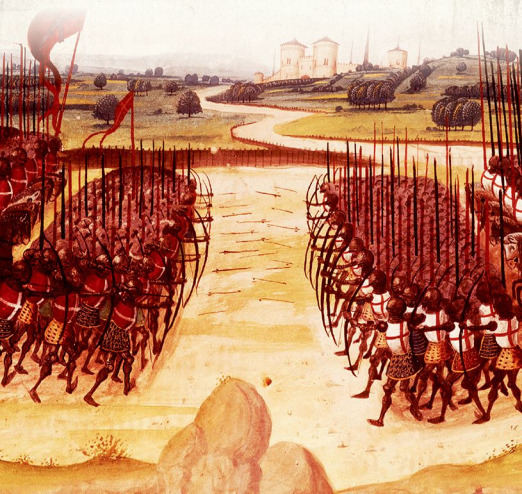


ANNE CURRY

— GREAT BATTLES —

AGINCOURT



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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
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First Edition published in 2015

Impression: 1

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014959909

ISBN 978-0-19-968101-3

Printed in Italy by L.E.G.O. S.p.A.

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FOREWORD

For those who practise war in the twenty-first century the idea of a 'great battle' can seem no more than the echo of a remote past. The names on regimental colours or the events commemorated at mess dinners bear little relationship to patrolling in dusty villages or waging 'wars amongst the people'. Contemporary military doctrine downplays the idea of victory, arguing that wars end by negotiation not by the smashing of an enemy army or navy. Indeed it erodes the very division between war and peace, and with it the aspiration to fight a culminating 'great battle'.

And yet to take battle out of war is to redefine war, possibly to the point where some would argue that it ceases to be war. Carl von Clausewitz, who experienced two 'great battles' at first hand—Jena in 1806 and Borodino in 1812—wrote in *On War* that major battle is 'concentrated war', and 'the centre of gravity of the entire campaign'. Clausewitz's remarks related to the theory of strategy. He recognized that in practice armies might avoid battles, but even then the efficacy of their actions relied on the latent threat of fighting. Winston Churchill saw the importance of battles in different terms, not for their place within war but for their impact on historical and national narratives. His forebear, the Duke of Marlborough, commanded in four major battles and named his palace after the most famous of them, Blenheim, fought in 1704. Battles, Churchill wrote in his life of Marlborough, are 'the principal milestones in secular history'. For him, 'Great battles, won or lost, change the entire course of events, create new standards of values, new moods, new atmospheres, in armies and nations, to which all must conform'.

Clausewitz's experience of war was shaped by Napoleon. Like Marlborough, the French emperor sought to bring his enemies to battle. However, each lived within a century of the other, and they fought their wars in the same continent and even on occasion on adjacent ground. Winston Churchill's own experience of war, which spanned the late nineteenth-century colonial conflicts of the British Empire as well as two world wars, became increasingly distanced from the sorts of battle he and Clausewitz described. In 1898 Churchill rode in a cavalry charge in a battle which crushed the Madhist forces of the Sudan in a single day. Four years later the British commander at Omdurman, Lord Kitchener, brought the South African War to a conclusion after a two-year guerrilla conflict in which no climactic battle occurred. Both Churchill and Kitchener served as British Cabinet ministers in the First World War, a conflict in which battles lasted weeks, and even months, and which, despite their scale and duration, did not produce clear-cut outcomes. The 'Battle' of Verdun ran for all but one month of 1916 and that of the Somme for five months. The potentially decisive naval action at Jutland spanned a more traditional twenty-four-hour timetable but was not conclusive and was not replicated during the war. In the Second World War, the major struggle in waters adjacent to Europe, the 'Battle' of the Atlantic, was fought from 1940 to early 1944.

