

# Welsh archers at Agincourt:

## myth and reality

**Adam Chapman** debates the evidence for a Welsh presence among Henry V's highly-successful force of archers at Agincourt in 1415.

**M**ichael Drayton, in his poem of 1627, *The Bataille of Agincourt*, described the Welsh presence in Henry V's army: 'who no lesse honour ow'd To their own king, nor yet less valiant were, In one strong re'ment [regiment] had themselves bestowed'.<sup>1</sup> Drayton was not privy to the surviving administrative sources for the 1415 campaign. His 'record' of the Welsh in Henry V's army in 1415 was part of a county-by-county praise of the shires of England and Wales. In fact, it was the archery talents of the men from Lancashire not of those from Wales which Drayton celebrated: 'not as the least I weene, Through three crownes, three Arrows smear'd with blood.'

Drayton was writing anachronistically. No fifteenth-century chronicle or sixteenth-century history which includes a narrative of Agincourt mentions Welsh archers at the battle at all. Yet in the popular imagination, Agincourt has been co-opted as a great patriotic achievement, the victory of Welshmen, in knitted Monmouth caps, over the French army. For much of the six centuries between 1415 and the present, however, Agincourt is actually the silent battle in Welsh culture. Among the large extant corpus of Welsh language poetry dating from the fifteenth century – the work of around a hundred poets and several thousand poems praising the Welsh gentry – there is not one mention of the battle of Agincourt. References to English wars in France are common, however, and these poems regularly reinforce the expectation that a gentleman should be proficient in arms and participate in war.

