

Agincourt | The Victory of the Welsh Warbow



Image: Chroniques d'Enguerrand de Monstrelet (early 15th century)

The Legend

On 25 October 1415, St. Crispin's Day (according to the Gregorian calendar), a battle of semi-mythical status took place that has resonated down the centuries. The appeal of the plucky underdog has always been irresistible to the British. Gutsy archers from Wales and England laid the haughty flower of French chivalry low with nothing more than a bent stick, steeled arrow shafts and even steelier nerves (with a little help from the dismounted men-at-arms!). The Victorians seized the battle as a metaphor for British superiority. Their public school songs extolled the stoic virtues of the stout yeomen archers whose martial prowess and stiff-upper lip were an exemplar lesson to its pupils. Later on, Shakespeare's masterpiece, 'Henry the V' was given added relevance in Olivier's film that was shot during the dark days of the 40's in WWII. That ancient victory, against all the odds, against a seemingly invincible menace, offered a glimmer of hope to a land facing a similar threat.

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition

This epitomised the glorified version of the day but what of the real battle?

The Battle

With the battle it is very difficult to obtain a definitive answer to the sizes of the Armies. Reader would gain a lot by reading Anne Curry's book on the battle as well as the excellent work by Juliette Barker. What is clear is that a sick and tired army defeated a well-armed and fresh one at least 2 to 5 times its size.

After the privations of the prolonged Harfleur siege and march through Northern France, the pursuing French army (at least 30,000 and perhaps as high as 100,000) finally managed to force Henry V to battle near the hamlets of Agincourt and Tramecourt. From the beginning of the 100 Years war, Anglo-Welsh armies usually sort to fight a defensive battle from a strong position. The Battle of

Agincourt was no different and Henry had chosen his position well. A position that minimised the effect of a larger foe whilst maximising the qualities of his own. Waiting for the French to attack, Henry arrayed his army. The French, however, were content to exercise their horses and gamble for the rich pickings on ransoms of the Anglo-Welsh nobles. Time was on their side as they had a supply line of provisions. The French were in an ebullient mood and did not even contemplate defeat. They flew the blood red Oriflamme banner. The name comes from the Latin aurea flamma, meaning golden flame. It was the battle standard of the King of France and at Agincourt signified that no quarter was to be given to Henry's army. Henry knew he could not stay where he was indefinitely and was forced to move his battle line to within extreme arrow range, some 300 yards, in order to goad the French into attack. His archers lifted the defensive stakes they had been ordered to cut and marched forward with the men-at arms. No sooner had they redeployed the stakes when the French charged. The on-coming French cavalry had to mount a frontal assault upon a static army with the archers on the wings behind the defensive anti-cavalry sharpened stakes. All the time the French Knights charged, the archers would rain a deadly arrow storm down upon them. As the plate armour clad men and lesser armoured horses got within 50 yards of the Anglo-Welsh front line the archers would shoot a last volley from point-blank range. Because of the archers position on the wings of Henry's army they would shoot in a lethal 'V' shape cross-fire. This would naturally have the effect of making the enemy bunch up into their centre as the horses shied away from the arrows that ripped into their flanks. Typically, armour was thinner on the sides and thus the arrows more effective. Despite the French having a plan to attack the archers from the sides, which they summarily ignored, they attacked the centre in a bid to kill or capture Henry. This congestion was further exacerbated because the battle field was funnel shaped due to the woods on either side. As a horse in front would topple it would disrupt an ordered charge. Whilst the woods were impenetrable to French cavalry, the thick woodland was ideal cover for archers. Some accounts mention that Henry had cunningly positioned archers in the woods to ambush the unsuspecting French from the side of the rear. The wooded ambush was a Welsh area of expertise and, although it is impossible to know for sure, it would be of no surprise if the Welsh archers were handpicked for this job. The disruption to the waves of cavalry attack, by the archers, was so successful Henry had managed to take numerous high status French prisoners that had yielded to the King's mercy. Controversially, these men were later executed during the battle apart from a handful of the very richest that would yield the highest ransoms. An assault on Henry's baggage train, probably by a local knight, placed to the rear took place and he feared encirclement. The number of French prisoners, perhaps outnumbering their captors, could potentially re-arm and re-join the fight became a risk that Henry could not take. But who would do the dirty work of killing the unarmed men who had surrendered? Obviously, it was the archers. Not bound by chivalric rules, these pragmatic men did what was necessary to secure the day. The Anglo-Welsh archers were also an elite fighting unit when their arrows were spent. They formed effective light infantry, unencumbered by heavy armour as they could fight hand-to-hand with buckler, sword, axe and the lead mauls they had driven their stakes in. In the sodden and heavy soil, made further slick with the blood of French men and horse, they were far more mobile than a plate-laden knight. Ultimately the French suffered the ignominy of the English capturing their belligerent Oriflamme banner as had previously happened at Poitiers in 1356. The destruction of the huge French force by the greatly outnumbered Anglo-Welsh army, who suffered very little loss of their own, was complete.

