



Why is the story of Henry V and Agincourt so popular?

One of the most famous battle in the Middle Ages took place at Agincourt. Ever since 1415 the story of the battle and its hero, Henry V, has been retold in books, plays and films. Can you see why it has always been a popular story – in England at least?

ACTIVITY

Read the story, then discuss these questions.

- 1 Why was the English army facing disaster in September 1415?
- 2 Which incident shows the French expected to win easily?
- 3 Pick out one incident you could use in a film to show Henry's heroism. Explain your choice.
- 4 Why did the English win against all the odds? (See if you can find at least three reasons.)
- 5 One part of this story is sometimes left out of English films. Which part, do you think? Why?
- 6 Why has this story been retold so often, especially when England has been at war?



▲ SOURCE 2 Henry V, King of England 1413–1422.

▼ SOURCE 1 A modern re-enactor shows a longbow in action. In Henry V's time, the best archers could fire ten to twelve arrows a minute for a distance of 275 metres.



Background

Henry had been leading armies since he was just sixteen. He became king when he was 26 and immediately began to plan an invasion of France. At first, the French weren't worried (even though the French king thought he was made of glass and would break if anyone touched him). They sent Henry a parcel of tennis balls as they thought he was more interested in sport and drinking than in war.

France, late September 1415

The English army was facing disaster. Two months previously, King Henry V had invaded France with 9,000 men. Henry wanted to be remembered as a great soldier so he planned to capture the town of Harfleur and beat the French in a great battle. He also hoped this would unite his lords who had been waging civil wars for twenty years.

The plan had gone badly wrong. It had taken a month to capture Harfleur. Two thousand English soldiers had died, many from disease. Henry had to decide what to do next. If he took his men home he would be a failure. If he marched across France and sailed home from Calais it would show the French he was not afraid. But what if their army caught the English, who were not fit to fight a major battle?

Early October 1415

King Henry decided to march across France. He led his army out of Harfleur on 8 October. He had 900 knights and 5,000 archers with food for eight days. All went well until they reached the River Somme. Then scouts brought news that the bridges over the river had been destroyed. Worse, a huge French army was on the other side.

Henry had to find another way to cross the river. They headed north until they found a place where the river was very shallow. It took several hours to get everyone across. Every minute the English expected the French to appear, ready for battle.

The English marched on, hungry, their food running out. Many were exhausted by illness. Somewhere nearby the French army waited.

24 October 1415

That evening the English made camp. They could see the huge French army in front of them. They were heavily outnumbered. An English knight, Sir Walter Hungerford, said to the King that he wished he had an extra 10,000 of the best archers in England. King Henry replied, 'That is foolish. I would not have a single man more. The men with me are God's people. God will help us overcome the French.'

The English expected to die the next day. They confessed their sins to God.

All night the French laughed, the knights gambling over the prisoners they would take.

25 October 1415, the Feast of Saints Crispin and Crispinian

King Henry chose a narrow battle line. There was woodland on both sides so the French could not ride round the sides of his army. He set out a line of knights with archers amongst them. Each archer hammered stakes into the ground to protect him from the charging French horses. They waited... but the French did not attack.

King Henry moved his men forward until they were just 180 metres from the French line. Then he ordered his archers to open fire. As the arrows fell, the French lost patience. They charged forward but, with the ground boggy after the heavy rain, their charge was slow. The English archers raised their bows and fired again and again, each man firing twelve arrows every minute. Sixty thousand arrows hammered down every minute onto the French knights and their horses.

The ground was covered in dead and wounded French knights and horses, but the bulk of the French had still not attacked. They moved forward on foot but stumbled over bodies, and frightened horses charged into them. Finally the two armies clashed in hand-to-hand fighting. The English were still heavily outnumbered but the battle had turned in their favour. The French could not make their numbers count because of the narrow battlefield. King Henry, in the thickest of the fighting, had his helmet broken by a blow from a French knight.

The English took hundreds of prisoners who were held at the back of the army. Then the King saw the French organising another attack. What if the prisoners broke free and attacked the English from the rear? Henry ordered his men to kill the prisoners. This was against the rules of war. It also meant losing large amounts of ransom money that would be paid by the prisoners' families. Henry's knights refused so he sent 200 archers to kill the prisoners. Nobody knows how many died.

The French counter-attack failed. The English had won. Between 7,000 and 10,000 Frenchmen were killed at the battle of Agincourt. Fewer than 30 English soldiers died. When the news reached England, there were great celebrations in London. Henry V and his archers had become English heroes.