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The Hundred Years War

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How did the personalities, battles, events and outcomes of this prolonged era of conflict shape England's development during the Middle Ages, and influence the nation's future?

Roots of war

Historical tradition dates the Hundred Years War between England and France as running from 1337 to 1453.

In 1337, Edward III had responded to the confiscation of his duchy of Aquitaine by King Philip VI of France by challenging Philip's right to the French throne, while in 1453 the English had lost the last of their once wide territories in France, after the defeat of John Talbot's Anglo-Gascon army at Castillon, near Bordeaux.

Edward III formally assumed the title 'King of France and the French Royal Arms'.

The overseas possessions of the English kings were the root cause of the tensions with the kings of France, and the tensions reached right back to 1066. William the Conqueror was already duke of Normandy when he became king of England. His great-grandson Henry II, at his accession in 1154, was already count of Anjou by inheritance from his father and duke of Aquitaine (Gascony and Poitou) in right of his wife Eleanor.

These trans-Channel possessions made the kings of England easily the mightiest of the king of France's vassals, and the inevitable friction between them repeatedly escalated into open hostilities. The Hundred Years War grew out of these earlier clashes and their consequences.

England's King John lost Normandy and Anjou to France in 1204. His son, Henry III, renounced his claim to those lands in the Treaty of Paris in 1259, but it left him with Gascony as a duchy held under the French crown. The English kings' ducal rights there continued to be a source of disquiet, and wars broke out in 1294 and 1324.

The 1294 outbreak coincided with Edward I's first clash with the Scots, and thenceforward the French and Scots were allied in all subsequent confrontations with England. It was indeed French support for David Bruce of Scotland, in the face of Edward III's intervention there, that triggered the breakdown between England and France and culminated in Philip VI's confiscation of Aquitaine in 1337 - the event that precipitated the Hundred Years War.

Edward's 1337 riposte - challenging Philip's right to the French throne - introduced a new issue that distinguished this war from previous confrontations. In 1328, Charles IV of France had died without a male heir. A claim for the succession had been made for Edward, then 15 years old, through the right of his mother Isabella, daughter of Philip IV and Charles IV's sister. But he was passed over in favour of Philip, the son of Philip IV's younger brother, Charles of Valois.

Edward now revived his claim, and in 1340 formally assumed the title 'King of France and the French Royal Arms'. Historians argue about whether Edward really believed he might actually attain the French throne. Irrespective, his claim gave him very important leverage in his dealings with Philip.

He could use it to stir up trouble by encouraging French malcontents to recognise him as king instead of Philip. He could also use it as a powerful weapon in negotiation, by offering to renounce his claim against very large territorial concessions, for instance the independence of Aquitaine from France - possibly even the cession of Normandy and Anjou on the same terms.

Edward III and the Black Prince

Edward skilfully played on his claim to the French throne during the 1340s and 1350s to lure discontented



Detail of the Battle at Crecy from 'Chroniqueurs de l'Histoire de France' ©

French princes and provinces into alliance with him.

Among these were the Flemings, always open to English pressure on account of their commercial links with England; the Montfort claimants to the duchy of Brittany in the succession war that broke out there in 1342; and Charles of Navarre, of the French blood royal and a great Norman vassal and landowner, in the 1350s.

These alliances enabled Edward to render substantial regions of France virtually ungovernable from Paris, and to keep the fighting on French soil going in between occasional English expeditions.

The conquest of territory was not an object, but Edward was quite ready to engage a pursuing French army in open battle.

Though intermittent, these expeditions had a very major impact. They took the form of large-scale, swift-moving military raids (*chevauchées*) deep into France and were intended, through systematic plundering and the burning of crops and buildings, to damage the economy and undermine French civilian morale.

The conquest of territory was not an object, but Edward was quite ready to engage a pursuing French army in open battle if he could do so in advantageous circumstances. He rightly reckoned that economic damage and defeat in the field would force his adversary to the negotiating table.

Edward III's great *chevauchée* of 1346 climaxed in his victory at Crécy, and was followed by the successful siege of Calais, securing for England a key maritime port on the French channel coast.

The two *chevauchées* that his heir, Edward the 'Black Prince', led out from Bordeaux in 1355 and 1356 were even more glamorously successful in terms of plunder. The second of these culminated in the victory at Poitiers, where John of France, Philip's successor, was taken prisoner.