Revisionist theories

During the 1990's a different reinterpretation of the battle had come into vogue, not least of all by Channel Four's 'Battlefield Detectives'. It attributed the famous victory to little more than the 'perfect storm' of a huge crowd control disaster, exacerbated by a ploughed field of very sticky mud.

With underpowered bows and inappropriate arrows they 'proved' that the archers were incidental as their arrows failed to penetrate the French plate armour. This interpretation was far more prosaic than Jean Froissart's (1337–1405) near contemporary accounts of the French dead piling up in mounds 'a man high' after being mown down by oft used cliché, 'the machine gun of the Middle ages'.

Recent research has revealed the 'real' truth of Agincourt lays somewhere between these extremes. Certainly, Henry V achieved a remarkable victory. With his dwindling army that was largely archer based (5:1 archer to man-at-arms) of around 6,000 tired and dysentery stricken men was able to overcome a greatly larger force of (according to some chroniclers) 30,000 fresh and expensively armed men.

The Gwent Connection

A long tradition of military archery existed in Gwent that preceded anything in England from Saxon times onwards. Gerald Cambrensis (Gerald of Wales), writing in 1188 about his journey through Wales, recounted feats of archery prowess from Gwent Welsh archers.

"The people of Gwent in particular, are more skilled with the bow and arrow than those who come from other parts of Wales."

Monmouth will always be associated with Henry V, born in its Castle in 1387. Less well known is that it is likely he spent his formative years at the Courtfield Estate in Welsh Bicknor. The estate is reputed to have originally been called Greenfield and later swapped the 'Green' with 'Court' prefix in his honour. Henry cut his military teeth fighting the rebel Owain Glyndwr with his father. During the battle of Shrewsbury, between the two claimants to the title 'Prince of Wales', he was badly injured by a Welsh arrow strike below his eye. However, he refused to leave the field until the day was won. A slightly stunted statue of Henry V was placed below the clock face of the Shire Hall in 1792. The figure seems to resemble Shakespeare's villain Richard III more than Henry himself. It is very likely that the recent Welsh rebellion reduced the number of Welsh archers present, especially from the north, as an air of suspicion was inevitable. Indeed, at the similarly famous battle of Crecy there had been a disproportionate amount of Welsh bowmen. Nevertheless, John Merbury, chamberlain of South Wales, raised 500 bowmen for the Agincourt campaign from the shires of Brecknock, Carmarthen and Cardigan. Former Welsh revolutionaries who had opposed the then Prince Henry were recruited because such a valuable resource that just could not be eschewed by the now King. Henry was not a man who took opposition to his 'divine right' to be King lightly. However, he was pragmatic enough to offer pardons to the former freedom fighters or rebels, depending upon your view point.

The Welsh archers mustered at the 15th century fortified manor house, Tretower Court, near Brecon. Sir Roger Vaughan of Bredwardine, who fought and died at the battle in 1415, also raised a retinue of archers. Sir Roger is a direct ancestor to the Courtfield Estate's current custodian, Mr. Jerome Vaughan. Not surprisingly, he is a keen longbowman himself and a very generous benefactor to Warbow Wales. Every year he offers the childhood home of King Hal to shoot on and organises the Courtfield Cup, an event exclusively for longbows with a very handsome purse to the winning archers. There can be few better feelings for a Welsh archer than to shoot a warbow on the very meadows that Prince Hal once exercised his horse.