Clausewitz would have called these twentieth-century 'battles' campaigns, or even seen them as wars in their own right. The determination to seek battle and to venerate its effects may therefore be culturally determined, the product of time and place, rather than an inherent attribute of war. The ancient historian Victor Davis Hanson has argued that seeking battle is a 'western way of war' derived from classical Greece. Seemingly supportive of his argument are the writings of Sun Tzu, who flourished in warring states in China between two and five centuries before the birth of Christ, and who pointed out that the most effective way of waging war was to avoid the risks and dangers of actual fighting. Hanson has provoked strong criticism: those who argue that wars can be won without battles are not

only to be found in Asia. Eighteenth-century European commanders, deploying armies in close-order formations in order to deliver concentrated fires, realized that the destructive consequences of battle for their own troops could be self-defeating. After the First World War, Basil Liddell Hart developed a theory of strategy which he called 'the indirect approach', and suggested that manoeuvre might substitute for hard fighting, even if its success still relied on the inherent threat of battle.

The winners of battles have been celebrated as heroes, and nations have used their triumphs to establish their founding myths. It is precisely for these reasons that their legacies have outlived their direct political consequences. Commemorated in painting, verse, and music, marked by monumental memorials, and used as the way points for the periodization of history, they have enjoyed cultural afterlives. These are evident in many capitals, in place names and statues, not least in Paris and London. The French tourist who finds himself in a London taxi travelling from Trafalgar Square to Waterloo Station should reflect on his or her own domestic peregrinations from the Rue de Rivoli to the Gare d'Austerlitz. Today's Mongolia venerates the memory of Genghis Khan while Greece and Macedonia scrap over the rights to Alexander the Great.

This series of books on 'great battles' tips its hat to both Clausewitz and Churchill. Each of its volumes situates the battle which it discusses in the context of the war in which it occurred, but each then goes on to discuss its legacy, its historical interpretation and reinterpretation, its place in national memory and commemoration, and its manifestations in art and culture. These are not easy books to write. The victors were more often celebrated than the defeated; the effect of loss on the battlefield could be cultural oblivion. However, that point is not universally true: the British have done more over time to mark their defeats at Gallipoli in 1915 and Dunkirk in 1940 than their conquerors on both occasions. For the history of war to thrive and be productive it needs to embrace the view from 'the other side of the hill', to use the Duke of Wellington's words. The battle the British call Omdurman is

for the Sudanese the Battle of Kerreri; the Germans called Waterloo 'la Belle Alliance' and Jutland Skagerrak. Indeed the naming of battles could itself be a sign not only of geographical precision or imprecision (Kerreri is more accurate but as a hill rather than a town is harder to find on a small-scale map), but also of cultural choice. In 1914 the German general staff opted to name their defeat of the Russians in East Prussia not Allenstein (as geography suggested) but Tannenberg, in order to claim revenge for the defeat of the Teutonic Knights in 1410.

Military history, more than many other forms of history, is bound up with national stories. All too frequently it fails to be comparative, to recognize that war is a 'clash of wills' (to quote Clausewitz once more), and so omits to address both parties to the fight. Cultural difference and, even more, linguistic ignorance can prevent the historian considering a battle in the round; so too can the availability of sources. Levels of literacy matter here, but so does cultural survival. Often these pressures can be congruent but they can also be divergent. Britain enjoys much higher levels of literacy than Afghanistan, but in 2002 the memory of the two countries' three wars flourished in the latter, thanks to an oral tradition, much more robustly than in the former, for whom literacy had created distance. And the historian who addresses cultural legacy is likely to face a much more challenging task the further in the past the battle occurred. The opportunity for invention and reinvention is simply greater the longer the lapse of time since the key event.

All historians of war must, nonetheless, never forget that, however rich and splendid the cultural legacy of a great battle, it was won and lost by fighting, by killing and being killed. The Battle of Waterloo has left as abundant a footprint as any, but the general who harvested most of its glory reflected on it in terms which have general applicability, and carry across time in their capacity to capture a universal truth. Wellington wrote to Lady Shelley in its immediate aftermath: 'I hope to God I have fought my last battle. It is a bad thing to be always fighting. While in the thick of it I am much too occupied to feel anything; but it is wretched just after. It is quite impossible to think of

FOREWORD

glory. Both mind and feelings are exhausted. I am wretched even at the moment of victory, and I always say that, next to a battle lost, the greatest misery is a battle gained.' Readers of this series should never forget the immediate suffering caused by battle, as well as the courage required to engage in it: the physical courage of the soldier, sailor, or warrior, and the moral courage of the commander, ready to hazard all on its uncertain outcomes.

