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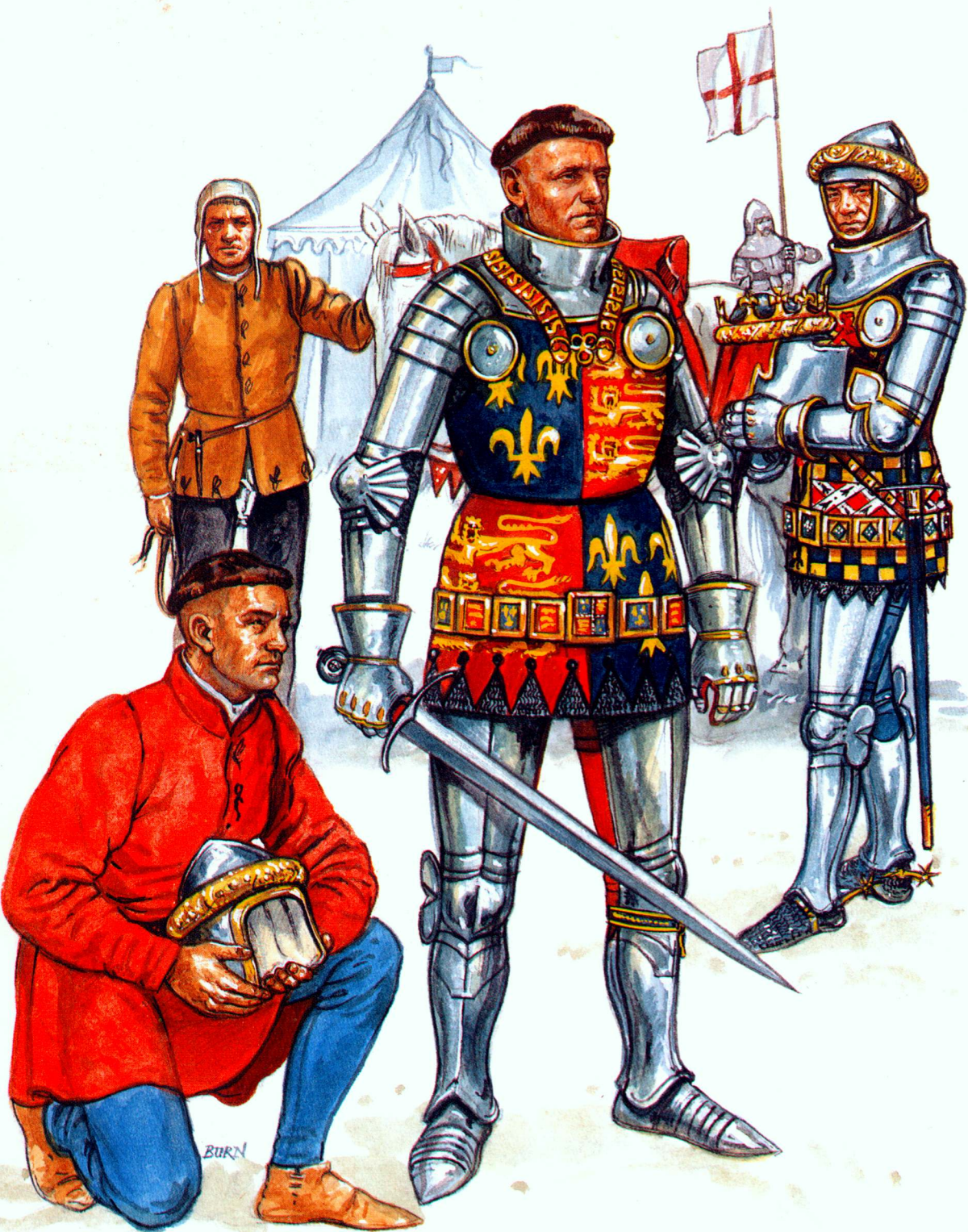
9

AGINCOURT 1415



TRIUMPH AGAINST THE ODDS

MATTHEW BENNETT



BURN

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◀ *Henry V preparing for battle at Agincourt. He wears full plate armour except for the head. A servant kneels with his open-faced bascinet while the king's body squire, John Cheyney, stands ready with the great helm circled by a golden crown. In the background a groom holds the head of the grey palfrey from which the king made his speech before the battle. The helmet, sword and saddle may still be seen in Westminster Abbey.*

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Note: Many of the illustrations in this book have been drawn from contemporary manuscript pictures. References to retinues in the captions to the coats of arms provide two sets of numbers: those at the outset of the campaign; and (in parentheses) those present at the Battle of Agincourt.

Northern France and Southern England in the Early 15th Century



ORIGINS OF THE BATTLE

On the evening of 24 October 1415, 28-year-old King Henry of England faced his greatest test. His small army was sick and exhausted and trapped by at least three times its number of fresh, confident French troops. Henry had tried to avoid fighting but he knew that next day it was inevitable. Against all expectations the battle that followed would turn out to be a decisive victory for the English, fought in a field near the village that was to give it its name – Agincourt.

At Agincourt, Henry V was fighting to recover what he believed to be his birthright: the Duchy of Normandy. This had last been in English hands more than two hundred years ago, before the French king took it from King John, his vassal. The intense rivalry between the French and English crowns dated back to 1066, when William the Bastard, Duke of Normandy, conquered England. But the dukes of Normandy had always been the vassals of the French Crown, and their elevation to royalty in one part of their realm did not change this relationship. In the mid-twelfth century the Norman kings were replaced by another dynasty, the counts of Anjou, who held extensive lands in the west and south-west of France. The new king, Henry II, actually ruled an 'empire' more powerful than that of his overlord. But his weak younger son, John, was not able to hold on to it in the face of a determined assault, both legal and military, by the French king, Philip II. In 1204, Normandy was overrun, England retaining only its possessions south of the River Loire. The minority of Henry III (1215-70) ushered in a period of political instability in England. This led to the disadvantageous Treaty of Paris in 1259, by which Henry gave up his rights to Normandy, Anjou and other territories, and agreed to do homage to the French king for his southern possessions of Aquitaine and Gascony. His son, Edward I (1270-1307), was a more

powerful ruler and wished to redress the balance in favour of England. But he was preoccupied with extending his power within the British Isles, and, apart from hostilities between 1294 and 1298, he made no attempt to enforce his claims against the French.

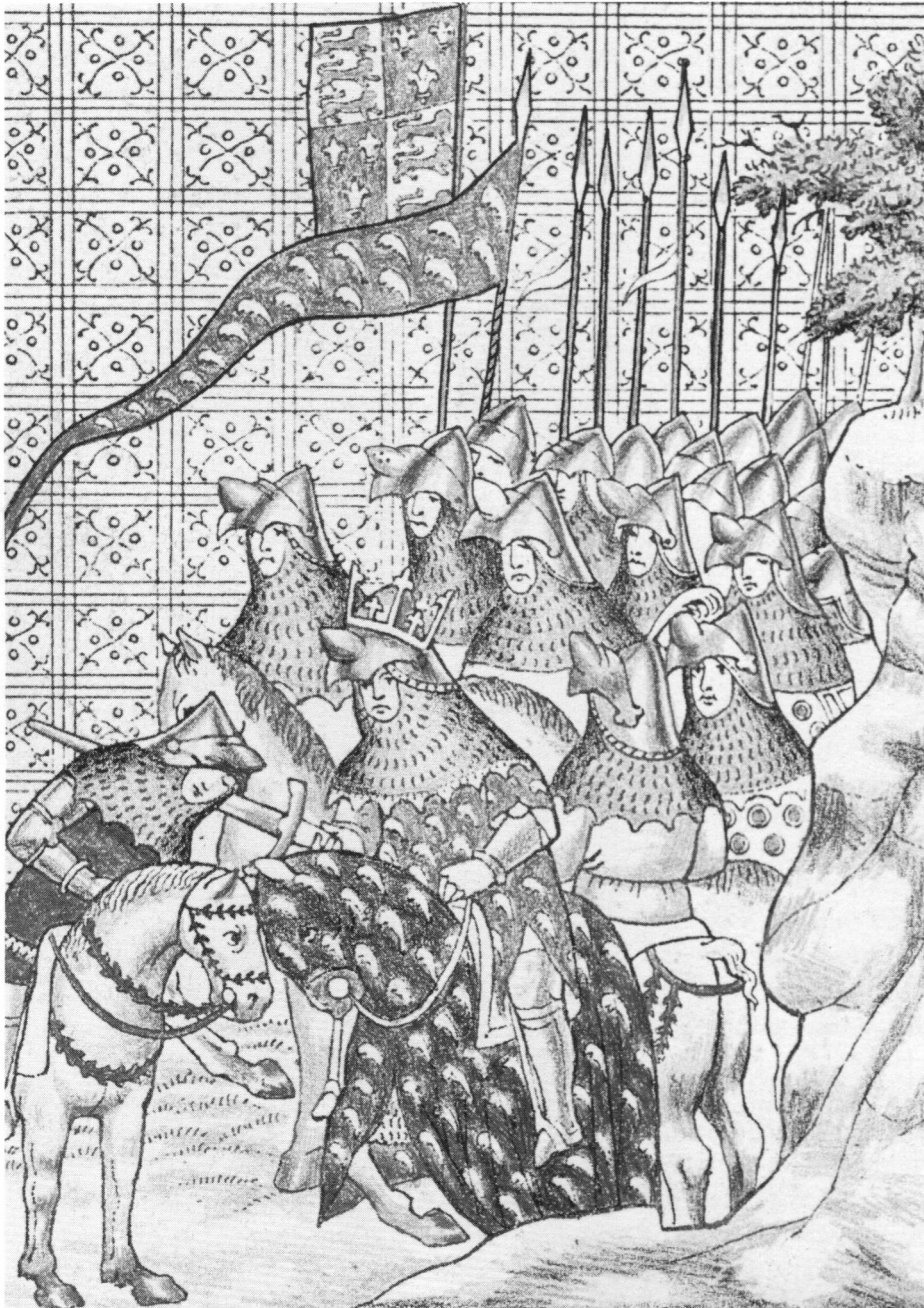
His reign was followed by another period of confusion when domestic concerns dominated English politics. A resurgent Scotland under Robert the Bruce inflicted a series of defeats, which led eventually to the deposition and murder of Edward II in 1327. There had been a brief conflict with France in 1324-5, known, after the town being fought over, as the War of Saint Sardos; but this was inconclusive. Edward III was only fifteen when he succeeded to the throne. In the following year the French king, Charles IV, died, leaving no male heir. Edward had a claim to the French throne through his mother, Charles's sister, but the French were not about to allow him to inherit. They invoked the Salic Law, an ancient custom that the crown should not pass through the female line. The French king's cousin, Philip of Valois, was the preferred choice, and – given the political and military situation at the time – there was nothing that Edward could do about it.

