used the Saltire as its emblem since the 17th century.

It is known as a lectern doocot, that is a rectangular structure with a lean-to roof and entry holes for the pigeons half way down the slope. The roof is south facing which gives it a certain amount of sheltered exposure. There are string courses of stone jutting out from the walls, probably to discourage rats from gaining access. The doocot is B-listed by Historic Scotland. In 1996 the Hepburn doocot was comprehensively restored and converted into an interpretative centre for visitors. This work was undertaken by the Scottish Flag Trust.



## The Flag Heritage Centre

Athelstaneford is the birthplace of Scotland's flag. The Flag Heritage Centre, which has been awarded 4 star attraction status by visitscotland, lies behind the Parish Church. Visitors can enjoy a short audio-visual dramatisation, available in 7 languages at the touch of a button, of the traditional origins of the flag. The Centre is open daily between 09.00 and 18.00 from 1 April until 31 October and on St Andrew's Day, 30 November. Admission is FREE.



Athelstaneford lies some 20 miles east of Edinburgh and is easily accessed and signposted from the A1.

[www.scottishflagtrust.com](http://www.scottishflagtrust.com)

# THE LEGEND OF THE SALTIRE



ATHELSTANEFORD  
Birthplace of Scotland's Flag

## The Legend of the Saltire

The St Andrew's Cross or Saltire is Scotland's national flag. Tradition has it that the flag, the white saltire on a blue background, the oldest flag in the Commonwealth and Europe, originated in a battle fought in East Lothian in the Dark Ages.

It is believed that the battle took place in the year 832AD. An army of Picts under Angus mac Fergus, High King of Alba, and aided by a contingent of Scots led by Eochaidh, King of Dalriada (Kenneth mac Alpin's grandfather) had been on a punitive raid into Lothian (then and for long afterwards Northumbrian territory), and were being pursued by a larger force of Angles and Saxons under one Athelstan.

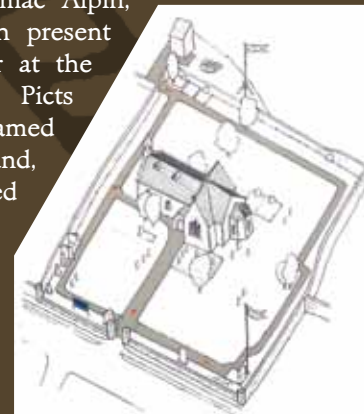
The Albannach/Scots were first caught by their pursuers in the area of Markle, near East Linton. This is just to the east of the modern village of Athelstaneford (which was resited on higher ground in the 18th century), where the Peffer Burn, which flows into the Firth of Forth at Aberlady, forms a wide vale. Being then wholly undrained,

the Peffer presented a major obstacle to crossing, and the two armies eventually came together at the ford near the present day farm of Prora. One of the field names there is marked on the earliest OS maps as the Bloody Lands.

Fearing the outcome of the encounter, King Angus led prayers for deliverance, and was rewarded by the dramatic appearance overhead of a white saltire (the diagonal cross on which St Andrew had been martyred) against a blue sky. The king vowed that if, with the saint's help, he gained the victory, then Andrew would thereafter be the patron saint of Scotland. The Scots did win, and in due course the Saltire became the flag of Scotland.



When Kenneth mac Alpin, who may have been present with his grandfather at the battle, later united Picts and Scots and named the entity Scotland, Andrew did indeed become the patron saint of the united realm. Kenneth mac Alpin, King of Scots and Picts, Ard-righ Albainn, was laid to rest on Iona in 860AD.



Plan of the churchyard

## The Memorial

The Saltire memorial is located at the south east of the churchyard. Built in 1965 to a design by the late Dr F.R. Stevenson, and comprehensively restored in 1993, it consists of a battlescene carved in granite within a textured concrete plinth.

The main panel shows the two armed hosts facing each other, the one about to claim victory, the other already accepting defeat, under the sign in the sky of the St Andrew's Cross. There is practically no surviving pictorial art from the 9th century, so the style is romanesque (Gislebertus of Autun) of a later period.

The inscription on the Memorial is as follows:



**TRADITION SAYS THAT NEAR THIS PLACE IN TIMES REMOTE PICTISH AND SCOTTISH WARRIORS ABOUT TO DEFEAT AN ARMY OF NORTHUMBRIANS, SAW AGAINST A BLUE SKY A GREAT WHITE CROSS LIKE SAINT ANDREW'S, AND IN ITS IMAGE MADE A BANNER WHICH BECAME THE FLAG OF SCOTLAND.**

Attached to the Memorial is a tall flagpole on which a Saltire is flown permanently, even during the hours of darkness when it is floodlit, as a reminder of the flag's origins.

The original copper panel of the battlescene has been restored and is on display in the Flag Heritage Centre.

## The Church and the Graveyard

The original church in Athelstaneford was built in 1176 by Ada, wife of Henry Prince of Scotland, and mother of William the Lion. This continued to be the parish church until 1780, when a new church was erected. There were further alterations in 1867 when the transepts and chancel were added. There has therefore been an unbroken Christian witness in the parish for over 800 years.

The church is open daily, and visitors are welcome to enter. One of the fine stained glass windows within the church (north transept) is of Scotland's patron saint, St Andrew. Also of interest



and on display is the richly decorated Book of the Saltire which chronicles the local origins of the Scottish flag. This was presented at a special service in 1987 to the Minister and Kirk Session by the St Andrew Society of Winnipeg.

A walk along the pathways around the churchyard will reveal many fascinating memorials. Of particular interest is the gravestone on the western wall to Adam Skirving (1719-1803) who wrote "Hey, Johnnie Cope". This well known song tells of another East Lothian battle - the defeat of the Hanoverian Army under Sir John Cope by the Jacobites at Prestonpans on 21 September 1745. Many Scots will know the chorus:

*"Hey, Johnnie Cope are ye wauking yet?  
Or are your drums a-beating yet?  
If ye were wauking I wad wait  
Tae gang tae the coals i the mornin."*