HEW STRACHAN

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It has been a huge pleasure and benefit working with French historians over many years. I would like to thank particularly Professor Philippe Contamine, Professor Bertrand Schnerb, Dr Olivier Bouzy, and Christophe Gilliot of the Centre Historique Médiéval at Azincourt. In the UK there are so many to thank that there is not space to list them here but specific thanks will be given in relevant notes. I am grateful to Mrs Caroline Simpson for passing on materials which her late husband, Professor A. W. B. Simpson, had collected towards a book on the battle. I cannot end these acknowledgements, however, without saying a special thank you to Dr Tim Sutherland, Dr Adam Chapman, the University of Southampton, Dr Sinclair Rogers and Marie Cross, and of course my family who have lived with Agincourt for so many years and still do.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AN	Archives nationales de France
BL	British Library
BN	Bibliothèque nationale de France
EEBO	Early English Books Online
PROME	<i>The Parliament Rolls of Medieval England 1275–1504</i> , ed. C. Given-Wilson et al. (Woodbridge, 2005)
Sources	A. Curry, <i>The Battle of Agincourt: Sources and Interpretations</i> (Woodbridge, 2000; rev. edn, 2009).
STC	<i>A Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland and Ireland and of English Books Printed Abroad 1475–1640</i> (2nd edn), 3 vols (London, 1986–91).
TNA	The National Archives
V&A	Victoria and Albert Museum

Citations from A. Curry, *Agincourt: A New History* are from the hard-back edition (Stroud, 2005).

1

Introduction

At the age of 12, John Lennon—an icon of the late twentieth century—labelled two pages of his notebook ‘Agincourt’. On the right-hand page he painted a scene of soldiers fighting in front of a medieval gateway. On the left, along with heraldic shields, clouds, and sun, he wrote out a verse of a poem (see Fig. 1):¹

When down their bows they threw
And forth their bilbows drew
And on the French they flew
Not one was tardy;
Arms were from shoulders sent,
Scalps to the teeth were rent,
Down the French peasants went,
Our men were hardy.

Agincourt, fought on 25 October 1415, has a greater cultural legacy than any other medieval engagement. This book explores why and how this is so. Why should an event of 600 years ago, which lasted little more than a few hours, continue to provoke interest and controversy today? Agincourt was not a decisive battle. It did not force the French to the negotiating table or to acknowledge defeat. In military terms it has many features in common with other battles of the period. Why is it remembered when others are not?

Lennon’s verse came from Michael Drayton’s ‘Ballad of Agincourt’ (c.1606), the full title of which was ‘The Cambro Britons and their

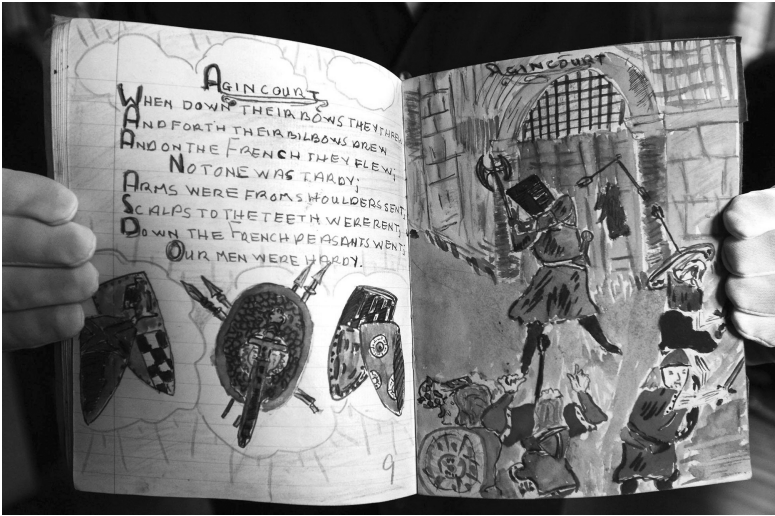


Fig. 1. At Quarry Bank School, at the age of 12, John Lennon copied extracts from a number of poems, providing illustrations to accompany them, into a school exercise book which he entitled 'Anthology'. Alongside a stanza from Michael Drayton's *Ballad of Agincourt* (c. 1606), he draw a scene from the siege of Harfleur.

