

# ARCHERY IN MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

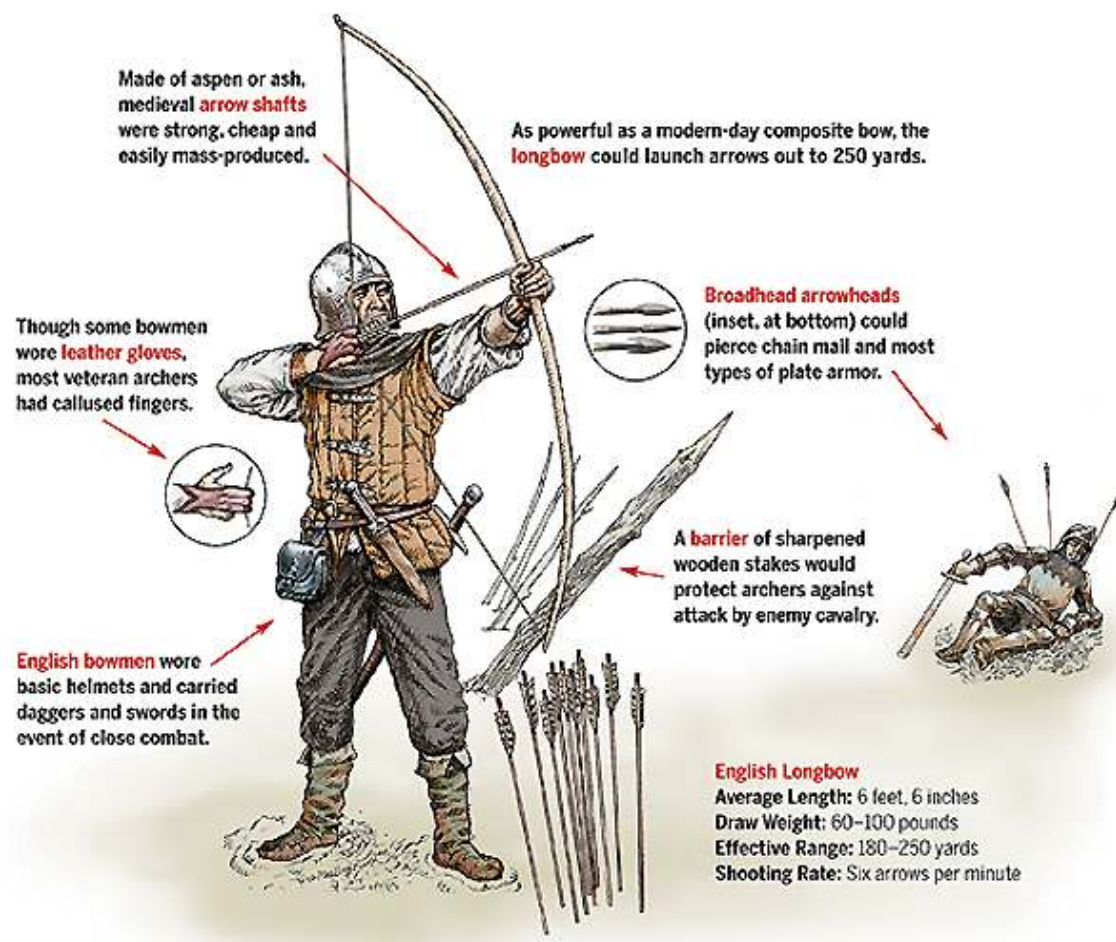
It is clear that there were laws in ENGLAND requiring ARCHERY PRACTICE dating back to at least the 13th Century. The motive was to make sure England had enough men trained to use the **LONGBOW**, which for Centuries was a crucial weapon for the English. (The most famous example is **Agincourt** in Northern France, a battle that **Henry V** won in **1415** and is still glorified.)

The training requirement was usually combined with prohibitions on other kinds of games and sports so that people would focus on archery instead of, for example, "Tennis, football, quoits, dice" and other "games inappropriate." **The point was not so much to condemn games as to make sure they did not get in the way of LONGBOW training.** In other words, they saw nothing morally wrong with tennis, it's just that it is hard to kill a French knight with a tennis ball, no matter how good your serve is.



In 1511 the requirement was expanded by "An Act concerning Shooting in Long Bows," even though by then the importance of the bow was declining. This law provided that: "**All sorts of men under the age of 40 Years shall have bows and arrows**" and practice using them. The playing of games continued, however, and in 1541 the law was expanded yet again by "**An Act for the Maintenance of Artillery, and debarring unlawful Games,**" the preamble to which declares that said games were believed to be the "**Cause of the Decay of Archery**" skills in England. (There was another very important cause by then, namely **guns** — or, more specifically, **bullets** — but games always seem to get blamed for social problems.)

## MEDIEVAL ENGLISH LONGBOWMAN



THE ENGLISH LONGBOW WAS A POWERFUL MEDIEVAL TYPE OF LONGBOW (a tall bow for archery) about 6 ft (1.8 m) long used by the English and Welsh for hunting and as a weapon in warfare. English use of longbows was effective against the French during the Hundred Years War, particularly at the start of the war in the battles of SLUYS (1340), CRECY (1346) and POITIERS (1356), and perhaps most famously at the BATTLE OF AGINCOURT (1415).

However, they were less successful after this, with longbow-men having their lines broken at the Battle of Verneuil (1424) though the English won a decisive victory, and being completely routed at the Battle of Patay (1429) when they were charged by the French mounted men-at-arms before they had prepared the terrain and finished defensive arrangements.