With every new reign the French king required homage for the English Crown's French possessions. This had been a problem since the beginning of the fourteenth century as it led to extensive legal wrangling, and homages had to be negotiated in rapid succession: in 1314, 1316, 1322 and now in 1328. The evident reluctance of Edward II to perform homage, aggravated by the conflict over Saint Sardos, meant that he only came into his Continental inheritance after paying £60,000 feudal 'relief' and handing over the territory of the Agenais. But it was his young son who actually performed homage to Charles IV. As king, Edward III performed homage twice more, in 1329 and

1331. Such ceremonies were far more than legal niceties. They helped to establish the justness of a ruler's cause should it come to war – and Philip VI had clear intentions to win England's rich southern French possessions. He devised an invasion plan for Gascony in 1329. The actual cause for war was Edward's refusal to hand over the renegade Count Robert of Artois, so that in 1337 Philip declared Gascony forfeit. Edward's

response was to claim the French throne himself.

This is not the place to go into a detailed history of the ensuing conflict, now known as the Hundred Years War, up until 1415. Several issues need to be considered, however. English and French fortunes had fluctuated over the intervening eighty years. Edward's land campaigns in 1339 and 1340 were inconclusive, although a great victory was won at sea, off Sluys. The English



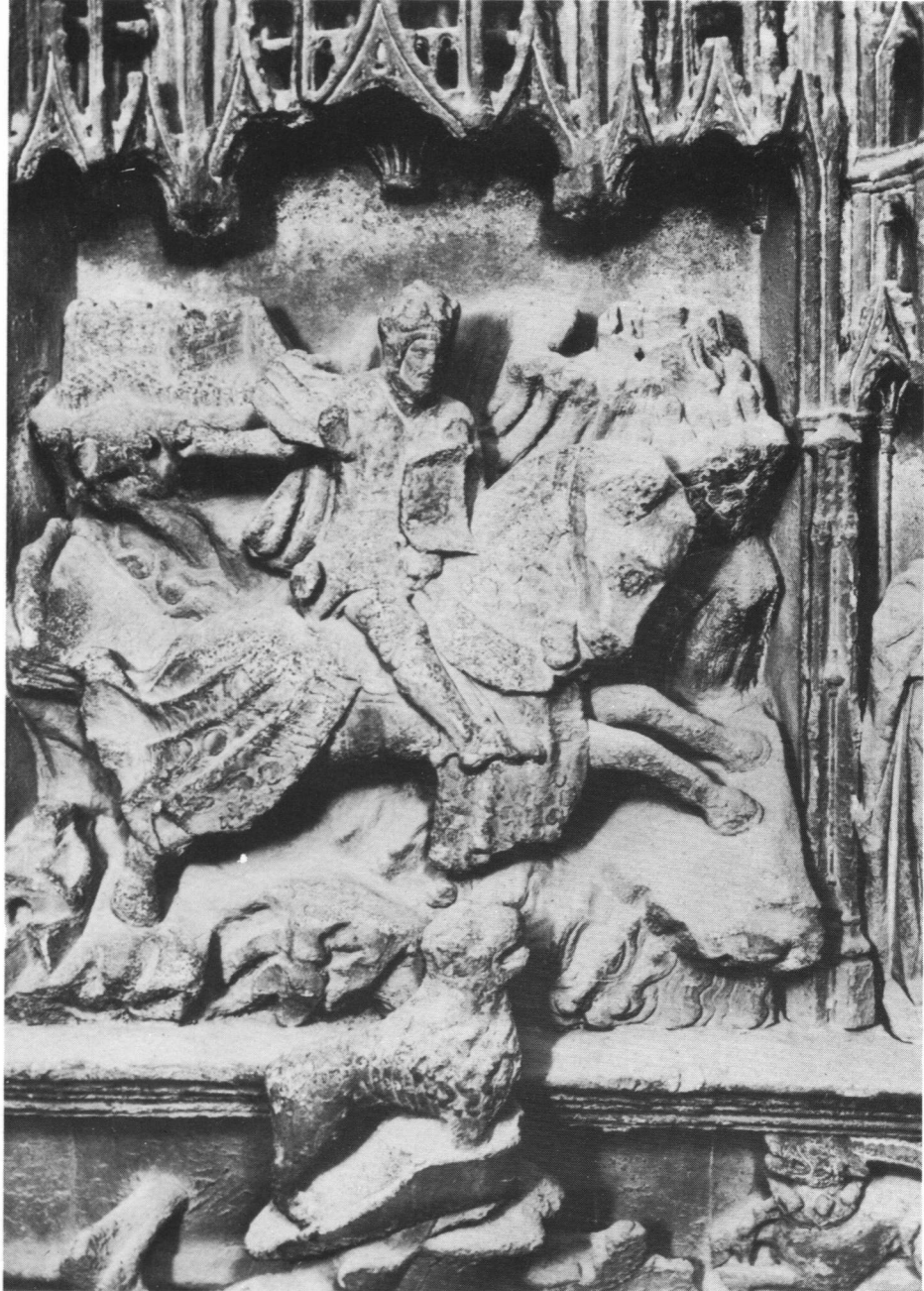
◀ Richard II knighting the 12-year-old Prince Henry in 1399 (the same year in which he became Prince of Wales). (Harl. MSS 1319)

tactic was that of *chevauchée*, literally rides through French territory to inflict damage, win plunder and undermine Philip's authority. When Edward's force was caught at Crécy in 1346, and his son the Black Prince was trapped at Poitiers ten years later, they both inflicted signal defeats on the French. In 1356, King John and many of his nobles were actually captured, giving the English the upper hand in the subsequent ransom and

territorial negotiations; these resulted in the Treaty of Bretigny in 1360, which assured Edward's possessions in western France, and some (excluding Normandy) in the north.

But in the same year a French fleet landed on the English coast, sacked and burned Winchelsea. This sort of destructive naval raid continued at intervals for the rest of the century. What is more, the English strategy of *chevauchée* began to fail.

► *Henry V armed cap-à-pie and mounted on his warhorse, from his chantry chapel in Westminster Abbey. This was how rulers liked to portray themselves, as warriors, in a self-glorifying style that bore no relation to the realities of war.*

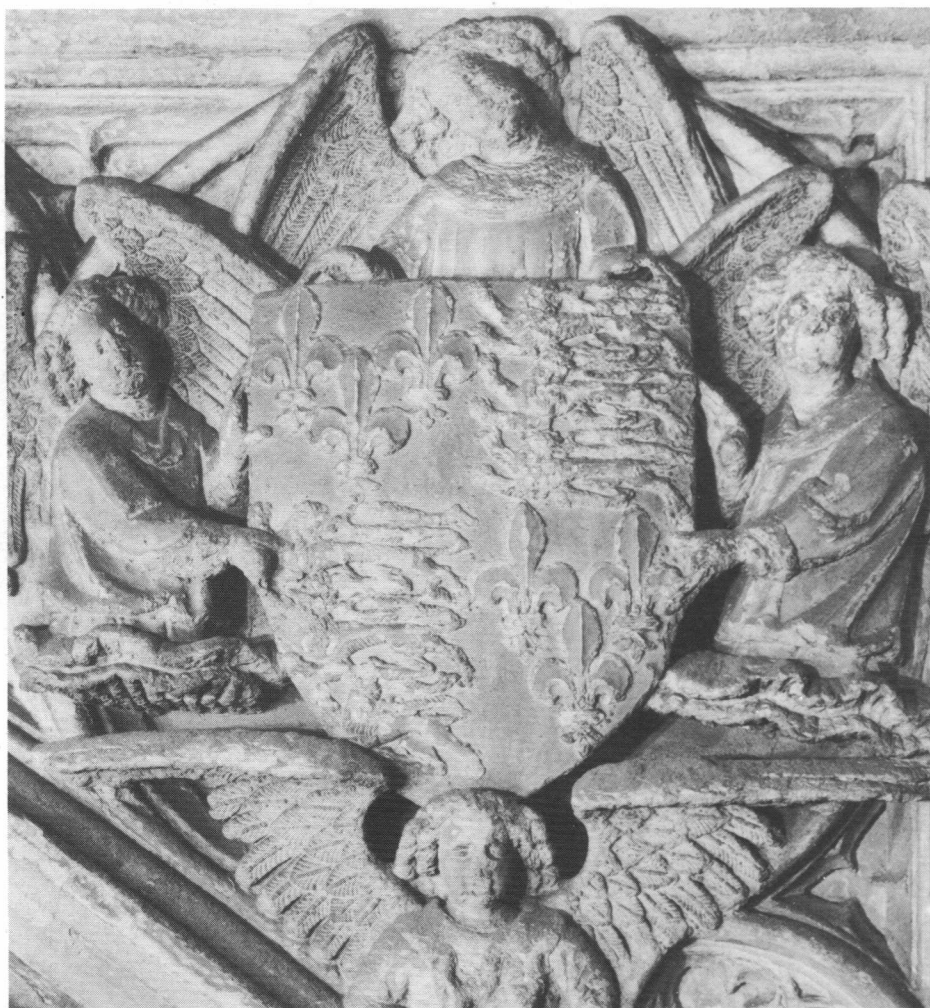


The Dauphin, who became Charles V in 1364, advised by his wily Constable Bertrand du Guesclin, declined battle in favour of a 'scorched earth' policy. English raiders were harried through devastated land by French forces that would not stand and fight. In 1370, Sir Richard Knolles, and three years later, John of Gaunt, conducted expeditions that were humiliating failures. In 1375, the Truce of Bruges was established, and within two years both Edwards were dead, leaving a minor on the throne.

Richard II's reign was a troubled one, but he did have a genuine desire for peace, which was achieved for the last decade of the fourteenth century. Richard's overthrow and murder by Henry of Lancaster in 1399 changed the political situation again. French naval raids and attempted intervention in England were matched by English

expeditions in 1405, 1410 and 1412. These were neither large nor particularly successful, however. In 1415 the English were looking back on a generation of defeats.

Three factors made Henry's invasion something more than a desperate gamble. One was the undoubted superiority of English arms in battle. English archers, if properly deployed, constituted one of the most formidable fighting forces in Europe. Second, in Henry they had a commander of energy and determination. Third, and most important, the French were riven by personal and political disputes that extended as far as civil war. Charles VI was insane, and in the absence of his authority, two groups of nobles, known as the Burgundians and the Armagnacs, vied for supremacy. It was this disunity that was to prove fatal for the French in the 1415 campaign.