Between 1356 and 1360, chaos engulfed the kingless French kingdom, with Charles of Navarre in revolt and temporarily controlling Paris in 1358. There was also a major peasant rising in the same year, in the central provinces (the 'Jacquerie'), and freebooting companies of soldiers on the rampage almost everywhere.

Under these conditions, it is not surprising that in 1359 Edward III's last *chevauchée* was aimed at Rheims, in the clear hope of a coronation there. But Rheims did not open its gates and nor did Paris. The abortive expedition ended instead in the opening of negotiations with Charles, the dauphin (heir apparent to the French throne), which led in May 1360 to the sealing of the Treaty of Brétigny.

The principle terms of the treaty were that France should pay three million crowns for King John's ransom, and that he would cede to Edward an enlarged Aquitaine, wholly independent of the French crown. In return, Edward would renounce his claim to the French throne.

For the next nine years Edward did indeed cease to use the title king of France.

The road to Agincourt

In 1369 the peace of Brétigny broke down, largely as a result of French and English backing opposite sides in an internal Spanish dispute for Castile's throne.

By 1375, the French under the leadership of the shrewd new king, Charles V, and his great constable, Bertrand du Guesclin, succeeded in wresting from the English the greater part of the principality of Aquitaine. This reduced England's, effective authority to a coastal strip between Bordeaux and Bayonne.



Portrait of Henry V ©

With wise caution, Charles made a point of not challenging the *chevauchées* the English carried out in 1370 and 1373. But he did retaliate with the help of his Castilian allies by launching a series of damaging naval raids on English south coast ports.

After the fall of Rouen, the way to Paris lay open to the English.

By the time Charles V died in 1380, however, the French military revival was running out of steam, and both sides were becoming war-weary. Over the two decades that followed, fighting was desultory and punctuated by truces. Under the English King Richard II indeed, there were serious efforts to find a way towards a negotiated and final peace.

Things began to change again after Richard II's deposition in 1399. In France, rivalry was escalating between the dukes of Burgundy and Orléans for control of government for the insane Charles VI. Following the assassination of Louis of Orléans in 1407, the confrontation slid into civil war between Burgundy and allies of Orléans known as the Armagnacs. This opened clear opportunities for an ambitious English intervention, which Henry V, who succeeded in 1413, boldly seized.

In 1415, Henry V crossed with a royal host to Normandy, took Harfleur and, marching *chevauchée*-style across northern France, met and overwhelmingly defeated the pursuing French army at Agincourt in Picardy on 25 October. The French battle casualties were horrific, and the royal dukes of Orléans and Bourbon were taken prisoner.

Henry returned to France in 1417, opening a new campaign in new style - this time aiming at the conquest of territory. A campaign of sieges ensued, in which Henry correctly calculated that the rivalry between Burgundians and Armagnacs would prevent either French party attempting the relief of beleaguered towns and castles.

After the fall of Rouen, the Norman capital, in January 1419, the English were able to bring the whole duchy under their control, and the way to Paris lay open before them.

At this dire pass, the French parties at last agreed to meet at Montereau to coordinate resistance to the English. But when they met on the bridge there on 19 September 1419, John, Duke of Burgundy, was struck down by the Armagnac followers of the dauphin Charles, thereby avenging Louis of Orléans.

Rather than ally with his father's assassins, John's heir, Philip, agreed to ally with the English, and to broker an agreement with the ailing Charles VI whereby Henry should marry Charles's daughter Catherine and be recognised as his heir to the French throne. Henry would then act as regent for Charles while he lived.

These became the terms of the Treaty of Troyes of 1420. Henry further promised to make war on the formally disinherited dauphin's party, in order to avenge John, Duke of Burgundy.

These terms were widely accepted in northern France, but not in the south. When Henry V died in August 1422, followed by Charles VI in October, the nine-month-old Henry VI of England (son of Henry and Catherine) was recognised as king of France in Paris. But in the south, the Armagnacs upheld the succession of the dauphin, Charles.

Joan of Arc and English defeat

The regency for Henry VI in France was taken up by his eldest surviving uncle, John, Duke of Bedford, and with it the task of seeking to win acceptance of the Troyes settlement throughout France. Militarily, Bedford needed to carry the war forward successfully into the 'dauphinist' lands south of the Loire.

But before he could push south, Bedford needed to consolidate Anglo-Burgundian authority north of the Loire. In August 1424, his great victory at Verneuil on the borders of Maine and Normandy effectively destroyed the dauphin Charles's formidable Franco-Scottish army, which in Henry V's absence had beaten the English at Baugé three years earlier.

