

THE BATTLE OF THE SEINE

15TH AUGUST 1416

FORGOTTEN VICTORY

In the shadow of Agincourt

In his biography of Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy (1970) Richard Vaughan wrote that Agincourt was 'the most famous battle in western Europe between Hastings and Waterloo'. 2016 marks the 600th anniversary of the Battle of the Seine, another great English success, but which is almost unknown. It is remarkable that, in his *History of the Art of War in the Middle Ages* (1885, 1924), Sir Charles Oman devoted four pages to Agincourt, but did not even mention the Battle of the Seine.

Why did this second great battle, fought and won on 15 August 1416, never become famous? There are several reasons. First, it was not a royal battle: at the last minute Henry V, the victor of Agincourt, delegated responsibility to his brother the Duke of Bedford, and it was the Duke who led the English forces. Second, it was fought between rival fleets at sea, rather than between armies. Land battles had greater appeal to a late medieval audience, with its interest in chivalrous 'feats of arms', and hence to chroniclers and poets. Third, the battle is not referred to by Shakespeare: the action in his play *Henry V* moves swiftly from the field of Agincourt to the peace conference at Troyes in 1420, and omits the Battle of the Seine altogether, along with several other events which were crucial in bringing the French government to the conference table.

Even in its own day, the battle of the Seine was not thought comparable with Agincourt. The anonymous royal Chaplain who wrote the *Gesta Henrici Quinti* between in 1416 and 1417 gives a brief account of it, but does not give it a name. Likewise the Keeper of the King's ships William Catton referred to it as 'the voyage in the company of the Duke of Bedford for the capture of diverse carracks'. Again, when the old soldier Thomas Hostell petitioned Henry VI for arrears of wages, he complained that he had been maimed and wounded by a 'gad' (a long iron spear) 'at the taking of the carracks on the sea'. Lastly, when William Worcester, secretary to Sir John Fastolf, penned *The Boke of Noblesse*, he described a battle 'fought with the carrekys and shypps lying at Seyn hede before Hareflue'. On the other hand, when the Duke of Bedford won another impressive victory on land, at Verneuil in 1424,

this victory was immediately described to Parliament as 'the greatest deed done by Englishmen in our day, save the Battle of Agincourte'.

The French Revival

The importance of the Battle of the Seine is obvious once we realise that there had been a remarkable revival in French fortunes, following the debacle at Agincourt. At the end of 1415 Bernard Count of Armagnac was made Constable of France. In J.H.Wylie's words this 'wrought a marvellous change.' The Count did not accept that the defeat suffered at Azincourt was God's verdict on the French, or that it decided anything. Moreover, he rejected any idea of compromise, either with Henry V of England or with his other mortal enemy, the Duke of Burgundy. Within a month of his arrival in Paris, the Count pushed the Burgundians out of Lagny and began to plan the re-capture of Harfleur.

In January 1416, the French King Charles VI requested an *aide* to finance operations to recover the port, and gave the order to assemble a 'great army both of galleys and carracks'. Henry V had installed a body of 1,200 men, commanded by the Earl of Dorset and including Sir John Fastolf – one of the prototypes for Shakespeare's Falstaff. With such a large garrison the town began to run out of food; and the English were compelled to mount several raids in search of supplies, one of which nearly came to grief at Valmont in March. By April the French had laid siege to Harfleur and mounted a naval blockade in the mouth of the Seine. The chronicler John Strecche recorded that the English were reduced to eating their horses. Fastolf's memories of their privations are recorded in his secretary William Worcester's *Boke of Noblesse*

A wretched cow's head was sold for 6s 8d sterling, and the tongue for 40s and [there] died of English soldiers more than 500, in default of sustenance.

The situation became so serious that Dorset threatened to quit, if food and ammunition did not arrive soon from England.