### Henry V and Wales

The principal reason for this lack of mention of Agincourt was probably

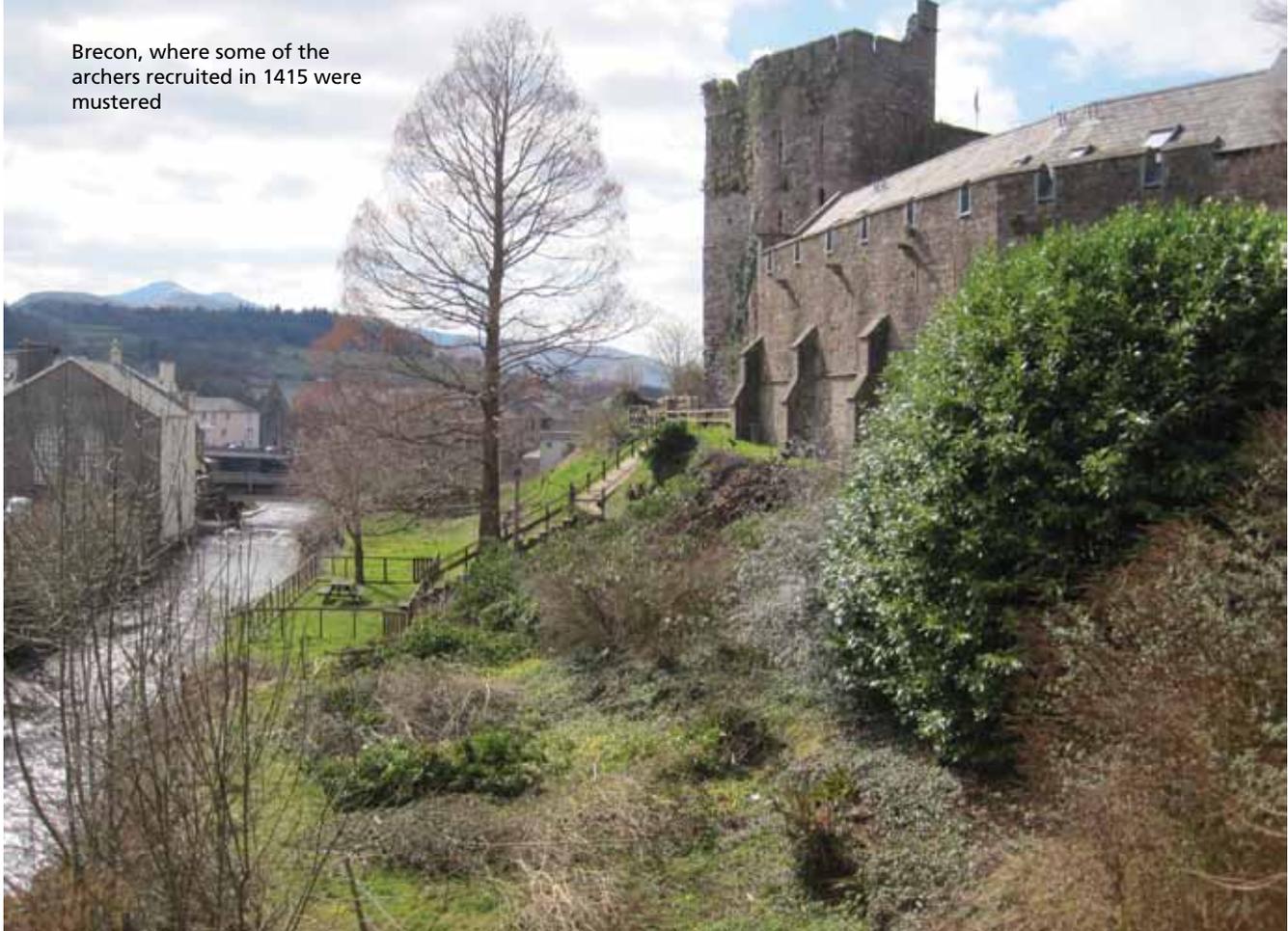


the failure of the decade-long national rebellion, led by the Welsh esquire, a descendant of Welsh princes and the self-proclaimed prince of Wales, Owain Glyndŵr. At the height of Owain's rebellion, all Wales was involved. Owain even enjoyed the support of the king of France and English rebels against Henry IV and his son, Henry 'of Monmouth' Prince of Wales.<sup>2</sup> The rebellion began on 16 September 1400 – indeed Glyndŵr seems to have chosen Prince Henry's birthday to proclaim himself prince

– and gradually petered out about a decade later. Glyndŵr remained at large and retained his supporters, so that large parts of Wales were beyond the reach of royal government. In this light it might be wondered that any Welshmen fought with Henry V in 1415 at all and this is a question we shall return to.

The burdens of military recruitment on the lands of Wales in 1415 were far from novel. English kings had employed Welshmen in their armies for centuries, but the factors surrounding

Brecon, where some of the archers recruited in 1415 were mustered



this particular campaign were decidedly unusual. The recruitment process played a significant part in the government's response to the end of the Glyndŵr rebellion in the shires and in the March of Wales. The shires of Carmarthen, Cardigan, Merioneth, Anglesey and Caernarfon were the property of the crown, while the March consisted of 40 or so quasi-independent lordships forming a crescent from the south-west to the north-east of Wales. While most of Wales was more or less at peace by the time of Henry V's accession in 1413, order and governance were far from fully restored, especially in north Wales. That said, in territorial terms, Henry V's position in the March of Wales was far more significant than that of any earlier English monarch. As king, he retained control of the royal shires in North Wales (Caernarfon, Merioneth and Anglesey), and of South Wales (Cardigan and Carmarthen), which he had held as Prince of Wales. With the lands of the Duchy of Lancaster inherited from his father, Henry dominated southern Wales: in addition to Brecon, one of the largest Marcher lordships which had come through Henry IV's marriage to Mary de Bohun, Henry V held the lordships of Monmouth and Three Castles, Hay and Huntington on the River Wye, Ogmore west of Cardiff, and Cydweli with Carnwyllion with all their dependent liberties west of Swansea, all of which he incorporated into the royal demesne. As such, and unusually for the army recruited in 1415, the Welshmen

within it were recruited directly by the king rather than by contractors – the peers, knights and esquires of Henry's realm who raised the bulk of the army.