By 1425, after some vigorous mopping-up, the position looked sufficiently secure for an offensive southward, and the first English objective was the key bridgehead on the Loire south of Paris, Orléans.

Joan of Arc's charisma breathed a new confidence into the army she led to Orléans.

Orléans was invested in September 1428, but the besieging force was too small to attempt an immediate storming. The aim had to be to starve the garrison out. At first it looked as if there was little chance of a relief for the defenders, but in February 1429, Joan of Arc arrived at the dauphin's court at Chinon with her story of the voices that had given her the mission of ridding France of the English.

Her charisma breathed new confidence into the relieving army that she led to Orléans in May, and it successfully broke the siege. On 12 June at Jargeau and again at Patay on 17 June, she defeated the retreating English. Just a month later, on 16 July, she watched as her 'gentle dauphin' was solemnly crowned Charles VII of France in Rheims cathedral.

After Joan's capture in the following year and her subsequent execution for heresy, the English succeeded in recovering some of the towns they had lost in the wake of her victories and more or less held their own for a while. But in 1435, Philip, Duke of Burgundy, abandoned his English alliance at the Congress at Arras, and recognised Charles VII as his king. This dealt a mortal blow to English hopes of making the Troyes settlement stick.

Paris opened its gates to Charles's general, Arthur, Constable de Richemont, in April 1436, and though the English still controlled most of Normandy and campaigned vigorously along its borders, the prospects for their cause began to look very gloomy indeed.

Negotiations formed a continuous background to the fighting from 1435. They finally bore fruit in 1444 with a general truce agreed at Tours. It was hoped that the arranged marriage there between Henry VI of England and the French princess Margaret of Anjou would help to make the truce a step toward full peace terms.

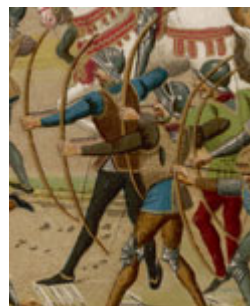
Then in 1449, an English force sacked and looted Fougères in Brittany. Charles VII, who had used the break in fighting to reorganise his royal army, declared himself no longer bound by the terms of the truce.

His forces rapidly overran Normandy during 1449-1450. In 1451, he repeated this success in Gascony. The veteran English commander John Talbot arrived there the following year with a force from England and retook Bordeaux. But on 17 July 1453, his army was disastrously defeated at Castillon and Talbot himself killed.

Soon after, with Bordeaux once more in French hands, there was nothing left of the former English territories in France, bar Calais. The war was effectively over, even though it would not officially end for many years yet.

Armies, battles and weaponry

The English armies of the Hundred Years War were small by modern standards. Henry V probably had fewer than 7,000 men at Agincourt, Talbot at Castillon maybe 6,000. Forces were raised principally by voluntary recruitment and organised by aristocratic leaders who contracted to serve the crown with a stated number of men-at-arms (knights and esquires) and archers. The terms, recorded in a written indenture, stipulated wages and an agreed length of service, such as six months or a year, with the possibility of extension.



English longbowmen at Crécy ©

These aristocratic leaders contracted in their turn with those that they recruited into their companies. This method of raising an army ensured an effective command structure much superior to that of the hastily assembled French armies that fought at Crécy and Agincourt). Archers as well as men-at-arms were usually mounted, ensuring a high degree of mobility. Both usually dismounted for battle. The men-at-arms were armed with lance and sword, the archers with the famous longbow.

The final French victory at Castillon in 1453 was the first major field engagement of the war to be decided by gunfire.

The longbow played an important part in the English victories in the field. Its special qualities were its accuracy and penetrating power over a long range (approximately 200 metres) and the ease of rapid discharge, which was much faster than the rate of fire of French crossbowmen. The fire of well-positioned longbowmen was decisive against charging French cavalry at Crécy, and at Agincourt against both cavalry in the first attacking wave and the dismounted men-at-arms in the second wave.

Archery contributed to victory again at Poitiers, but in this very hard fought battle, charging Anglo-Gascon cavalry had a decisive impact at a critical juncture. The longbow did not make the English invincible. Archers were always very vulnerable if they could be taken in the flank. At Jargeau, Joan of Arc's cavalry successfully rode down the English bowmen.

