Historians have not much cared for John, Earl Warenne. The Victoria County History for Surrey described him as ‘a turbulent, probably selfish, and not very capable man’, while Scott Waugh, who penned his entry in the new Dictionary of National Biography, sees him as ‘hesitant and perhaps even pusillanimous on the battlefield and in politics...a symbol of a crude conservatism’. For G.M. Trevelyan, Warenne was nothing more than a ‘blundering feudal chief’, while an earlier historian thought his character ‘dark and repulsive’. More recently, Michael Prestwich, the foremost scholar on the reign of Edward I, has written that Warenne ‘displayed a monumental degree of stupidity’ at the battle which ‘puts him alongside the Earl of Cardigan in the roll call of disastrous English commanders’. This, then, is the historical verdict on the vanquished general at Stirling Bridge.

Warenne was certainly not what one would call a pleasant man. He was famous for brandishing a rusty sword in front of the king’s justices when questioned about his rights during the *quo warranto* proceedings, and on one occasion he attacked and mortally wounded a fellow magnate in the midst of a court case in Westminster Hall. Warenne was a man who insisted upon his own rights to the exclusion of all else: he was reprimanded by the archbishops of both Canterbury and York for the treatment of his tenants, and he refused to allow anyone else to hunt within his barony of Lewes in Sussex, or even to enclose their corn to protect it from being trampled by the wild beasts the earl might wish to hunt.
For all this, however, Warenne was not the blundering fool for which he has so often been taken. His life was characterised not only by his belligerent defence of his own rights, but also by an enduring personal loyalty to Edward I, which had begun in 1254 when they were knighted together in Spain, and lasted through the Barons’ wars in the 1260s, the Welsh wars in the 1270s and 1280s, and the Scottish wars in the late 1290s and early 1300s, and right up to his death, aged 73, shortly after returning south from the capture of Stirling in 1304. Upon hearing of the earl’s death, Edward I ordered prayers and masses to be said for his soul in all the churches in the dioceses of London and Canterbury as well as in six important abbeys, an honour previously bestowed by Edward only upon members of the royal family. Judgements on Earl Warenne should be made through the prism of the value which Edward I, certainly no fool, placed upon him.

This article will not attempt to retell the story of the Scottish rising or even that of the troubled English government at Berwick in 1296 and 1297, as both of these have been described elsewhere. Instead, it will try to piece together the reasons why this experienced soldier suffered the first significant defeat by an English army against the Scots for well over a century. It does not seek to exonerate Warenne from the mistakes he undoubtedly made during his time as guardian of Scotland, but rather to place his tenure in the context of the momentous events of 1297 in order better to understand that epic year.

Before discussing those events, in an article on Earl Warenne as a commander it is worth tracing his military career before the Scottish war commenced in 1296. By the mid 1290s, the earl had been active in military affairs for 30 years and in chivalric exploits for 40 years. He had been active on the foreign tourney circuit in the 1250s with Lord Edward and particularly with the Lusignans and during the Barons’ wars he was a major...