With these royal estates came significant responsibilities, not least of ensuring that the rebellion, once extinguished, was not reignited. The task was accomplished through a combination of judicial action, communal fines and subsidies, and, as we shall see, unusual military demands. In the March of Wales, where the rights of individual lords were generally fiercely protected, Henry IV's direct levies of fines on the communities of Marcher lordships were exceptional. The justification was simple: the revolt in Wales was an act of treason against the crown and therefore only the crown could pardon the offenders for their treason. Henry IV levied fines of 180 marks (£108) and £50 on the tenants of the Lancaster lordships of Cydweli and Ogmore, and £500 and £300 on the Marcher lordships of Glamorgan and Abergavenny immediately before his death. The accession of Henry V in March 1413 brought new and greater demands upon his own lands. By the end of 1414 the new king had raised over £5,000 in collective fines from Wales and the March.

The process of personal accommodation following the end of the rebellion was more complicated and more varied. While some rebels were executed or had their property redistributed, the policy of Henry IV and

Henry V tended towards reconciliation, albeit on tough terms. Men like Henry Don, a member of the gentry from the lordship of Cydweli and who had led the rebels there, were bound over for enormous fines on their release from royal custody intended to ensure their good behaviour. In Don's case his release only provided the opportunity to settle scores: at the judicial sessions in 1413 he was indicted for terrorising the locality and for going as far as levying fines on those of his neighbours who had not risen in rebellion with him! His grandson, Gruffudd, however, fought at Agincourt and was an important captain in Henry V's armies in France after 1417. Military service, as we shall see, formed a key step on the road to pardon and for some, favour.

## Recruitment in Wales in 1415

Wales in 1415, then, was far from a peaceful, settled country. Owain Glyndŵr himself remained a free man and, though no longer a threat, was protected by those loyal to him. North-west Wales in particular was still more or less beyond the reach of Henry's government and remained a problem for the rest of the fifteenth century. In February 1415, with the king's plans to launch a new expedition to France taking shape, his council advised that special attention be given to securing Wales. Sixty men-at-arms and 120 archers led by the sheriff of Merioneth served for three months from 4 March.

Half were stationed at the Cistercian abbey of Cymer near Dolgellau and half at Bala. More archers were based at another Cistercian abbey, Strata Florida (Welsh: *Ystrad Eflur*), near Aberystwyth. In June, attempts were made to contact Glyndŵr and to offer him pardon. This he seems to have declined. More soldiers were deployed around the borders of Merioneth and remained until the end of December. Meanwhile, the lords of the Welsh March were ordered to garrison their castles and the king himself invested in supplies of guns and gunpowder for his Welsh castles.

By April 1415, the king's preparations for his campaign had turned to the recruitment of men. While the nobility and members of the king's own household entered into contracts with the king to supply soldiers, the king, owing to his enormous personal estates, concentrated in the north-west of England – Lancashire and Cheshire – and in Wales was able to use these resources to bolster the size of his army.

In common with the royal and duchy estates in Wales, the English royal shires – Cheshire, and, under the Lancastrian kings, Lancashire – provided companies of archers for the royal army. In 1385, Richard II recruited 70 Welsh foot archers to serve in Scotland and again in Ireland in 1394. Foot archers had not formed a regular part of English

Wales in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.



In 1385, and possibly in Irish campaigns, Richard's armies were intended to impress. Henry IV's expedition may have had a similar intent and, if this is so, such companies of archers bolstered

to one man-at-arms to every four archers. In percentage terms an army with 75% archers became one with 80%. In 1415, Henry V intended to be abroad for at least a year; the additional archers recruited from his personal estates (his demesne) were intended to facilitate conquest since they would be as useful in siege and garrisons as in the field.

### The South Welsh contingent in 1415

We know about the men raised from the royal demesne in Wales from a set of muster rolls preserved in the National Archives at Kew. They are attached to documents acknowledging receipt of money from the Crown to the soldiers up until the point they joined the army. They record three sets of payments apparently reflecting separate musters

made at Brecon, Carmarthen and Cydwelli.<sup>3</sup> The money was paid out to groups of men-at-arms, five each from Cardiganshire and Carmarthenshire, ten from the Marcher lordship of Brecon