◀ *The Royal Arms of England, quarterly 1&4 France Modern azure three fleurs de lis or, 2&3 gules 3 lions passant guardant or, borne by Henry V. The angels symbolize divine aid. Chantry chapel Westminster Abbey.*

▶ *Henry V, King of England. This modern reconstruction is based upon an early sixteenth century copy of a contemporary portrait. This is probably a good likeness and may be compared with a head carved in 1971 to restore Henry's tomb in Westminster Abbey. He was a handsome, well-built and athletic man, every inch a king, whom even his enemies respected.*

THE OPPOSING COMMANDERS



Henry V, King of England

The formal beginning to young Henry's military career was in 1399, when at the age of twelve, he was knighted. In fact he was knighted twice. On the first occasion this was by Richard II who had taken him that summer on his Irish campaign, as a hostage for his exiled father's good behaviour. He was then knighted again by his father, Henry Bolingbroke, the day before his coronation as Henry IV, having deposed Richard in a coup d'état. Twelve was an unusual, though not exceptionally early, age to be knighted. What was unusual, and what gave Henry an invaluable apprenticeship in the career of arms, were the circumstances of the usurpation that made the second knighting necessary. By deposing, im-

prisoning and later secretly murdering Richard, Henry IV had, whatever his justification, acted contrary to the laws of God and Man. This legitimized rebellion against his rule, and more than half his reign was spent in dealing with the results of his seizure of power.

The first campaign during which Henry saw service was against Scotland in 1400. Then, as Prince of Wales, he was faced with a full-scale and determined revolt by Owain Glendwr (who also claimed that title). The young prince was only the nominal leader at first, working with the powerful 'Marcher' lords who wielded effective power in the area. The Welsh used guerrilla tactics, relying upon raids and a swift retreat to mountain hideouts. So the 1402 campaign, when 'night after night the army lay in the open, drenched to the skin and half-starved' in pursuit of an elusive enemy, taught Henry the dreary realities of warfare. He also received military instruction from two members of the Percy family. Harry Hotspur was his first tutor; and in 1403 Thomas, Earl of Worcester, took over the role. Ironically, later in that year Henry was to face both of them in battle.

The Percies, with the Earl of Northumberland at their head, had helped Henry IV to the throne. Now the family wanted full control. So they made an alliance with Glendwr, and Percy forces marched to unite with him in the summer of 1403. By swift marching, King Henry was able to prevent their junction. At Shrewsbury, on 21 July, with Prince Henry leading the left wing, the rebels were soundly defeated. Hotspur was killed and his army dispersed. But it was a far from easy victory. The Royalists had to advance uphill into a hail of archery from some of the best bowmen in the kingdom, notably those of Cheshire. Young Henry was himself wounded in the face by an arrow, but bore the pain until victory was won. This was truly a baptism of fire. Henry proved his courage and

determination in the teeth of the most fearsome tactical weapon of his time, one that he was to turn on the French a dozen years later.

Already Henry was unusual – he had fought a battle. In fact he was to fight two in the twenty-odd years of his military career; Agincourt was the other. For battles were rare events at this time. Warfare was mainly given over to long sieges of castles and towns. Accordingly, the reconquest of Wales dragged on for another five years. In 1405 a great rebellion involving Glendwr, the Percies and the Mortimers was crushed at Bramham Moor, the Earl of Northumberland being killed. There was even a French expeditionary force landed at Milford Haven to link with the Welsh in a southern thrust; but it sailed home with nothing achieved.

So, when his father died in 1413, Henry was already an experienced warrior after a military education of the most harsh and practical kind. He had endured long marches in appalling weather conditions. He had suffered the tedium and discomfort of the siege-lines. As well as seeing many skirmishes, he had commanded men in formal, open battle. Above all, he had been taught the need for attention to detail in war. His preparations for the Agincourt campaign were massive and meticulous, to ensure the necessary numbers of men and sufficient amount of weaponry and ammunition.

In order to do this he needed about him men of competence and honesty. Bishop Henry Beaufort, his uncle, as well as providing or arranging the huge loans necessary to fund the expedition, oversaw the recruitment of his army. The Earl of Arundel, his treasurer, organized the payment of sailors and the provision of supplies for the voyage. The Earl of Dorset, his admiral, gathered together the invasion fleet. Richard Courtenay, Bishop of Norwich, was involved in diplomatic and intelligence-gathering activities (we know this because his agent in Paris was later arrested and tried for treason). Nicholas Merbury, Master of the Ordnance, provided ammunition and other equipment of war.

On campaign, Henry surrounded himself with experienced and trusted subordinates – for the most part. He also took with him Edward, Earl of

March, who had been involved in the plot that was uncovered only a few days before the departure for France. Admittedly it was Edward himself who had confessed, but he was a dangerous man (his claim to the throne was in fact stronger than Henry's) and it is a mark of the King's confidence that he pardoned and continued to employ the Earl. For the rest, there were Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, and Thomas, Duke of Clarence, the King's brothers; the Earls of Suffolk, Cambridge and Oxford; the Duke of York, the king's uncle; and numerous subordinates such as that old war-horse Sir Thomas Erpingham, the King's Steward; Sir John Holland and Sir John Cornwall. An important aspect of Henry's success as a leader was his ability to win respect from everyone, whatever their age or experience – and even from his enemies.

▼ *Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester; an exact copy of a contemporary sketch.*





In summary, Henry was the complete medieval military man and model king. This is not to say that he was perfect in all things. There is no doubt that he took his responsibilities very seriously. He had inherited rights in France, especially in Normandy, and he felt a responsibility to enforce them. Similarly, on the larger issue of the French crown, he had a family responsibility to his great-grandfather, Edward III, to achieve this, if possible. A very pious man, he was acutely aware of the sanctity of Church property and of his duty to his subjects. Accordingly, he strictly enforced ordinances controlling the behaviour of his troops on campaign. The discipline he demanded paid him back in full at Agincourt. In addition he possessed both moral and physical bravery; his confidence never appeared to be shaken even in such desperate circumstances as at Agincourt. Above all, he knew his trade as a soldier. He appreciated the

◀ *Michael de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk. Note the organization of plates around the face, and the protection for shoulder and elbow.*

▼ *Effigy of the Earl of Oxford, his head resting on his great helmet. Note the chain mail beneath the metal gorget and the roundel at the elbow.*



importance of the sea and the need for a strong fleet (although this was not created until after Agincourt). He accepted no bounds to the campaigning season and later was to prosecute what is known as the 'War of the Sieges' (1417-22), which firmly established his rule in Normandy, with unrivalled determination. Rouen, the province's capital, was taken after a seven-month siege (July 1418 to January 1419). Meaux took as long and this mostly in the winter months. It was after the capture of the town that he died, exhausted, probably of dysentery, that most common and



▲ Charles VI, King of France, based upon his tomb effigy at St. Denis. He is shown wearing a remarkable gold parade helmet discovered in the courtyard of the Louvre in an old well in 1887. It is decorated with symbols of the French monarchy, notably the fleur de lis,

and is encircled by his motto 'En bien', constantly repeated. This seems a suitable depiction of a king whose madness made him think he was made of glass, an unsatisfactory delusion for a soldier, and which made him incompetent to command in war.

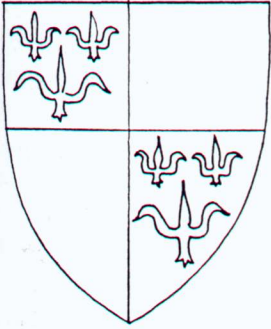
disgusting of soldiers' diseases. His death, two months before that of Charles VI of France, meant that he never held the Joint Crown he strove for. He was a victim of his own success,

There is a side to his character little dwelt upon. French commentators noted that he was a harsh and arrogant man, assured of his own rectitude. His single-mindedness made him ruthless. And his ruthlessness made him cruel. It was this that made him hang prisoners after a siege. He oversaw a massacre at the taking of Caen in 1417. During the long siege of Rouen he refused food to the women and children expelled from the city and trapped between the siege-lines and the city walls. Technically he was within his rights according to the 'laws of war' at the time; but he need not have stuck to their letter. So it is with the massacre of the prisoners at Agincourt. He had justification for what he did, but it was a horrific act. Constant war from an early age had brutalized him. He was a cold and heartless warrior, which made a mighty king.

The French Commanders

In contrast to the English, who were led, as we have seen, by a commander of the first rank, the French were in a mess. Their king, Charles VI,





▲ Charles d'Albret, Constable of France, arms quarterly 1&4 France Modern 2&3 gules. He was killed leading the first line at Agincourt.

► Charles d'Albret, Constable of France, stands beneath his banner in the first rank at Agincourt. He is dressed for combat, with a mail aventail and open-faced bascinet in preference to a heavy, vision-inhibiting closed helmet. He has drawn his sword and left off his scabbard, which could prove an encumbrance while fighting.

◄ The jupon or coat armour of Charles VI dating to the late fourteenth century and now in Chartres cathedral in perfect condition. It was originally a plain bright red.



was subject to fits of insanity to which he had been victim for over twenty years. Despite his undoubted bravery and moments of sanity, he was unfit to command. His son, the Dauphin Louis, was an unhealthy and unmilitary lad of nineteen with no experience of war. This crucial weakness at the top had resulted in a situation of near civil war in which the Burgundian and Armagnac factions struggled for supremacy. In such a situation there was no possibility of undivided command.

The King (or his advisers) preferred not to call upon either John, Duke of Burgundy, or Charles, Duke of Orleans to lead the army. They could not work together: John had assassinated Charles's father in 1413 (and was to be murdered in revenge in 1419) while Burgundy was equivocal about whether to oppose the English or to ally themselves with them. John did allow his subjects to serve in the French army, but declined himself and forbade his son's presence.

Next in seniority came Charles, Duke of Orleans, aged only 24 and with little military experience; John, Duke of Bourbon, a 33-year-old who had won a victory over an Anglo-Gascon force during a chevauchée at Soubise in 1413; and John, Duke of Alençon, who, at thirty, had proved himself a failure as a military leader in the Bourges campaign three years earlier. They were asked to work in cooperation with the military officials of the Royal household: the Constable, Marshal and Master of the Crossbows.