Archers also played an important part in naval warfare. The longbow's range and rapid rate of fire could be of great advantage as ships were closing to grapple. This was thought to be the key to Edward III's naval victory at Sluys in 1340. Both he and Henry V well understood the importance of safeguarding the Channel for the transport and supply of English forces in France, as well as for the protection of English overseas commerce.

In the siege-dominated fighting in France post-1417, gunnery became seriously important. Henry V's great sieges at Rouen (1418-1419) and Meaux (1421-1422) ultimately succeeded only by starving out the defence, as had Edward III's 1347 siege of Calais. But at Maine (1424-1425), bombardment was a key to English success. There was brisk artillery fire from defenders as well as attackers at Orleans in 1428-1429. The final French victory at Castillon in 1453 was the first major field engagement of the war to be decided by gunfire.

The legacy of war

The shock in England over the loss of its formerly wide overseas empire was very great. Popular rage against the counsellors and commanders deemed responsible had much to do with the outbreak in the mid-1450s of civil war (the 'Wars of the Roses'). The recovery of the lost lands in France long remained a wishful national aspiration, but in material terms the consequences of their loss, for Englishmen living in England at least, was not very great.

Fears that English commerce would suffer now that the Norman Channel harbours were back in French hands proved largely groundless. The only real sufferers from the loss were the professional soldiers and those Englishmen who had sought to settle in France. Their numbers were not seriously significant in social terms.

The war period witnessed a considerable rise in the importance and frequency of parliaments, and in the influence of the Commons.

Although most noblemen and a good many among the gentry saw some war service, among the total population the proportion that fought was decidedly low. Since virtually all the fighting was on French soil, there was no English experience comparable to the devastation and dislocation of economic life in the French countryside. Plagues, recurrent after the 1348 Black Death, had much more significant effects on the conditions and living standards of ordinary working people in town and country than the war ever did.

Where the impact of war was most directly felt by most people was in increased taxation. Campaigning abroad called for high government expenditure, and the only means of raising the necessary funding was through taxes. This required the assent of the Commons in parliament, which meant the war period witnessed a considerable rise in the importance and frequency of parliaments, and in the influence of the Commons. This in turn set in train parliament's future central constitutional role.

Publicity for the war effort, in which the church played an important part (with royal encouragement), fostered a patriotic sense of English identity. Prayers were regularly ordered for armies serving overseas, and in thanksgiving for victories. Edward III's promotion of the cult of St George as England's warrior patron saint played deliberately to nascent national sentiment.

A proud patriotism, nourished by royal propaganda and pulpit oratory, and also, emphatically, by the euphoria of such dramatic English victories as Crécy, Poitiers and Agincourt, was probably the most lasting legacy of the Hundred Years War.

Its origins in national war experience gave that patriotism a chauvinistic edge that continued to colour English popular attitudes to foreigners and especially to the French for a very long time. Francophobia runs as a recurrent thread through the English story from the 15th century down to the start of the 20th, when finally the Germans replaced the French as England's natural adversaries in the popular eye.

Find out more

Books

The Hundred Years War: England and France at War, c.1300-c.1450 by CT Allmand (CUP, 1988)

The Angevin Legacy and the Hundred Years War, 1250-1340 by Malcolm Vale (Blackwell, 1990)

The Black Prince by Richard W Barber (Boydell, 2003)

The Perfect King: The Life of Edward III, Founder of the English Nation by Ian Mortimer (Jonathan Cape, 2006)

War Cruel and Sharp: English Strategy under Edward III by Clifford J Rogers (Boydell, 2000)

The Hundred Years War; vol 1- Trial by Battle, vol 2 - Trial by Fire by Jonathan Sumption (Faber 1999)

Agincourt: the King, the Campaign, the Battle by Juliet Barker (Little Brown, 2005)

The Battle of Agincourt: Sources and Interpretations by Ann Curry (Boydell, 2000)

John Talbot and the War in France 1427-53 by AJ Pollard (Royal Historical Society Studies in History no 35, 1983)

Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism by Marina Warner (Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1981)

About the author

Maurice Keen was educated at Winchester and at Balliol College, Oxford, where he studied history under Richard Southern. In 1961, he was elected a fellow of Balliol as tutor in medieval history. He retired in 2000. His publications include 'The Outlaws of a Medieval Legend' (1961); 'England in the Later Middle Ages' (1973, second edition 2003); 'Chivalry' (1984); and 'Origins of the English Gentleman' (2002).