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expeditionary armies since the resumption of the war in the 1360s. Archers were generally mounted so as to move quickly but fought on foot; the longbow did not lend itself to being used on horseback. Richard had, infamously, retained archers from his earldom of Chester as his personal bodyguard during the final years of his reign. For his fateful second Irish campaign of 1399 he attached to his household a company of ten knights, 110 men-at-arms and 900 archers from the county. In 1400, when Henry IV campaigned in Scotland, he recruited heavily from Cheshire, in part, no doubt, as an expression of his authority over the county most closely associated with Richard. Unfortunately, there is no evidence from the surviving documentation relating to this campaign that Henry IV used men from his Welsh estates in 1400. We might ask, from a military perspective, what it was that such large numbers of relatively less mobile foot archers were intended to do.

the size of armies. In 1385 Richard was proclaiming himself a martial king, and also an adult. The campaign, however, was brief and the two Irish campaigns in the 1390s were meant to demonstrate the effectiveness of Richard's power as monarch, both in England and Ireland.

Most of the retinues in Henry's army in 1415 had one man-at-arms for every three archers. This was obviously felt to be the optimum ratio and is first seen in the Welsh wars in 1406. It was a marked increase on the common ratio of one man-at-arms to one archer in the armies which the English had sent to France in the late fourteenth century. It also shows an appreciation of the military value of archers. Furthermore they were cheap (costing half as much as a man-at-arms) and easy to recruit, given that all adult males had to practise the longbow on Sundays. The archer companies from the royal lands in Cheshire, Lancashire and Wales which Henry raised in 1415 altered that ratio for his army as a whole

and three from the lordship of Cydwelli by John Merbury, Henry V's chief official in the area, who was also chamberlain of his lands of the principality in South Wales.

These documents are exceptionally detailed, recording the particular divisions of counties and lordships from which the men were recruited. The muster of the royal counties of Cardiganshire and Carmarthenshire was taken at Carmarthen on 26 June. That for the Lancaster lordships of Brecon, Hay and Huntington, as well as other minor lordships then in royal hands, including Llanstefan, St Clears, Oysterlow and Talacharn was apparently made at Brecon. The men-at-arms were presumably responsible for co-ordinating the recruitment of the archers and by their seals accepted responsibility for payment. Only two of these seals survive in good condition and only one can be identified with its owner, Richard Boys of Brecon, because it bears his

initials. A curious feature of the muster from the royal counties of Cardigan and Carmarthen is that many men were serving as substitutes for another. This curious fact suggests that these men were summoned in person: those who provided substitutes were presumably too old, ill or – in the case of those who held local government offices at the same time – too busy to fight. These personal summons were almost certainly a consequence of their involvement in the rebellion: as named rebels the price of forgiveness was joining the king's army when they were required.

Brecon and the smaller lordships provided ten men-at-arms, 14 mounted archers and 146 foot archers. The royal shires of South Wales and their dependent lordships yielded ten men-at-arms, 13 mounted archers and 326 foot archers. Cydweli provided three of each type of soldier, nine men, a total of 528 men, paid for 45 and a half days, long enough for them to march to the coast of England and to join Henry's army. The men-at-arms were paid at the usual rate of the time, 12*d.* per day, while the archers were paid 6*d.* per day whether mounted or not. This was a good wage since in the fourteenth century foot archers had tended to be paid only 4*d.* per day. In contrast, at least 247 archers were raised from Cheshire, although 650 may have been intended, and 500 archers were recruited from Lancashire and were divided into groups of 50, each under the command of a local knight or esquire, each with a personal retinue: this was a more significant, and higher status, contribution.

Not all of the men who assembled at Carmarthen went to France, however. Some did not even leave west Wales. Nine men-at-arms with nine mounted archers and 38 foot archers served in Carmarthenshire and Cardiganshire between 6 July and 11 November. Four of the nine men-at-arms had been named in John Merbury's financial account as chamberlain of South Wales. One of these, Dafydd ab Ieuan ap Trahaiarn, who had intended to go to France as a man-at-arms from Carmarthenshire, was a former rebel. His lands in Cantref Mawr (Carmarthenshire) had been forfeited to Dafydd Gam, an esquire from the lordship of Brecon, in November 1401. Another two, Ieuan Teg and Llywelyn ap Gwilym Llwyd had enlisted to serve as archers in France so it is probable that the men serving under them had also intended to leave for France, meaning that the Welsh archers who sailed with Henry V could not have numbered more than 460. They reached Warminster in Wiltshire around 24 July, a week before the expedition was due to sail. We know this from a complaint that English and Welsh soldiers were

Sycharth, the seat of Owain Glyndŵr in North Wales



reported as not paying for food they had acquired from the local population.