The Battle of Pontvallain (1370) had also previously shown longbow-men were not particularly effective when not given the time to set up defensive positions. English longbows have not survived from the period when the longbow was dominant (c. 1250-1450) probably because bows became weaker, broke, and were replaced rather than being handed down through generations. More than 130 bows survive from the Renaissance period, however. More than 3,500 arrows and 137 whole longbows were recovered from the MARY ROSE, a ship of Henry VII's navy that sank at PORTSMOUTH in 1545.

# The BATTLE of AGINCOURT (1415)

## ARROW STORM

As the French advanced, those mounted troops who were in position rode forward to attack, but the result was a fiasco. Met by a hail of arrows, the horsemen were slowed down by the boggy ground before being totally halted by the pointed stakes the archers had planted.

While a good piece of armour would keep out an arrow shot (unless fired from the closest range), with thousands of missiles falling every minute, some of them were bound to find a weak spot – whether an unprotected part of the body or the eye slit of a visor. The horses suffered particularly badly. Some keeled over, tumbling their riders into the quagmire while others, maddened by wounds, galloped wildly across the battlefield.

Soon, the French mounted troops were streaming back in confusion – straight into the first division of dismounted men, which was now closing in on the English line. Struggling through the mud, which had been further churned up by the hooves of their comrades' horses they, too, came under fire from the English archers on the flanks, causing them to bunch up as they advanced. Matters were made worse by the fact that, as they approached the English, the area between the two woods narrowed, further compressing their ranks.



**By the time they reached the English lines they were exhausted, disorganized and so crowded that some were unable to wield their weapons properly. Even so, through sheer weight of numbers, they temporarily pushed the English back.**

The **DUKE OF YORK** was killed – either from a wound to the head or from “**heat and pressing**” as one account put it. **KING HENRY** came under attack, receiving a blow that dented his helmet and struck off part of the coronet he was wearing. **Some accounts say KING HENRY saved the life of the wounded DUKE OF GLOUCESTER, straddling his prostrate body and fighting off his attackers.**

**Somehow the English invaders’ line held.** By now, the English archers had loosed all their arrows and they joined in the hand-to-hand fighting, many using the mallets they’d used to drive in their stakes as weapons. As they battered the armour of their French enemies, who were hampered by the crush, the second French division tried to enter the fray.

Anyone who lost his footing had little chance of getting up again and soon the bodies were piling up, some dead, some wounded, some simply unable to move. One of these was the **DUKE OF ORLÉAN**, who was pulled from under a pile of bodies, recognized as someone worth saving and sent as a prisoner to the rear of the English line.

Shattered and, with their chance of retreat cut off by the mass of men behind them, more and more French nobles, knights and men-at-arms in the front ranks tried to surrender to the English. Not all were successful. The **DUKE OF ALENÇON**, the man credited by some with denting King Henry’s helmet, tried to surrender to Henry himself, only to be cut down by one of the King’s bodyguards.

## **THE KILL COMMAND**

**Was Henry’s order a war crime?**

**A knight who was taken prisoner in medieval battle could normally expect to be well treated by his captors.** He was worth looking after, as he could be ransomed back to his own side for a good sum of money and in, any case, the captors would hope for similarly good treatment if they were taken prisoner themselves.

**KING JOHN II OF FRANCE** was treated as an honoured guest by the English after his capture at **Poitiers in 1356**, but if the hundreds of knights who surrendered to the English at **Agincourt** were hoping for similar treatment, some of them were in for a shock.

**Concerned about the large numbers of captured Frenchmen milling about behind his army, and alarmed about a possible final French attack, Henry V ordered their immediate execution and a company of archers under the command of a squire were sent to do the grisly work.**

The slaughter stopped when it became clear that the French were retreating, but not before hundreds had been killed (and hundreds of potential ransoms lost).



**Some modern writers have attempted to portray the killings as a 'WAR CRIME' but contemporaries did not see it that way. Instead, they blamed the French for forcing him to do it by refusing to accept their defeat.**

## WHY WAS AGINCOURT IMPORTANT?

Henry's triumph commanded great respect.

In military terms, the BATTLE of AGINCOURT achieved very little. No territories were gained and, despite victory, KING HENRY was no nearer to the Crown of France. But politically and psychologically it was another matter.

Had Henry gone home after Harfleur, his campaign would probably have been something of an expensive anti-climax. However, Agincourt changed everything. By defeating the might of France in battle, Henry earned enormous prestige for himself and for the Lancastrian dynasty.

An increasingly united England saw the victory as evidence of God's approval of the relatively new Lancastrian regime, while Foreign Royal Courts now saw KING HENRY V as a force to be reckoned with.

SIGISMUND, THE HOLY ROMAN EMPEROR, signed a treaty with England, in which he acknowledged Henry's claim to the throne of France.

AGINCOURT also made the Country more willing, for the time being at least, to pay for further campaigns against the French. This became particularly important when, after he tried and failed to build on his victory through diplomacy, Henry decided conquest was the answer.

In 1417, KING HENRY was able to mount a full-scale invasion of NORMANDY and, while he will always be remembered for his victory at Agincourt, it was this campaign that best demonstrates his abilities as a "warrior King".

He made extensive use of ships to protect, transport and supply his men, not only across the Channel but up the rivers of Normandy as well. He had also built up a powerful train of siege artillery, which he used to batter the towns of Normandy into submission. When Rouen surrendered in January 1419, Henry was undisputed Master of the Region of NORTH EAST FRANCE.



ENGLISH CONTROL IN FRANCE CIRCA 1422 AD.