Shakespeare's Dafydd Gam, a real character who saved the king's life also raised a retinue but lost his life during the battle. Unlike the French, only a relative few Anglo-Welsh knights and men-at-arms perished on the field.

Another inseparable link between archery and Monmouth is the eponymous cap. Monmouth became a centre for woollen goods production during the 15th and 16th century. The Monmouth cap is mentioned in Shakespeare's stirring Henry V.

Fluellen says to the King...

"Your majesty says very true: if your majesties is remembered of it, the Welshmen did good service in a garden where leeks did grow, wearing leeks in their Monmouth caps; which, your majesty know, to this hour is an honourable badge of the service; and I do believe your majesty takes no scorn to wear the leek upon Saint Davy's day."

The King replies...

"I wear it for a memorable honour; For I am Welsh, you know, good countryman."

Monmouth has the good fortune of having the Wye, which made exporting goods much easier. It is also a short distance away from Archenfield in Herefordshire, which was noted for producing outstanding felting wool from Ryeland Sheep.

On the Agincourt Role, is man called Thomas Capper. The surname is derived from the makers of the knitted caps who enjoyed membership of its craft guild. An original 16th century Monmouth cap can be seen in the town's museum. The leading expert on the cap is Kirstie Buckland, a Monmouth resident. She still knits the caps of which the author is a proud owner.

No country can really lay an exclusive claim to the longbow or archery but certainly Monmouth has an indisputable place in archery history.

Some Welsh men also hold the distinction of being on the losing side at Agincourt! Henry's brother, the Duke of Gloucester obtained a grant of the manor Llanstephen which belonged to Henry Gwyn of Wales who was killed serving amongst the French at Agincourt. Clearly Henry Gwyn was a man who could not forgive his erstwhile foe as easy as other men.

Plate armour penetration, Fact or Fiction?

So was the yew warbow of Agincourt an effective weapon when wielded by powerful and skilful archers from Wales and England? Could it pierce the metal-clad knights mounted on their warhorses?

An ongoing and often acrimonious debate usually ensues within military archery circles when the ability of arrows to penetrate plate armour arises.

Many scholars even question whether arrow penetration through plate armour is a relevant question anyway. The case is made that the hock resulting from an arrow strike can traumatize soft tissue or discombobulate even if penetration does not occur, thus disabling an opponent. It is also rightly argued that the percentage of a medieval army actually protected by plate armour (including

horse) also makes it a moot point. Even those knights or men-at-arms that did wear the finest Milanese armour had chinks at the joints and an arrow numbers game may losses inevitable.

Nevertheless, the answer as to whether Welsh medieval archers could shoot an arrow through plate is not simple to answer. Certainly the thicknesses of plate varies in different places. Armour, of all types, must always be a balance between protection with encumbrance. For instance, greaves (lower leg armour) usually are less than 1/16" in thickness but helms often well over double that thickness in places. Typically, the sides and back of a man-at-arms' armour was thinner and, therefore, weaker. Jean Froissart wrote, during the Hundred Years War, that Anglo-Welsh archers were arrayed on the wings of an army.

Another huge variable was the quality of the design and manufacture of the plate armour. The finest Milanese and gothic armour offered unparalleled protection but only at a very handsome price, something akin to a buying a Ferrari nowadays. Also like Ferrari sport cars, a finest bespoke white harness was not a common sight and out of reach to the vast majority of soldiery. The polished, curved and hardened surfaces were not necessarily seen on munitions grade armour and, in all likelihood, could be defeated by a powerful shot. Steel also was not the homogenous product we know today and could have both soft and hard patches just inches apart. It should be noted that wearing fine armour usually gave protection from death in another form as it was clear that the wearer be well worth keeping alive and ransoming, a sum that would set an archer up for life. Modern test have shown that with the correct arrowhead and shot from a powerful bow, and arrow can indeed penetrate plate armour. In military archery, the real 'killing zone' happens at point blank range when the arrow is at high velocity and shot in a flat trajectory. As the old archery saying goes, "I may have missed that one but I certainly got the man behind!". With a man-stopping war arrow this is also true for a French destrier, or warhorse, which was far more lightly armed than the rider. The historian, Sir John Keegan, in 'The Face of Battle' has researched the devastating ripple effect caused by a falling horse in a tight formation and its ability to disrupt an ordered charge.