In theory, this was a good solution. Charles d'Albret had held the post of Constable since 1402 and was an experienced and cautious warrior. John le Maingre, known as Boucicault, the Marshal, had an international reputation. A stalwart crusader, he had taken a leading part in the Burgundian Crusade so disastrously defeated at Nicopolis in 1396. Captured and ransomed from Sultan Bayezid, he had returned to defend Constantinople against Ottoman attack in 1399. He was already a hero of literature, his 'words and deeds' having been recorded in a book celebrating him as a model of chivalry. He was a legend in his own lifetime.

Had these two vastly experienced soldiers been able to exercise command, the result of King

Henry's chevauchée might have been very different. For they advocated extreme caution: by avoiding battle and employing a 'scorched-earth' policy they planned to starve the English force into submission. They also devised a tactical plan by which the English might be defeated should it come to a fight. As we shall see, this was certainly the right strategy and these were probably the best tactics to employ. But when the day of battle came they were overruled by the arrogant young dukes, Princes of the Blood, over whom career soldiers such as they were could claim no authority.

D'Albret and Boucicault managed the campaign very well up to a few days before the battle. On the fateful day itself, if one were to ask who commanded the French army, the answer must be: no one. This, along with the evident, and contrasting, tactical competence and cohesion of the English, is the root cause of the French defeat.



▲ John le Maingre, Marshal Boucicault, from a contemporary portrait. This is the battered 'prize-fighter's' face of a veteran

of many wars fought over three decades. Boucicault advised avoiding battle with the English but was overruled.

THE OPPOSING ARMIES

The Cavalry

Armies of the early fifteenth century were based on the man-at-arms: that is to say, someone clad in a complete suit of armour, trained to fight both on horse and foot. He could be a knight, if he possessed the necessary social standing and had undergone a formal ceremony; but more often he was not. While all important men were knights, many men-at-arms were simple esquires (the rank below and technically denoting a man suitable for knighting) or ordinary soldiers with no such pretensions. A man-at-arms was principally a cavalryman, by training and ethos, although, as we shall see, most fighting of the period was carried out on foot. He usually led a 'lance', a group of retainers who were also mounted, so he needed enough wealth to sustain the cost of several horses.

There were other types of cavalry, more lightly

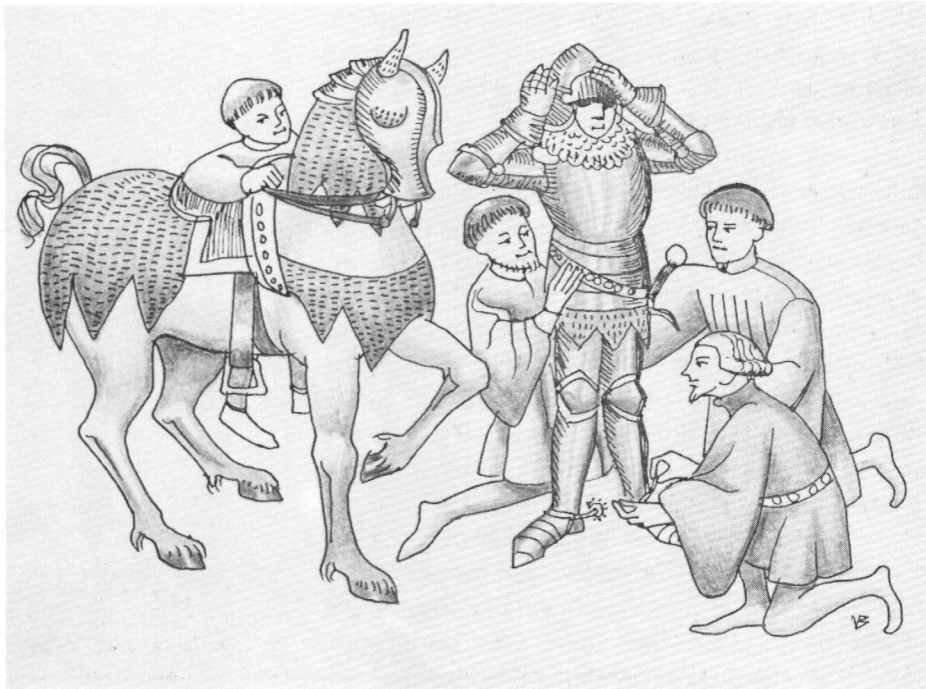
equipped, known since the time of Edward III as 'hobilar', although they played no role in the Agincourt campaign. A third to a half of English archers also rode horses, although they should be seen only as mounted infantry, gaining increasing mobility for the strategy of *chevauchée*.

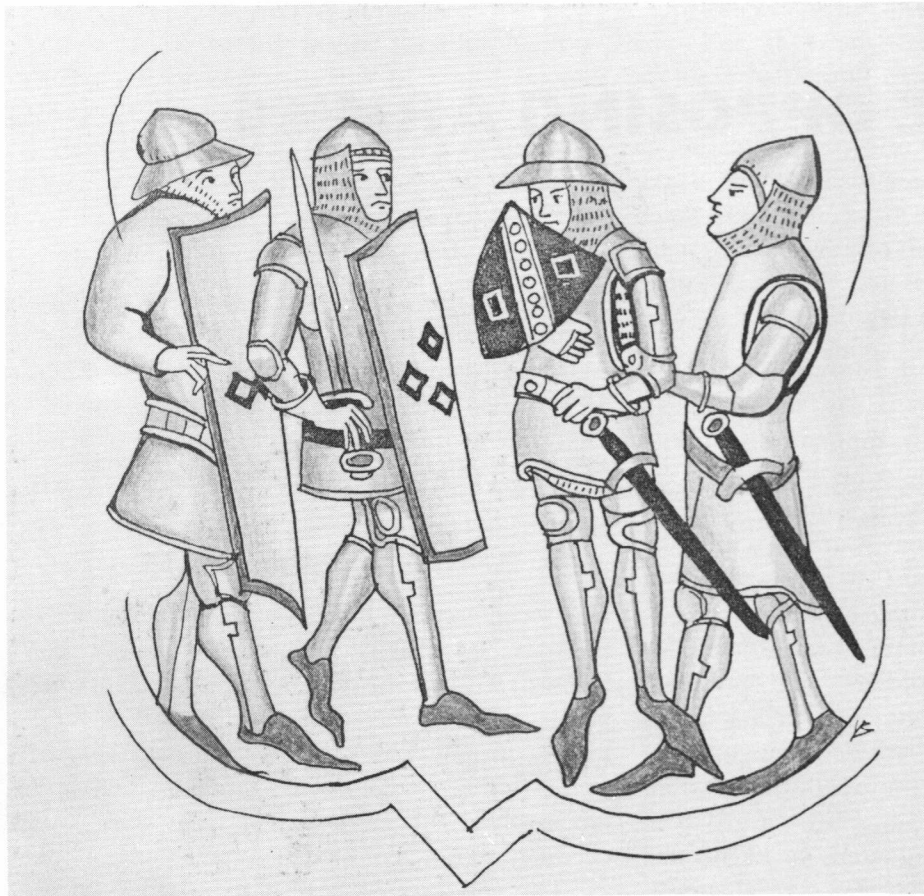
The Infantry

The most common form of infantry soldier was the ordinary spearman. His weapon might be a halberd, with an axe-like head rather than a spear point, and he was armoured according to his means, usually with a helmet and brigandine. As well as filling the back ranks on the battlefield, his job involved the hard slog of siege work, which occupied so much of medieval campaigns.

The missile-men were of three types: archers, crossbowmen and gunners. The success of the

► *Arming a knight, from an early fifteenth century manuscript. As well as showing details of armour for man and horse, it makes the point that each man-at-arms needed the support of a team of servants to support him and his mounts – usually one or two warhorses, a riding horse for every member of the 'lance' and a packhorse.*

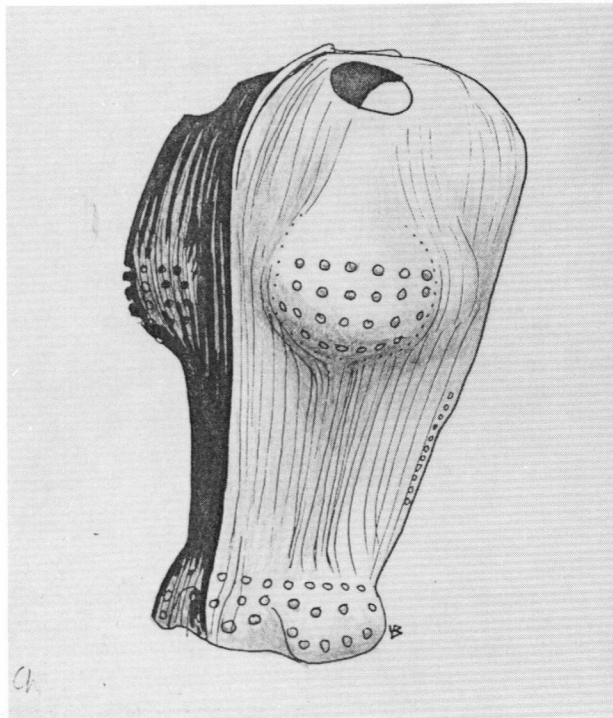


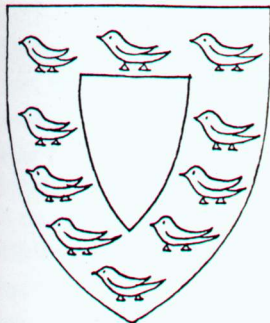


◀ **French infantrymen.** This French manuscript shows the kinds of soldiers provided by the urban communities. The equipment is varied: with bascinets and pot helmets, more mail than a man-at-arms was wearing in 1415, and shields. The long shield on the left looks like a pavise, with a pointed base for holding it firm in the ground usually serving as protection for crossbowmen. Such shields were decorated with the coat of arms of the town.

▼ **The Warwick Chamfron.** Men-at-arms' horses were expected to be protected frontally, at least, to justify their rider's place in the battle line. At Agincourt it was as the cavalry charge was repulsed that the horses became maddened by arrows striking their unprotected flanks and rumps.