Other Welshmen were present in the 1415 army but only in small numbers. Thomas, earl of Arundel, had extensive estates in north-east Wales but no Welshmen were included in the retinue that Arundel brought to France. The earl, however, fell ill at Harfleur and returned to England, dying at Arundel castle at the end of October. Perhaps for this reason, the surviving records of his retinue are far more detailed than most others. They show that many of the earl's men fell sick too but that the overall strength of Arundel's retinue was maintained by the use of substitutes. Interestingly, almost all the replacements were Welshmen.

### Dafydd (Davy) Gam

Welshmen are wholly absent from English narrative accounts of the battle from the same period. The South Wales chronicler, Adam Usk, however, claims the death of two men at the battle. One, Sir John Scudamore of Kentchurch, Herefordshire, had enlisted in Henry's army but was almost certainly part of the garrison left at Harfleur after the surrender of the town, and was still in that garrison in February 1416. He did not fight at Agincourt and he certainly could not have died there, since we know that he in fact survived until 1435; Scudamore's prolonged absence as a garrison soldier probably caused rumours of his demise. The second, Dafydd ap Llywelyn ap Hywel Fychan, Usk describes as 'David Gam of Brecon'. Other contemporary and near-contemporary commentators noted his

death: the chronicle of Peter Basset and Christopher Hanson call him 'Davy Gam esquire, Welshman'.<sup>4</sup> Although the chronicle of the monk of St Albans, Thomas Walsingham, and the Great Chronicle of London also list Gam among the dead, they do not mention his origins and, by the time he appears in Shakespeare's *Henry V* (1599), these seem to have been forgotten, at least in England. Although Gam is mentioned in the play as among the dead he is not called 'Welshman'.

So who was he? Dafydd or Davy Gam (his 'nickname' indicates that he had some form of visible disfigurement, perhaps a squint), was a life-long servant to the Lancastrian cause. He had served Henry V's grandfather, John of Gaunt, and with his brother Gwilym and son Morgan, was appointed a king's esquire by Henry IV. His loyalty to the English cause during Owain Glyndŵr's rebellion was important to both Henry IV and Henry V, then Prince of Wales, but totemic to his Welsh opponents. During the rebellion, Dafydd gained estates confiscated from rebels and, despite damage to his property, benefited from his loyalty. In 1412, after the rebellion was over, however, Gam was abducted and ransomed by Glyndŵr's supporters. Gam had benefitted financially from supporting Henry IV throughout the rebellion but the scale of the ransom demanded by the rebels outweighed

Monument in Abergavenny church of Gwladus, daughter of Dafydd Gam, and her second husband, Sir William ap Thomas.



his resources. The regard with which he was held by the English regime, however, meant that he was granted permission to levy taxation on the Marcher lordship of Brecon to recover his liberty.

In 1415, Dafydd entered into an indenture on 29 April to serve as a man-at-arms with three archers, his retinue reflecting the optimum ratio.<sup>5</sup> Although the documents do not tell us who the archers were, a tradition has developed that one was the husband of his daughter, Gwladus. This man, Roger Fychan or Vaughan of Bredwardine, Herefordshire, fathered three sons with Gwladus, Walter (or Watcyn), Thomas and Roger (d. 1471), who all played important parts in support of the Yorkists during the Wars of the Roses. Sixteenth-century heraldic visitations intended to confirm the genealogies of the gentry state that Roger Fychan also died at Agincourt though the presence of an esquire of that name in the retinue of the earl of Warwick for Henry V's campaign to Normandy in 1417 casts doubt on those stories, even if he did not survive long after 1417. Gwladus's second husband was Sir William ap Thomas, who built the magnificent Raglan Castle. He is another who is supposed to have served at Agincourt but, once again, there is no contemporary evidence. Nor are there any references to Dafydd Gam's death at Agincourt in any Welsh source of the fifteenth century.