The yew warbow of Agincourt

We know a lot about yew warbows from the 137 longbows found in the Tudor wreck The Mary Rose and there is no reason to suggest they had changed particularly from Agincourt that was little more than a 100 years before. The yew for Henry V's bow was likely to have been sourced from abroad as well as at home. Nicolas Frost, his masterbowyer, was sent to collect what he could for the Agincourt campaign from around Britain. Interestingly he was forbidden to take yew from ecclesiastical land by the ever pious Henry. It is improbable that Welsh yew bows were not represented at Agincourt. What was the yew warbows of Agincourt like? First a bowyer needs a suitable log of around 7' and it important to split it rather than saw it so as to follow the natural rhythm of the grain in the wood. The bow stave will then be carefully tapered until the drawn shape comes 'full compass' or describes the shape of an arc. The tips of the bow are then horned to protect the wood from abrasion from the hempen string. For the finished bow you are looking something which is around 6ft 6" long, nock to nock, with a draw-weight between 130 to 150 lbs with some possibly heavier. A bow like this, in the right hands, has a potential range with a military arrow (weighing as much as a ¼ lb) up to 260 yards.

Warbow Wales holds regular shoots using bows made of European and British yew stung with natural strings to gain a deep understanding of the weapon.

An arrow from Agincourt?

An arrow that was discovered in the roof of Westminster Abbey during maintenance over a century ago was likely to have been of type used at Agincourt. Its precise date is unknown but it cannot be later than 1437 as that was the completion date of its location. The nock was once reinforced with a delicate sliver of horn and a preservative compound had been applied over the feather bindings like so many of the Mary Rose arrows. The 29" (approx) draw-length shaft has been tapered to a slim nock and is perhaps made of aspen or birch although Dr. Hardy and Dr. Pratt were unable to definitively identify the wood when they carried out the most in-depth investigation of the arrow to date. Warbow Wales' first-hand observation of the arrow showed that no discernible annual growth rings are apparent, as with ash. The widest part of the shaft, 11.2mm starts 1/3rd of the way back from the base of the arrowhead. The arrowhead is a Type 16, which is an armour piercing barbed head with the barbs swept closely to the socket. The shaft tapers to a little over 7.5 mm at the base of the nock. The arrow head socket is 11 mm in diameter. The witness marks on the binding compound shows the feathers were a little over 7" and bound on by fine tread, likely to have been silk, at around a 1/4" a turn. The overall weight is a tad over 43g but an amount must be added for the feathers, damaged arrowhead and possible desiccation over time.

Why was the arrow there? Was being used to throw at errant pigeons trying to roost? Did it fall through the ceiling above? Or, was it placed there as a symbolic act of remembrance and respect by Henry's Chantry Chapel? However it got there, Warbow Wales shoots accurate approximations of the arrow with yew warbows. The table below shows some striking results and the draw weights of the bows used to achieve them. They give a representative indication of what bows of Agincourt could achieve.

Mary Rose/Agincourt design yew warbow (correct at the time of publication)
(shot with a natural string)

Westminster Abbey arrow reproductions distance achieved

Italian yew 118 lbs @ 32" - 183 yards

Welsh yew 129 lbs @ 32" - 224 yards

Italian yew 150lb @ 32" - 234 yards

English yew 170 lbs @ 32" - 255 yards

Legacy

The fact that Agincourt still resonates with us after 600 years proves that every generation finds something new to take from the battle. Some 200 years prior to the most famous battle of the 'Hundred Years War' a seminal charter was signed that changed everything in Wales and England, The Magna Charta. For the first time, a person had to actually be found guilty to be punished. This first bill of human rights has had far more of a profound effect upon the West than Agincourt ever could. In reality, the battle was but a high watermark in an ultimately doom campaign.

And yet, in a year of historic anniversaries, Agincourt is not over shadowed by its far more worthy sibling. Olivier knew that nothing could stir the blood of a nation like Wales and fill it with a sense of pride than The Battle of Agincourt!

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