Harp, his ballad of Agincourt'. Drayton deliberately wrote in an archaic style. In 1627 he penned the much longer *Battle of Agincourt*, a historical narrative in verse which projected England's past greatness into the present. The late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries saw much interest and pride in these medieval glories. Families anxious to prove their antiquity and gentility to the increasingly active College of Arms claimed, accurately or not, the presence of their ancestors at Agincourt. It was in the same spirit that Shakespeare had his *Henry V* (1599) invoke the 'band of brothers':

For he today that sheds his blood with me
 Shall be my brother, be he ne'er so vile
 This day shall gentle his condition.
 And gentlemen in England, now abed

Shall think themselves accursed they were not here
 And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
 That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's Day.

(Act 4 Scene 3, lines 61–7)

Lennon had Shakespeare as much as Drayton ringing in his ears. His drawing was of the siege of Harfleur, the first stage of Henry V's campaign. The siege did not feature in Drayton's 'Ballad of Agincourt' but stimulated one of the most famous lines from Shakespeare's play: 'Once more unto the breach'. In time, Shakespeare's *Henry V* came to dominate popular perceptions of Agincourt and still does today. For many, the battle is Shakespeare's Agincourt rather than the Agincourt of 1415. Agincourt is the only medieval battle which is regularly and repeatedly refought thanks to its centrality to every performance. Shakespeare provided very little dialogue for the battle but the scenes contain his characteristic mix of comedy, bombast, and poignancy. There is ample opportunity for directorial imagination thanks to the simple but well-known stage instruction 'alarms and excursions'.²

Stage recreations of Agincourt are inevitably constrained by the theatrical infrastructure, as Shakespeare called to mind in the opening speech with 'this Wooden O'. If he was referring to the newly built Globe Theatre, then further iconic status is achieved since *Henry V* is believed to be the first play to be performed there in 1599. This belief prompted its choice to celebrate the opening of the recreated Globe in 1997. Two mass-market films (Olivier, 1944 and Branagh, 1989) gave opportunities for more 'realistic' battle scenes and have contributed hugely to modern views of Agincourt. Olivier's film has achieved special status through its distinctive interpretation by its equally distinctive actor/director as well as its release six months after D-Day. The 'Band of Brothers' has stimulated its own TV series (2001) concerning the activities of the US Army 101st Airborne Division in the Second World War. Even Drayton had an outing in 1944 with the opening line of his 'Ballad of Agincourt', 'Fair stood the wind for France', forming the title of H. E. Bates's novel in which an RAF

crew are sheltered by the occupied French. In turn this generated a spin-off TV series in 1980.

Just as the battle is the crux of *Henry V*, Shakespeare's Agincourt forms a pivotal contribution to this book. Chapter 4 looks at the context in which Shakespeare wrote his play as well as how his work linked back into the century of the battle itself. To what degree is the afterlife of Agincourt the afterlife of Shakespeare's play rather than of the actual battle? That is a key question with regard to the Battle of Agincourt as an expression of English (and after 1714 British) identity. This is what marks it out from the other significant English victories of the Hundred Years War, Crécy (1346) and Poitiers (1356). These battles are much less integrated into the popular psyche even if equally or more significant in historical terms. Crécy was the first major English victory against the French. Poitiers saw the capture of the French king and led to an advantageous diplomatic settlement. Both feature in *Edward III*, but this play, despite Shakespeare's contribution, comes nowhere near the language and dramatic integrity of *Henry V*. Only Agincourt is memorialized.