Why not? Agincourt had a contemporary fame throughout the English realm that has only grown since. In the context of Wales, as we have seen, it came at the end of a decade-long revolt which for a time had genuinely national aspirations and whose shadow

was a long one. Fighting in France was something which the Welsh gentry came to celebrate by the 1430s and this was fully expressed in praise given to them by poets. Mathew Goch (often given as Matthew Gough) of Maelor in Flintshire, for example, enjoyed great success in Normandy as a soldier where he served from at least 1425 to 1450. He finally died defending London Bridge against Jack Cade's Kentish rebels in 1450. Lewys Glyn Cothi, Huw ap Dafydd and Guto'r Glyn all praised him and the latter, a soldier himself, may have served alongside him in the 1430s. Guto'r, without exaggeration, noted that he was 'A man from Maelor, delightfully civilized/a man who shattered spears/ a famous man from Trefor as far as Rouen ... /he is a man of distinction for the Crown.'<sup>6</sup>

Agincourt, as the greatest battle of the age, was too close to the great disappointment of the failure of the rebellion and the upheaval this created. Even praise composed to Dafydd Gam's grandsons failed to mention the specific incident at Agincourt which has come to define him. The earliest writer to suggest Gam's place in the battle was Sir Walter Raleigh, whose *History of the World* (1614) has Gam, allegedly sent out to spy the French, return with the fanciful report: 'that of the *Frenchmen*, there were enough to be killed; enough to be taken prisoners; and enough to run away.'

## Conclusion

The documentary record cannot tell us how many of Henry V's Welsh archers actually fought at Agincourt. As we saw, 528 were recruited, but perhaps 50 of these never left Wales,

and another 50 or so fell ill at Harfleur and were given leave to return home; their names are recorded on lists of the sick.<sup>7</sup> So perhaps 400 survived to fight at Agincourt. Henry V's army at that battle numbered 8,000 to 8,500: therefore in no way did the Welsh predominate. It is impossible to be sure what effect these Welshmen had or how they were deployed on the field of battle. When the author summarised his research into Welshmen and the battle of Agincourt on BBC Radio Wales a few years ago he was reminded that he had forgotten something – that one Welshman was worth three Englishmen. Who am I to argue?

## Suggestions for further reading

A. Chapman, 'The King's Welshmen: Welsh Involvement in the Expeditionary Army of 1415', *Journal of Medieval Military History*, 9 (2011), 41–64.

R. R. Davies, *The Revolt of Owain Glyndŵr* (Oxford University Press, 1995).

A. O. H. Jarman and G. R. Hughes, *A Guide to Welsh Literature*, vol. 2 (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992).

For more on the culture of fifteenth-century Wales and the praise poetry of Guto'r Glyn, see [www.gutorglyn.net](http://www.gutorglyn.net)

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> M. Drayton, *The Battaile of Agincourt*, ed. R. Garnett (London, 1893), stanza 74. The whole poem is available on line as part of the Project Gutenberg ([www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/27770](http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/27770)).
- <sup>2</sup> Henry V was not known as 'of Monmouth' in his lifetime but was referred to as such in two Welsh poems by Lewys Glyn Cothi later in the fifteenth century. As 'Henri Mynwy', (Monmouth is 'Trefynwy' in Welsh), Lewys used him as a point of comparison for two of his patrons, both named Henry. See Dafydd Johnston, ed., (1995) *Gwaith Lewys Glyn Cothi*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, poem 21, lines 1–2 and poem 156, lines 47–48.
- <sup>3</sup> TNA E101/46/20. All of the names have been entered onto [www.medievalsoldier.org](http://www.medievalsoldier.org).
- <sup>4</sup> Curry, A. (2000, 2009) *The Battle of Agincourt: sources and interpretations*, Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, p. 88.
- <sup>5</sup> TNA E 101/69/4/404.
- <sup>6</sup> This theme is more fully examined by Glanmor Williams, in his *Renewal and Reformation: Wales c. 1415–1642* (Oxford University Press, 1987, 2002), ch. 7. For fuller biographical details of Mathew Gough/Mathau Goch see also: <http://www.gutorglyn.net/gutoswales/persondb.php?ref=nm02>
- <sup>7</sup> TNA E 101/45/1 m. 12.

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