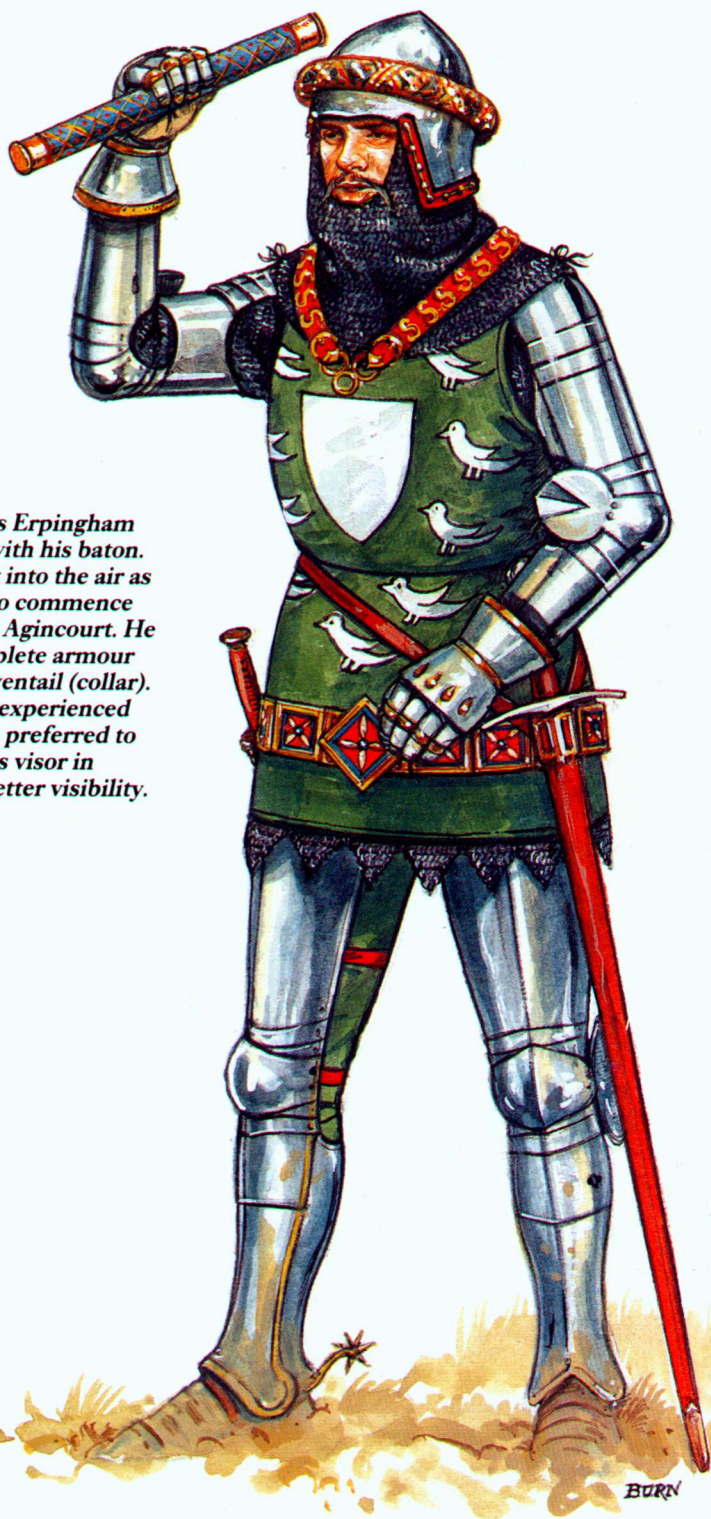
English longbow meant that archers habitually made up two-thirds of England's armies (and at Agincourt more than four-fifths). Their rapid shooting and destructive effect will be examined later. The French also possessed archers but did not use them so effectively. They relied more on the crossbow, which shot a heavier missile, or quarrel, but took much longer to reload. A crossbowman was usually accompanied by a companion bearing a large shield, a pavise, to protect them during reloading. This made the crossbow more useful in sieges than on the battlefield. The gunners, employed by both sides, were also more often engaged in siege work. There was already a wide range of types and sizes of artillery pieces, developed in the three-quarters of a century since their first appearance in Western Europe. They ranged from small, hand-held weapons to massive bombards used for battering down fortifications. It should be stressed that there was no proper, mobile, field artillery at the time of Agincourt.





▲ Sir Thomas Erpingham (b. 1357) KG 1401, arms vert an inescutcheon within an orle of martlets argent. An old warhorse, Steward of the King's Household, he commanded the archers at Agincourt. Retinue: 20 (16) men-at-arms, 60 (47) horsed archers.

Sir Thomas Erpingham gesturing with his baton. He threw it into the air as the signal to commence shooting at Agincourt. He wears complete armour and mail aventail (collar). Like many experienced men he has preferred to abandon his visor in favour of better visibility.

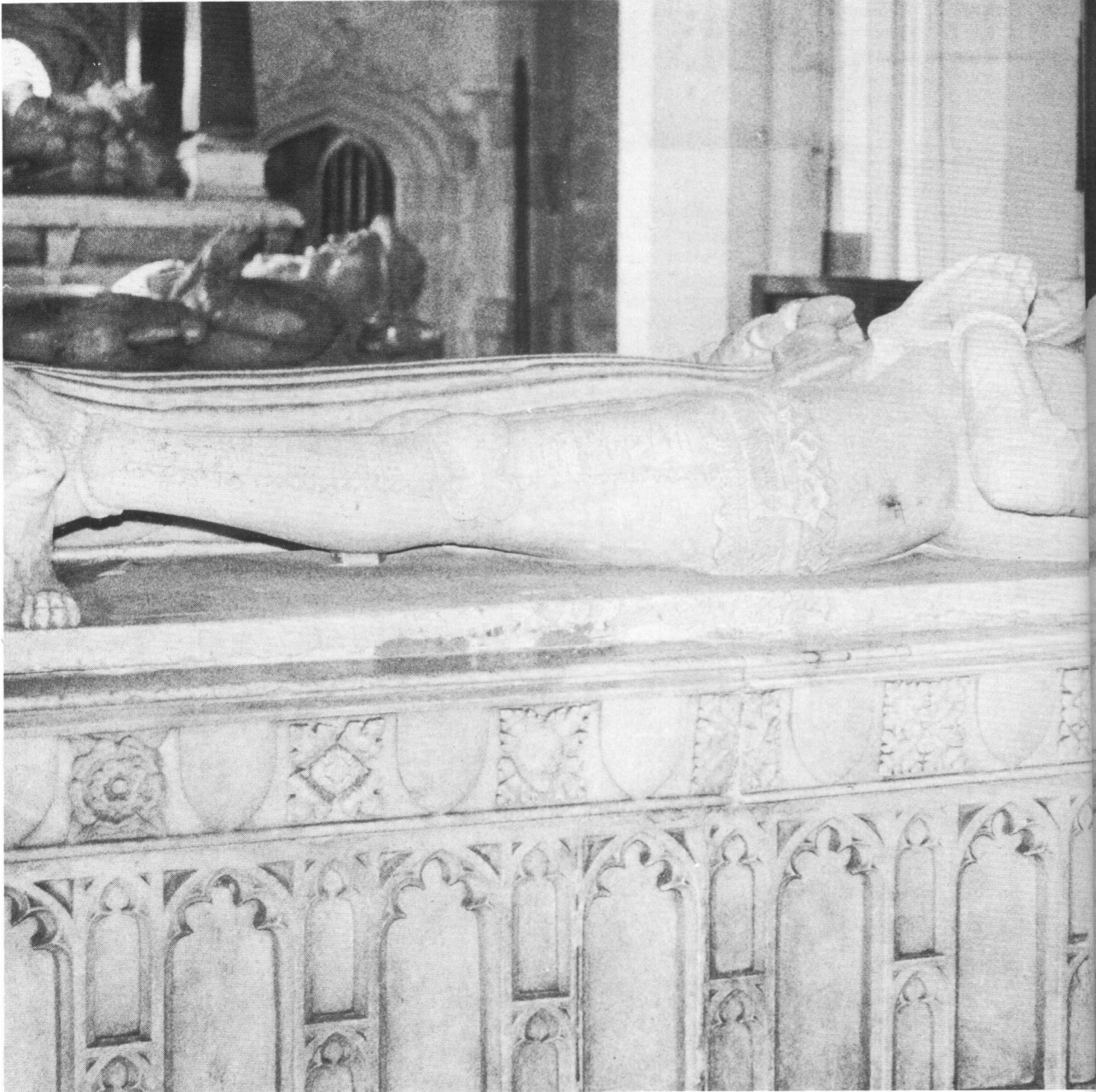


The Man-at-Arms: Armour

Until the mid-thirteenth century, armour had been made of mail – closely interlocking rows of iron rings – but gradually pieces of steel were added to afford extra protection against blows and missiles. By 1415, the suit of plates, or complete armour, had almost reached its final state. A man-at-arms was covered ‘cap-à-pied’, from head-to-toe, in polished steel.

Under the armour a padded jerkin (akheton) was worn, both to prevent the metal rubbing and to absorb some of the force of an arrow. Until 1400 many men-at-arms wore a mail hauberk over this, and then a coat of plates. Such apparel was

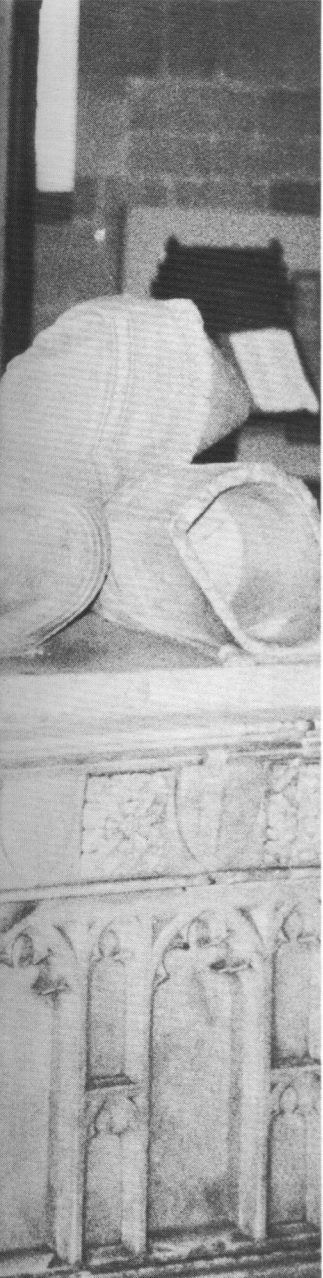
▼ *An early fifteenth century armour from the tomb of Fulk de Pembrugge IV, Tong church, Shropshire.*



undoubtedly heavy, but a greater problem was the threat of heat exhaustion under all that armour. The development of the complete 'white armour' (so-called because every piece was solid, polished metal) helped to alleviate this. No man could arm himself unaided; it needed at least one assistant. A complete suit was not impossibly heavy: at about 60-80lb (28-35kg), the weight of a complete harness did not exceed the load of a modern infantry pack. Furthermore, the weight was distri-

buted around the body, each piece strapped on and articulated to suit the wearer's movements. So knights did not need to be lifted on to their horses by cranes as Olivier's film *Henry V* erroneously shows. A fit man could easily vault into the saddle.