Chapter 2 sets the scene by looking at the context of the campaign. When Henry became king on 22 March 1413 there was a state of truce. Why did he decide to invade France two years later? An assessment of the preconditions in England and France, and of Henry's war aims, helps us to understand why a battle was fought at all as well as why it was fought in the way it was. These themes are developed in a consideration of the battle, linked to what we know of the two armies. In researching the battle for my *Agincourt: A New History* (2005), I attracted critical comment. How dare I challenge what everyone *knew* to be true? It is fascinating that Agincourt has come to mean so much that it cannot be debated. The professional historian deals in uncertainties as well as in evidence. It is not easy, and perhaps not even possible, to reconstruct a medieval battle but a possible scenario is suggested as well as the rationale for my arguments on army sizes. What makes Agincourt distinctive? Important here is Henry V's killing of the prisoners. Even Shakespeare hedged his bets, having the royal

order linked both to the French attempts to regroup for a new attack and to the attack on the baggage train.

How was the battle interpreted and explained at the time? This question forms the principal theme of Chapter 3. In the modern world, there is a tension between transparency and what governments and media want populations to know and think. Can we detect this concerning Agincourt? Was there a deliberate effort to 'use' the battle? Was this based on national lines? This chapter also considers how the battle was written about as the fifteenth century continued and how changing political circumstances impacted on this. In the Treaty of Troyes of May 1420 Henry V was accepted by the French king, Charles VI, as his heir and regent. Politically this upstaged Henry's triumph at Agincourt. The French were now his people and not his enemy as they had been in 1415. By 1453, however, the English had lost all of their lands in France save for Calais, Edward III's conquest of 1347, which remained in English hands until 1558.

Chapters 2–3 establish the pre-Shakespearean Agincourt. The study of *Henry V* in Chapter 4 leads into the ongoing relationship between the image of Agincourt and national consciousness in the modern period. Chapter 5 considers Agincourt within national consciousness and in particular the impact of later wars on perceptions of the battle. The 400th and 500th anniversaries both occurred in time of war but by 1915 the French were an ally not an enemy. Agincourt is a battle identified with English superiority, but a superiority often based on the role of the common man—the archer—who is contrasted with the arrogant French aristocrat. Yet there are no archers in Shakespeare's play. The 'rise of the archer' marched in step with the rise of the middle and lower classes in later centuries: out of the whole of Drayton's 'Ballad of Agincourt', Lennon copied in 1952 the stanza which most emphasized the role of the archers.

Agincourt has become a thing of legend. Even its name has a significance and use. The battle has inspired literature, art, and music, as well as ancestral claims. A special role for the Welsh has been advanced as well as the invention of the V-sign. A number of

objects have alleged associations with the battle. These topics are examined in Chapter 6.

Serious historical study of Agincourt was initially inspired by national pride. The first excavations and mapping by John Woodford in 1818, and the first major documentary study, the *History of the Battle of Agincourt* by Harris Nicolas (1st edn, 1827), were stimulated by British victory in the Napoleonic Wars. The establishment of national archive collections in England and France also played their part. It is the study of the fifteenth-century administrative records, including my own work on the English and French armies and the use of computer databases, which has shed new light on the battle. New techniques are being applied through battlefield archaeology. We now know more than ever but there remain points of contention on location, deployment, and army size. This is the subject of Chapter 7 which also looks at the battlefield, its memorials, and its museum, as is appropriate with the 600th anniversary upon us.

There is more in this book on English/British than French interpretations of Agincourt, because of space constraints but also because there is no parallel in the shaping of French views to the impact of Shakespeare's *Henry V* in the English-speaking world. The different spelling of the battle in English and French causes some problems. For simplicity I have used Azincourt when referring specifically to the location in the Pas-de-Calais.³

Agincourt

The Battle in Context

On 13 August 1415, ships laden with soldiers, horses, equipment, and supplies stood off the coast of Upper Normandy. A royal proclamation declared that all should make ready to disembark the following morning. No one was to land before the king. As Henry V stepped ashore, he fell to his knees, praying that God might give him justice against his enemies.¹ He was landing as king of France but the French, under their 'so-called king' Charles VI, were unjustly withholding his rights.