. Henry V reacted decisively. He ordered that a relief force be mustered and sent to the Seine. According to Anne Curry, this consisted of 7,300 men, though (as with the Agincourt campaign) it is impossible to be sure how many men actually fought in the battle which ensued. At the last minute, on 22 July, Henry decided that his priority had to be diplomatic, and ordered his the Duke of Bedford to take his place. Bedford had not fought at Agincourt, despite the fact that Shakespeare's Henry V names him as one of 'the few'; but it was a happy choice: the Duke was an experienced commander and completely reliable.

A Conventional Account

For their part the French were expecting an English attempt to break the blockade of Harfleur and they had assembled a fleet to prevent it. Most of these were clinker-built barges from Rouen, together with a motley collection of French merchantmen; but crucially the fleet also included 8 large carracks hired in Genoa and about 30 more hired in Castile. The French had also recruited a crack force of 600 Genoese crossbowmen. Their fleet was stationed at Honfleur; but it put to sea and raided the Isle of Wight while the English were assembling their fleet at Southampton, before returning to the mouth of the Seine to await Bedford's approach.

The fight lasted around seven hours. The English lost some 20 ships with their crews but, by the end of the day, Bedford had won a complete victory, capturing 3 Genoese carracks, while a fourth was wrecked in the attempt to escape. The English also captured a large French cog and four small oared barges. Casualties were heavy on both sides – the English estimated they had killed 1,500 of the enemy and captured around 400, but they may have lost around 700 men-at-arms and 2,000 archers themselves. The Duke was wounded and had to retire to England as a result, but his men were able to sail on and deliver the supplies which were so desperately needed by the beleaguered garrison of Harfleur.

Strategically, the battle was hugely important. The relief of Harfleur meant that Henry could now exploit his capture of the port the previous year; and he went on to conquer the whole of Normandy, town by town, siege by siege, between 1417 and 1419. Moreover, Harfleur remained in English hands (with a gap of four years in the late 1430s) until Charles VII's armies finally overran the Duchy in 1449-50.

There have been many accounts of the battle in modern times, but perhaps the most interesting is Wylie's (1919). This tells a tale of cheeky little cogs versus mighty and arrogant carracks, reminiscent of John Masefield's juxtaposition in his famous poem *Cargoes* (1902) of the 'dirty British coaster with a salt-caked smokestack' with the 'Quinquereme of Nineveh'; and it is intended to evoke the same sympathy and patriotism. Once more, as at Agincourt, the English are portrayed with their backs to wall; and once again, as at Waterloo in 1815, the fight itself it is a 'damned close-run thing'.

[The English] were matched against a class of ships vastly stouter than their own in height and build and manned by 300 or 400 men apiece who were rightly regarded as the most daring sailors and the best crossbowmen in the world and, after being beaten off with fearful loss they returned to action not once or twice but twenty times with dogged stubbornness till they had sunk, captured, crippled and utterly dispersed them, leaving none seriously to dispute with them the entrance to the Seine.

Thus Wylie portrays the English as underdogs once more, and he stresses how much of a threat those great Genoese carracks were; but it is noticeable that he is unclear as to the numbers involved. At one point tells us that the French assembled 300 foreign vessels, plus a dozen galleys from the royal arsenal in Rouen, plus 100 cogs; but he also tells us that an unknown number of Castilian vessels

defected from the French fleet, together with 8 Genoese galleys and many balingers. At another point he tells us that the English had 10,000 men, and anything between 200 and 400 ships, though he also tells us that, according to a German source they only had 70.

A New Look

Ian Friel's *Henry V's Navy* (2015) enables us to re-write the story. Though he says that it is impossible to be precise about numbers, it seems reasonably clear that the French assembled a fleet of around 200 vessels in defence of the Seine but may have had as few as 38 when the battle was fought, while the English assembled around 250-300, and were able to deploy most of these. So Bedford may have commanded by far the larger fleet, when the fight took place.

However, the English were certainly underdogs when it came to the size and quality of really large ships. In particular, the Genoese carracks were a serious threat, not only because of their size but on account of their height; and here the French enjoyed great superiority. Early in 1416 they hired 9 war carracks in Genoa (as well as 8 galleys). One Genoese carrack was lost during a raid on the south coast of England and, immediately before the Battle of the Seine, the entire Castilian contingent and at least some of the Genoese galleys retreated to Honfleur; but that still left the French with 8 carracks.