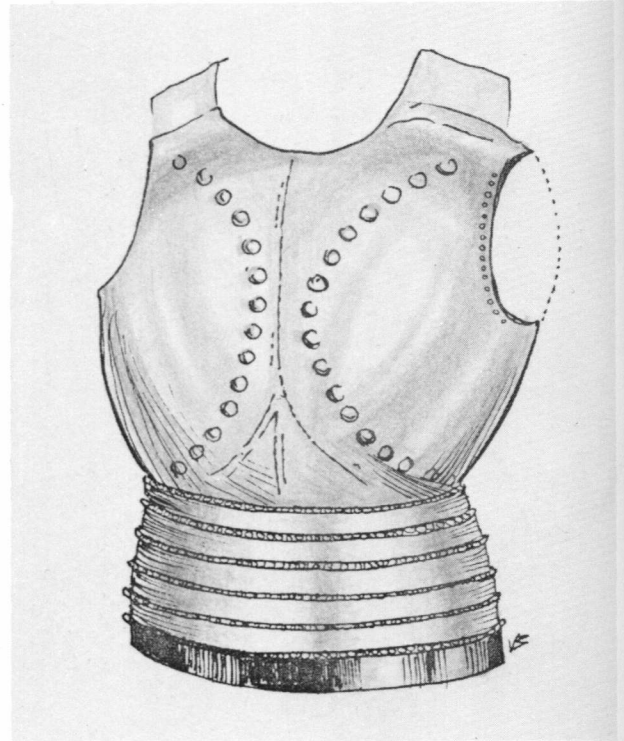
▼ *A close-up of the Tong tomb, showing a bascinet with mail aventail, and the great helm supporting the figure's head.*





Nor were they unable to rise from a prostrate position, unless totally exhausted, stunned or otherwise injured.

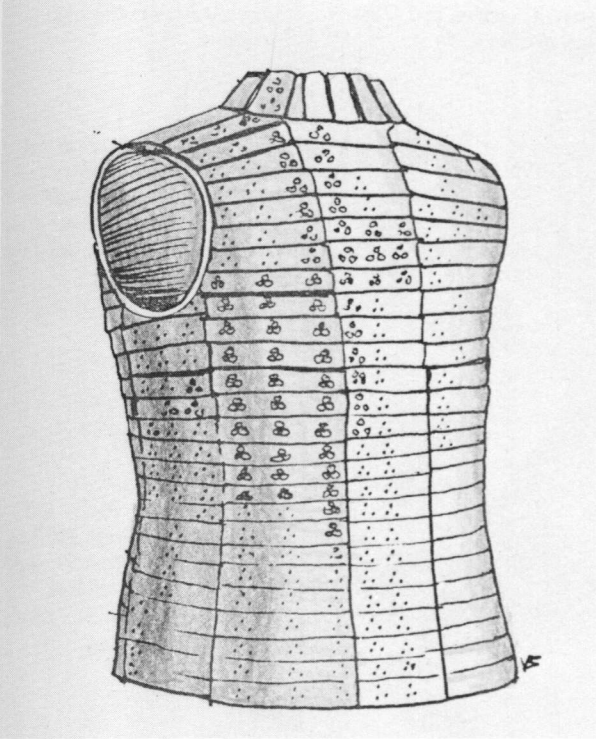
The heaviest and probably most uncomfortable piece of armour was the helmet, and so it was the most frequently removed when action seemed distant or unlikely. The torso was covered by a back- and breast-plate hinged on the left side, buckled on the right and across the shoulders. The arms and legs had tubes similarly attached, elbow and knee covered respectively by 'couter' and 'poleyn' pieces to allow movement. Between waist and mid-thigh hung a skirt of hoops of steel (lames). Articulated gauntlets protected the hands and sabatons the feet. A recent development was the small, circular plate covering each armpit, a vulnerable area when the arm was raised for a



◀ Brass of Sir Nicholas Dagworth at Blickling, Norfolk, 1401. This shows the style of armour worn at the beginning of the fifteenth century, featuring much chain mail, which was to reduce rapidly during Henry V's reign.

▲ A late fourteenth century breastplate and fauld (strips of armour below the waist) covered in cloth. This would be worn by a man-at-arms or possibly a wealthy crossbowman.

blow. Another innovation, replacing the mail aventail, was a solid neck guard (gorget), which was attached to the helmet. This was known as the bascinet and was so ubiquitous that contemporaries used the term to denote men-at-arms (for example, 8,000 bascinets in the French van at Agincourt). It was close-fitting and sloped to a point at the back of the head. The face was protected either by a visor, or another helmet worn over it. The sharply-pointed visor gave rise to the term 'dog-faced bascinet' and could be hinged or slid open for better vision and ventilation. The bucket-like 'great helm' afforded neither comfort. It tended to be used in the tournament rather than in war, but Henry V wore one at Agincourt, and the double-protection it afforded probably saved his life.

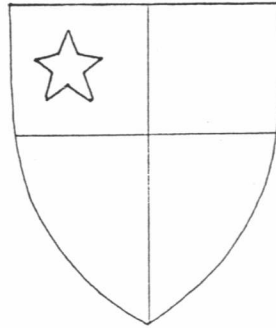


▲ **Brigandine.** This was a common and cheaper form of armour than plate. It was covered in cloth so that only the rows of rivets showed on the surface. This example from the Musée de l'Armée in Paris shows its construction.

► **Brass of John Leventhorpe Esquire,** in Sawbridgeworth Church, Hertfordshire, c.1433, illustrating armour typical of the latter period of Henry's reign, fully armoured with little visible chain mail.

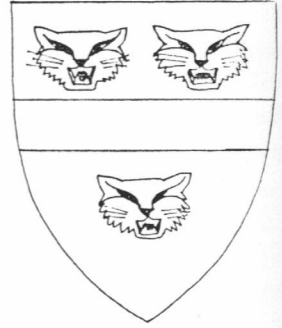


Rich men had bands of brass or gilded brass to decorate their suits. Those with heraldic arms displayed them on a close-fitting garment called a 'cote d'armes' (literally, coat of arms). This made identification possible in battle and had great symbolic significance. When, a few days before Agincourt, Henry V vowed to wear his 'cote d'armes' at all times, he meant by this that he was constantly ready for battle. A late arrival at Agincourt actually improvised one from his trumpeter's banner. For the coat of arms also had the effect of declaring that its wearer was worth a ransom, a valuable insurance policy if threatened with death. It is commonly believed that the 'cote d'armes' was abandoned in the early fifteenth century, in favour of the all-steel 'white armour', but these two examples would seem to argue otherwise. Shields were falling out of fashion, so there was no other way of self-identification, and it is likely that all knights and nobles wore their 'cote d'armes' at Agincourt.



Coats of arms: two English examples.

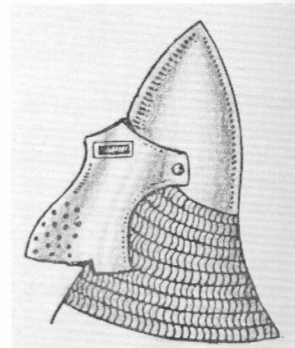
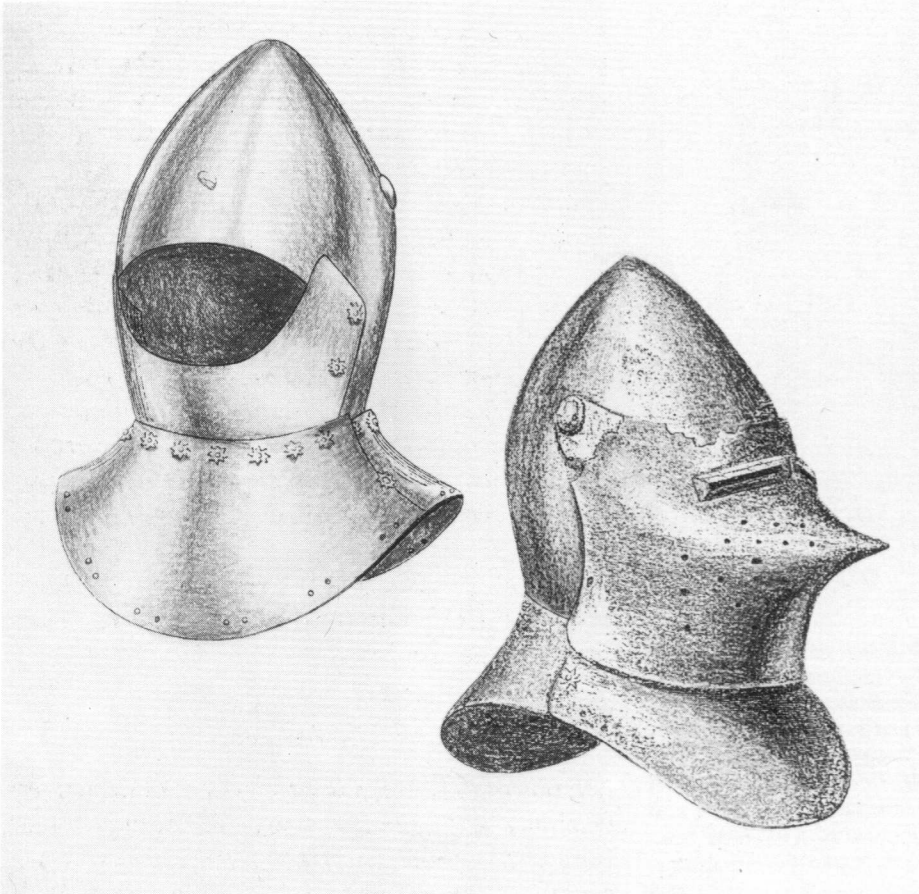
▲ **John de Vere, Earl of Oxford**, arms quarterly gules and or in the first quarter a mullet argent. Joint rearguard commander with the Duke of York. Retinue: 40 (29) men-at-arms, 100 (79) foot archers.



▲ **Michael de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk**, arms azure a fess between three leopards' heads or. Michael senior died of dysentery at Harfleur, and was succeeded by his only son, also Michael, who was killed at Agincourt. Retinue: 40 (14) men-at-arms, 120 (44) horsed archers.

▶ An Italian great sword, c. 1400. This simple, functional, but beautiful weapon of about three feet in length (1m) was used by all types of soldiers.

◀ Visored bascinets: left, an example about 1400 in the Royal Armouries at the Tower of London; below, from Roy. MS 20, C. 7. ▼



Other important items were the spurs, worn by all horsemen, but gilded in the case of knights to symbolize their higher status, These were removed for fighting on foot, as Henry V did.