The opening of the campaign which ended at Agincourt demonstrates a key point about medieval warfare. Conflict between Christian peoples needed justification. Henry had inherited his right to the French crown by descent from Edward III who had declared himself king of France in 1340, thereby starting what we call 'the Hundred Years War'. Edward had defeated the French at Sluys in 1340 and Crécy in 1346. In 1360 he stopped calling himself king following the negotiation of the Treaty of Brétigny, known as the Great Peace: Edward gained a huge swathe of land in France to be held in full sovereignty without homage to the French king, thereby solving the longer-term problem of the tenure of lands in France by English kings since the twelfth century. Edward's diplomatic success resulted from the capture of King John II by his son, Edward, the 'Black Prince', at the Battle of Poitiers on 16 July 1356.

In 1369 the French reneged on the Treaty of Brétigny, invading and recovering many of the lands transferred to the English. In response, Edward III resumed the title 'king of France'. Despite several land and sea campaigns over the next twenty years, the English could not recover the lost lands, but nor could the French remove them from French soil. This stalemate led to a thirty-year truce in 1396. The English still held Gascony, based around Bordeaux, as well as Calais which Edward III had taken in 1347 after a year-long siege.

The state of truce ended in mid-August 1415 when Henry V launched his invasion.² He arrived back in England on 16 November. His campaign began with the siege of Harfleur, which surrendered on 22 September. Around 6–8 October he left Harfleur to march towards Calais (see Fig. 2). Arriving at the mouth of the Somme on 13 October, he was not able to cross at Blanchetaque, the fording point used by Edward III en route to Crécy. Fearing there was a large army awaiting him north of the Somme, Henry took his army eastwards along the southern side of the river, shadowed by the French on the other side. On 19 October he succeeded in crossing the Somme between Bethencourt and Voyennes. On the next day French envoys came from Péronne to summon him to battle. Four days later Henry arrived at the plain bordered by Maisoncelle to the south, Ruisseauville to the north, and Azincourt and Tramecourt to the east and west (see Fig. 3). The French were already there. Battle was given on the following day, Friday 25 October 1415. By 29 October Henry was in Calais with his victorious army and its prisoners.

This was the first time for over fifty years that an English king had waged war in person in France; Henry's army of invasion, containing up to 12,000 paid men, was larger than the 10,000 which Edward III had taken in 1359 to besiege Reims.³ Only the army of 14,000–15,000 which Edward had led in 1346, from the Cotentin to the outskirts of Paris and then to victory at Crécy, was larger.⁴ Henry's decision to go to war in person and on a grand scale is worthy of our attention even without Agincourt. The French posed no threat to England: this was simply an act of aggression.