On the other side of the equation, Friel shows that most of the ships which the English had available in the early 1400s were small; and that English shipwrights 'did not have a clue' as to how construct carracks (which were carvel- rather than clinker-built). In May 1416 there were only 16 ships in the royal 'navy' – the body of ships which belonged directly to the Crown - of which only two - the *Holy Ghost* (of 740 tons) and the *Trinity Royal* (500 tons) were 'great' ships;¹ and even these were not a match for the carracks. The English were forced to build *somercastells* on top of their existing superstructures, in an attempt to compete; but, even if we assume that they succeeded, so that a 'great' ship became a match for a carrack, the Franco-Genoese carracks would still have outnumbered Bedford's great ships by 4 to 1 in the relevant department. Nevertheless, the English won, despite sustaining heavy casualties. The question is why.

Why did the English win?

The Chaplain's theory (as in the case of Agincourt) was that God was on our side. For him, it was critical that the Battle of the Seine was fought on 15 August – the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Christ himself had intervened

¹ It was reported recently that Dr Ian Friel had detected the remains of the *Holy Ghost* in the Hamble, not far from those of the *Grace Dieu*: see *Mail Online*, 12 October 2015. She has yet to be excavated.

as a result of the intercession of His Mother (Who, as is devoutly believed, had compassion on the people of her Dower of England, so long distressed by the waves, and also on their comrades in Harfleur suffering from lack of food and from hunger.

William Worcester took the same view, though he also thought that the enemy had been defeated by 'myghty fyghtyng' on the part of his countrymen.

The historian of the French Navy thought he had a different answer. Writing in 1899, when Britannia truly ruled the waves, Charles de la Roncière explained that the English had always closer to the sea, and had it in their blood. They also had more mariners and these were to be found in greater numbers and in a larger number of ports than in France, where the seamen were concentrated in Normandy and Picardy. One result of this was that the French monarchy frequently needed to seek foreign assistance in Spain and Italy during the Late Middle Ages. However, a reading of N.A.M.Rodger's magisterial *Safeguard of the Sea* (published in 1997) would suggest that this explanation is both facile and misleading. England was not predestined to enjoy naval superiority and, between 1066 and 1416, she did not. It was Henry V who was the true and founder of the Royal Navy.

Perhaps the truth is that numbers were decisive, after all. At Agincourt, the English had fewer men, though they enjoyed a decisive advantage in the missile arm; but at the Seine they had more men, more archers and many more fighting platforms. The Genoese carracks may have been bigger and of superior design; but this did not give the French a decisive advantage, because of the nature of naval warfare in 1416. Any cannon mounted on board early 15th century ships were small and primitive and could not blow the enemy out of the water. A battle at sea therefore consisted of a series of individual duels, which involved getting alongside one another, grappling, boarding and fighting man to man. The missile arm supported these operations with anti-personnel fire, using crossbows and longbows, and firing arrows, bolts and gads, which could inflict devastating injuries on men and boys, but could not sink ships. For this reason, 8 carracks were never going to make a substantial difference, when the English may have had 7,500 men on board their vessels, half of whom were archers, all using the English longbow – a weapon which had proved itself at Agincourt.

Further reading

Charles de la Roncière, *Histoire de la Marine Française* (Paris, 1899)

J.H.Wylie, *The Reign of Henry V* volume II (Cambridge, 1919)

N.A.M.Rodger, *The Safeguard of the Sea* (Harper Collins, 1997)

Susan Rose, *Medieval Naval Warfare* (Routledge, 2002)

Anne Curry, *What Next? Henry V and the Campaign of 1416, in The Fifteenth Century VII* (The Boydell Press, 2007)

Jonathan Sumption, *Accursed Kings* (Faber & Faber, 2015)

Ian Friel, *Henry V's Navy, The Sea-Road to Agincourt and Conquest, 1413-1422* (The History Press, 2015)