The Man-at-Arms: Weapons

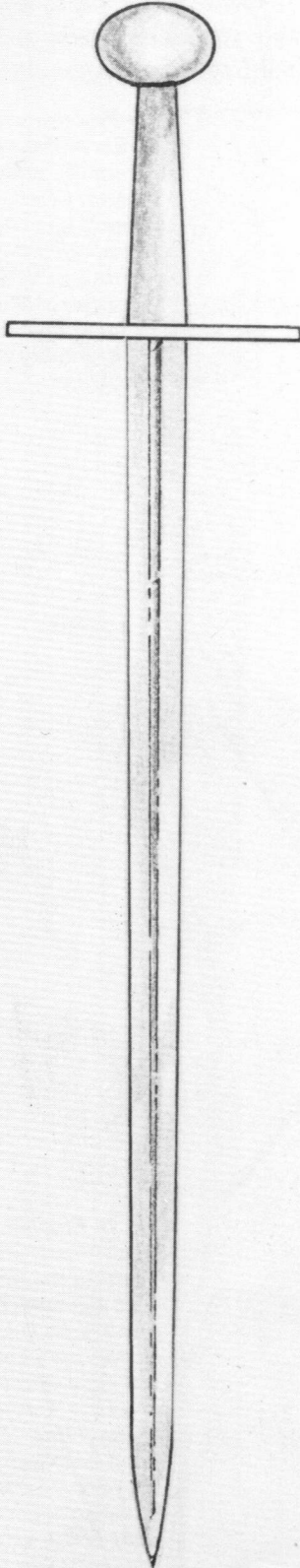
As a cavalryman, the man-at-arms learned to wield lance and sword. The lance was about 12 feet (4m) long, a stout piece of ash (usually) thickening towards the grip and with a long, slender point. On horseback it was tucked firmly under the arm while the legs were braced against stirrups and saddle, making man and horse a projectile to unhorse or pierce the armour of an opponent. On foot it was shortened by half to make it more wieldy. Increasingly favoured was the poleaxe, a wicked weapon with an axe-head on a four- to six-foot shaft bound with metal so that it could not be lopped off. It could used to bludgeon, transfix or cleave an opponent.

The queen of weapons was the sword – the symbol of knighthood and nobility. Made of the finest steel (that of Bordeaux was highly prized), most were some three feet long with a simple cross-guard and heavy pommel. Some specialist weapons were slim, with a diamond section, for piercing armour, but most had a broad, doubled-edged blade for cutting. Longer swords, wielded in both hands, were also popular (although they had not yet reached the monster proportions-of the sixteenth century). Finally, on his right hip the man-at-arms carried a dagger of ‘ballock’ or misericord style. Not really a combat weapon, it could be used to dispatch a wounded opponent, or as a last resort. It could slip through a visor or gaps in armour to wound or kill an otherwise invulnerable man.

Not all could afford the equipment described, but substantial numbers of men-at-arms were armed to this standard.

The Archer

Armour was not the primary concern of the archer; flexibility and mobility were. Accordingly, they wore either padded jerkins or brigandines (which contained metal plates) but little other body



armour. The head was protected by an open-faced bascinet or the popular wide-brimmed 'pot-helm' and possibly a camail. Some leg or arm armour may have been worn, but the archers at Agincourt

neglected even their breeches!

The archer's bow was a six-foot stave of elm, ash or preferably yew. The 'back' of the bow was flat and the 'belly' rounded, giving it a 'D' section



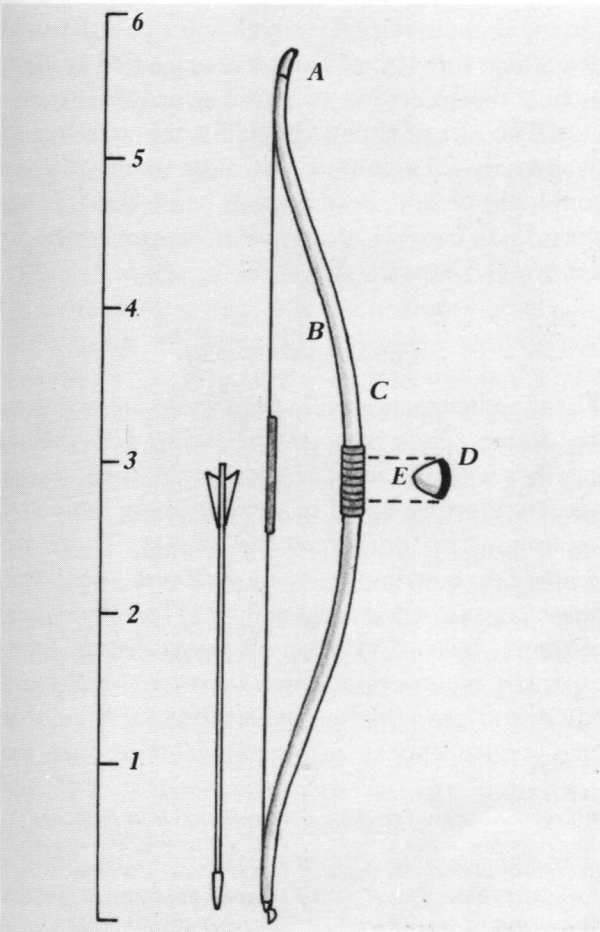
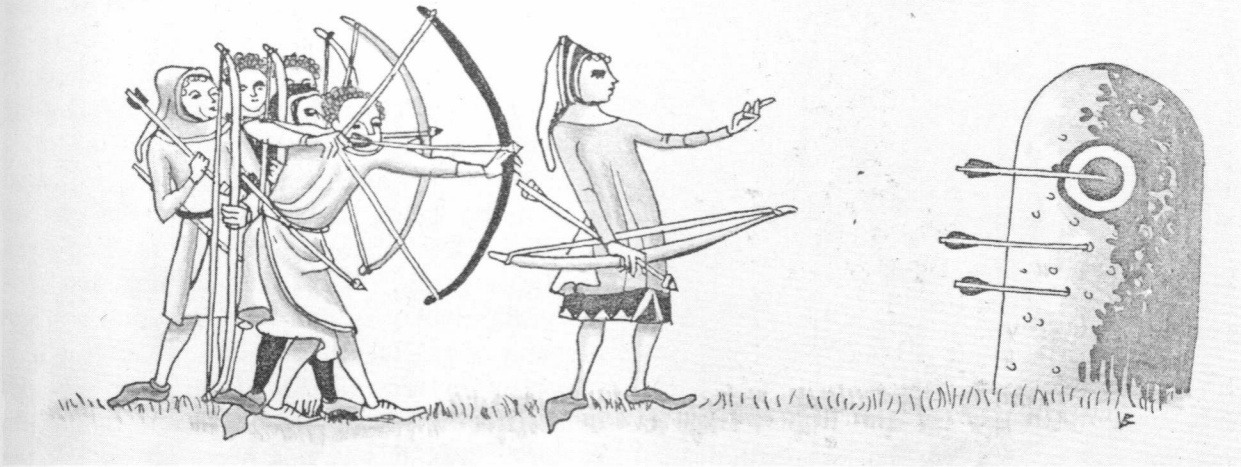
► *Practice with the bow.* This well-known drawing from the mid-fourteenth century Luttrell Psalter shows how the English developed their battle-winning skills. The practice shafts are tipped with bulbous arrowheads, presumably a safety measure.

◄ *An English archer at Agincourt. Standing behind the protection of the six-foot sharpened stakes, he is lightly armoured. On his head he wears a simple iron cap, and his body-armour is a brigandine. His half-hose and loin cloth, the only covering for his lower limbs, suggest that he is one of the many victims of dysentery in Henry's army.*

tapering to the nocks where the string was attached. The bow was usually kept unstrung with the string in a pouch to keep it dry. Stringing and unstringing took but a matter of seconds, allowing

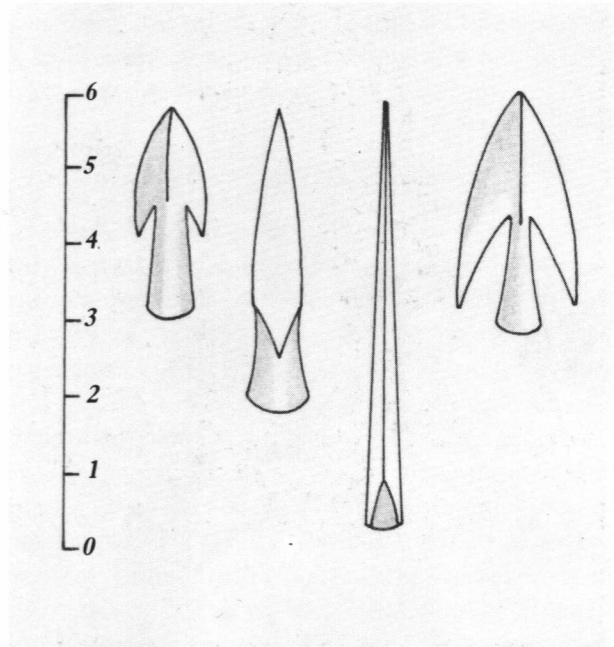
bowmen to pop the string under their hats should it come on to rain!

The English bow of this period is normally called a longbow, although it is not the description



◀ The longbow, showing its construction. A, nock; B, belly; C, back; D, sapwood; E, hardwood. Approximate length just under six feet.

▼ Types of arrow heads. Left to right: general purpose, armour-piercing bodkin type, mail-piercing bodkin, hunting type used against unprotected horse. (Based on surviving examples in the Museum of London.) Scale in inches.