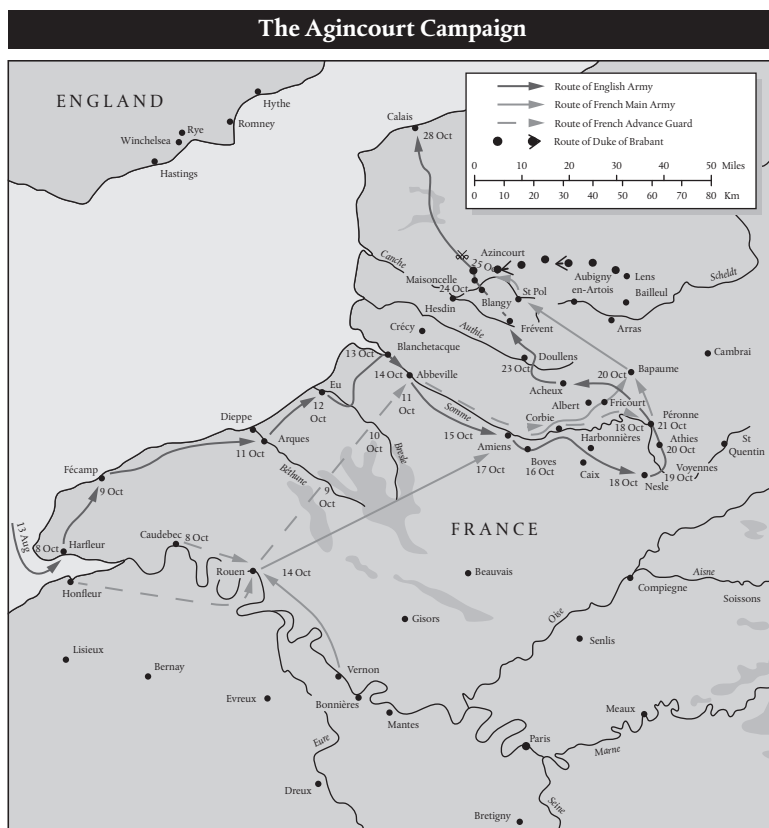


Fig. 2. This map shows the route taken by the English and French armies in October 1415. Henry had planned to move Straight from Harfleur to Calais but, fearing a French army was on the north bank of the Somme estuary, he was forced to march a long way inland to seek a crossing point. The map emphasizes that parts of the French army also had to cover long distances to arrive at Azincourt.

Preparations

Henry's intention to invade France was first made public by the chancellor (Henry Beaufort, bishop of Winchester) at the opening of parliament on 19 November 1414.⁵ Beaufort explained that Henry understood that a 'suitable time' had come to accomplish, with the aid of God, the recovery of his inheritance and the rights of his French crown.



Fig. 3. A view of the battlefield today. This view emphasizes the relative flatness of the site as well as flanking woodland.

To wage war the king needed to raise money. As in the previous phases of the Hundred Years War, soldiers expected a daily wage. Henry also needed to raise troops since there was no standing army. Ever since the late thirteenth century the Commons in parliament had to approve direct taxation. Bishop Beaufort expressed his confidence that all would be moved to generosity. After all, if the king could increase his patrimony (i.e. gain lands in France) he could reduce the financial burdens on his subjects at home. ‘And when these things have been accomplished, great honour and glory must surely follow from them.’

These statements are key to understanding how Henry was able to gain support for his invasion. They also remind us of the pressure on him to deliver successes in France in order to show that the money had been well spent. The Commons were indeed generous, agreeing a subsidy of £76,000 to be collected in equal instalments on 2 February 1415 and 2 February 1416. On the back of this guaranteed income

Henry was able to raise loans for the campaign. That is how state finance worked, much as today. In the spring of 1415 the City of London was persuaded to make a loan of 10,000 (£666 13s. 4d.) marks for the expedition.

War was expensive for the state. There were many additional costs in terms of shipping and equipment although soldiers had to cover their own victualling costs. In 1415 they were told to take enough food for three months. Their daily wages were dependent upon social status as well as military function. So, for instance, a knight bachelor was paid 2s. per day and an earl 6s. 8d. even though their military role was as men-at-arms. Non-titled men-at-arms were paid 1s. per day and archers received 6d. Wages were paid to the captain for distribution to his troops. There were also well-established arrangements for the division of war booty and ransoms. Such conditions of service, in addition to the excitement and camaraderie of campaigning, made an invasion of France attractive for the military classes.

Parliament was a useful recruiting ground as well as a way of communicating the king's plans back to the shires and towns and uniting the kingdom in the war effort. During or shortly after the parliament of November 1414, lords and knights met with the king. Although they urged that another embassy should be sent to France, they agreed that, in the meantime, 'all works of readiness for the expedition' should begin and declared themselves 'ready with our bodies to do you service to the extent of our powers, as we ought of right to do and as our ancestors have done to your noble progenitors in similar circumstances in the past'.⁶ By March 1415 it was apparent that diplomacy had failed. At the end of the next month, contracts (indentures) for the provision of troops were entered into, following a system established in the later fourteenth century. Although made up of many individual retainers—at least 320 men contracted to provide troops—the army was bound together by standard conditions of service and by disciplinary ordinances. These included a requirement that all men should wear the cross of St George on their front and back, an important element in