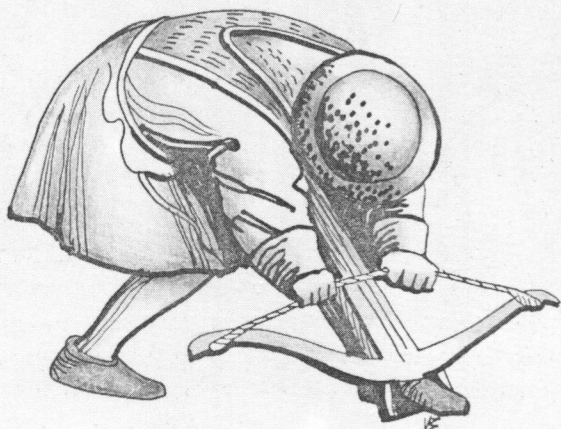




used by contemporaries. For it is not so much the length of the bow but its 'pull' (power) and the expertise of the user that matter. This could vary from 80lb up to 150lb, but to pull a bow of the latter magnitude required great strength and technique. Hence training from an early age was crucial, and English kings were able to promote the skill throughout their lands, giving them an invaluable pool of skilled archers. Although Edward III feared that the French might follow the English example, they never managed to do so. (This may be because the French monarchy feared to arm the lower classes effectively in case of rebellion.) The range of a longbow is often given as 400 yards (365m), but killing range was little more than half that, and real execution was not probably not achieved over 50 yards. But it is important to remember that the bow was not outdone in these respects until the mid-nineteenth century! Also, it was not necessary to kill the enemy: wounding and terrifying their horses or forcing them to retreat through fear of death would be enough for victory. Each archer carried as many as four dozen arrows in a quiver or in his waist-belt. The rate of shooting could reach up to ten or twelve arrows a minute. At close range, arrows could pierce the best armour, and the 'arrow-storm' was capable of driving back even the most determined opposition.

The Crossbowman

The crossbowman usually wore more armour than the archer. As a weapon in use at sieges, this, together with the large shield, might have been a necessary protection. Illustrations show body and leg armour in addition to the helmet. There are almost no contemporary illustrations for 1415, however; most cited as such date to half-a-century or more later. Furthermore many come from expensive manuscripts which represent battles and equipment in a highly stylized manner, so that missile-men appear as heavily armoured as the

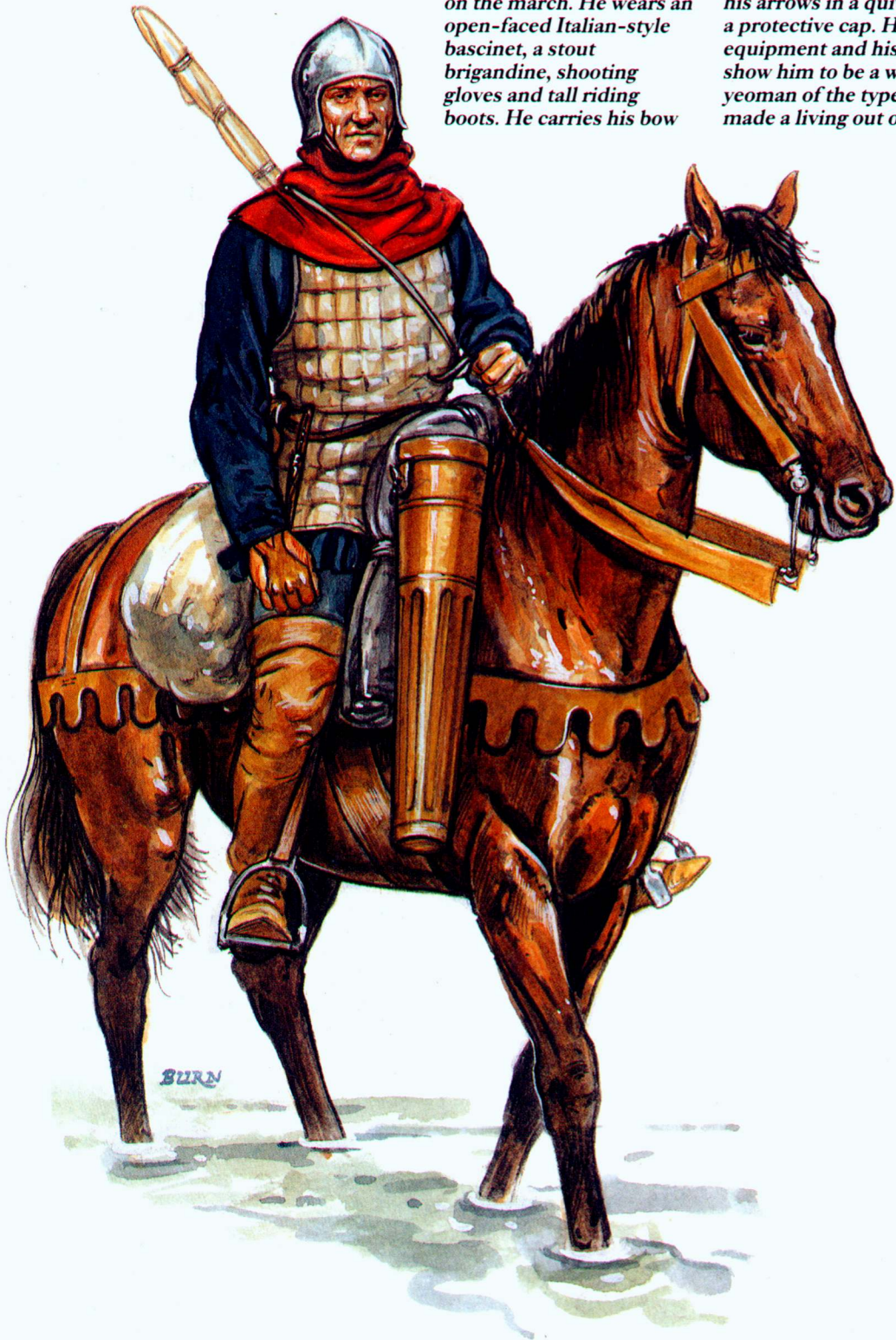


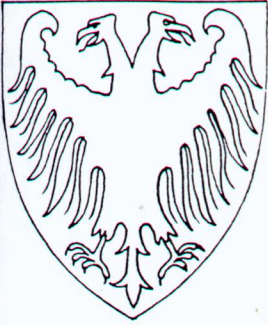
◀ *Crossbowmen. Loading the crossbow was a strenuous activity as these drawings show. The development of ratched*

devices to draw back the stiff string made it easier, but it was still a slow weapon to load and fire.

English mounted archer on the march. He wears an open-faced Italian-style bascinet, a stout brigandine, shooting gloves and tall riding boots. He carries his bow

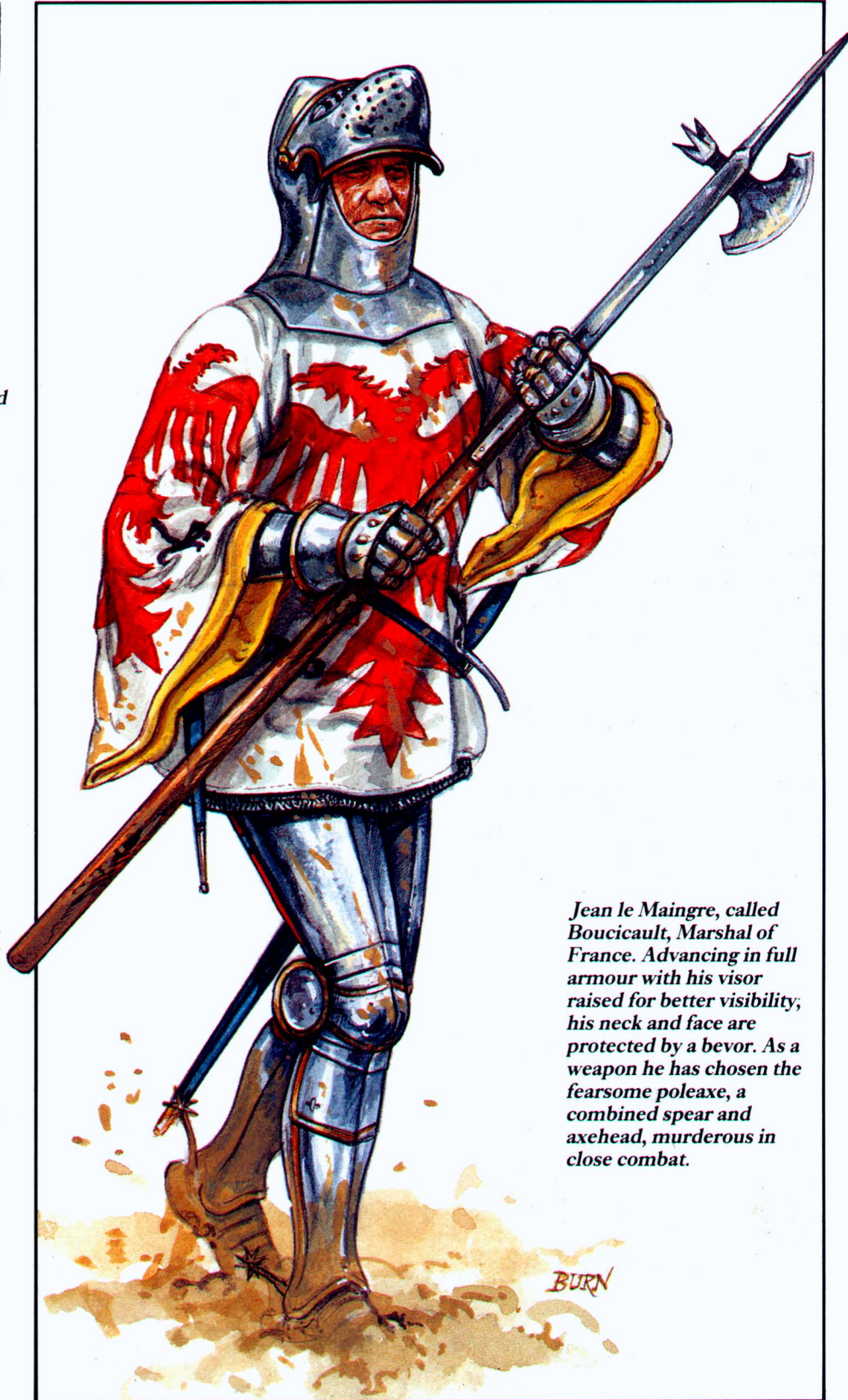
in a weatherproof bag and his arrows in a quiver with a protective cap. His whole equipment and his mount show him to be a well-off yeoman of the type who made a living out of war.





▲ **John le Maingre, de Boucicault, Marshal of France**, arms argent a double-headed eagle displayed gules armed and membered azure. He was a veteran, knighted at the battle of Roosbeke in 1382, and appointed Marshal in 1391. He was dragged wounded from a pile of corpses at Agincourt, made prisoner and died unransomed in England in 1421.

◀ **The castle at Peronne.** The town was the base for the French advance guard and strategically sited above a bend in the Somme. Peronne was much damaged in the First World War; the original towers are shortened and now linked by a brick curtain wall.



Jean le Maingre, called Boucicault, Marshal of France. Advancing in full armour with his visor raised for better visibility; his neck and face are protected by a bevor. As a weapon he has chosen the fearsome poleaxe, a combined spear and axehead, murderous in close combat.