

Agincourt 1415-2015

Agincourt has become one of a small number of iconic events in our collective memory. **Anne Curry** explores how succeeding generations have exploited its significance.



The Battle of Agincourt, 25 October 1415. Miniature from the manuscript "Vigils of King Charles VII" by Martial d'Auvergne, 1484. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

In his budget statement of 18 March 2015 the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, announced £1m had been awarded to commemorate the 600th anniversary of the battle of Agincourt. He used the opportunity to make a political jibe, claiming that the victory showed a strong leader defeating 'an ill-judged alliance between the champion of a united Europe and a renegade force of Scottish nationalists'. The Scots did indeed send troops to France on several occasions in the 1420s. Many Scots fell fighting for the French at the battle of Verneuil on 17 August 1424, a battle which has been termed 'a second Agincourt' because it was won, as Agincourt itself had been, thanks to the power of English longbows. But no

Scots were at Agincourt. Nor did the French in 1415 symbolise a united Europe. Indeed, the battle was fought at a time of major divisions within French political society between the Burgundian and Armagnac factions. Such divisions played a role in undermining the French response to Henry V's invasion in 1415 and in contributing to the defeat.

The 600th anniversary of Agincourt prompts us to reflect on how the battle has been remembered since. In the modern age we are accustomed to officially-orchestrated celebration of anniversaries. Commemoration of the victory at its first anniversary on 25 October 1416, however, seems to have been private to Henry's chapel. The *Gesta Henrici Quinti*, a text

written by a priest who had been present on the campaign, tells us that 'there came round in due course the feast of St Crispin and Crispinian on which feast the year before God had shown his clemency to England in her resistance to the rebellious people of France at Agincourt. The king, not unmindful of God's goodness, renewed praises to Him in the hymn *Te Deum laudamus*, solemnly chanted in his chapel before Mass'.¹

By the end of 1416, attention had been given to more public celebration. In December the archbishop of Canterbury ordered that commemorative collects in churches on 25 October should henceforth be shared between martyrs generally, Crispin and Crispinian, and St John of Beverley. The Lancastrian dynasty had a particular devotion to the latter. His tomb had expressed oil on the day Henry Bolingbroke (later Henry IV) landed at Ravenscar in 1399 en route to usurping the throne, and did so again on the day the battle of Agincourt was won. Rather conveniently, 25 October was already one of his feast days, therefore it was wholly appropriate, as the archbishop noted, to celebrate 'the gracious victory granted by the mercy of God to the English on the feast of the translation of the saint to the praise of the divine name and to the honour of the kingdom of England'.²

To what extent these orders were observed is yet to be discovered. Only in the immediate aftermath of the Reformation do we find a reference to any other form of public commemoration of Agincourt. In 1538-39, Richard Morrison urged Henry VIII to inaugurate annual triumphs against the pope. He cited as a precedent the celebrations of Agincourt at Calais, although historians have so far been unable to find evidence of these in the Calais records.

For the victory that God gave to your most valiant predecessor, King Henry the Fifth, with so little a number of his countrymen against so great a multitude of the Frenchmen at the battle of Agincourt, your retinue at your noble town of Calais and others over there yearly make a solemn triumph, going in procession, lauding God, shooting guns, with the noise and melody of trumpets and other instruments, to the great rejoicing of your subjects who are aged, the comfort of those who are able, the encouraging of young children.³

There was no 'war memorial' for Agincourt. None of the 45 or so surviving tombs of those who fought

there makes any reference to the battle in their inscriptions. The only mention of the campaign is found on a memorial of a soldier who did not make it to the battle: the brass of Sir John Phelip at St Mary's Kidderminster recalls his death at the siege of Harfleur.

Remembering Agincourt in time of war

Agincourt was largely forgotten once English lands in France were lost in the 1450s. In later centuries, however, its memory was invoked at time of war, especially war with the French. *The First*

of Austrian Succession. A letter in the *General Advertiser* in 1744 brought to mind 'Agincourt! O glorious day!'. The frequency of Anglo-French war over the rest of the eighteenth century brought the battle into the public domain. Agincourt epitomised the continuity across the centuries of English (or now more properly British) military supremacy over the French. Crécy and Poitiers were also alluded to but Agincourt emerged supreme because of the popularity of Shakespeare's play. In 1757, during the Seven Years War, we find the first commemorations in newspapers of the anniversary of the



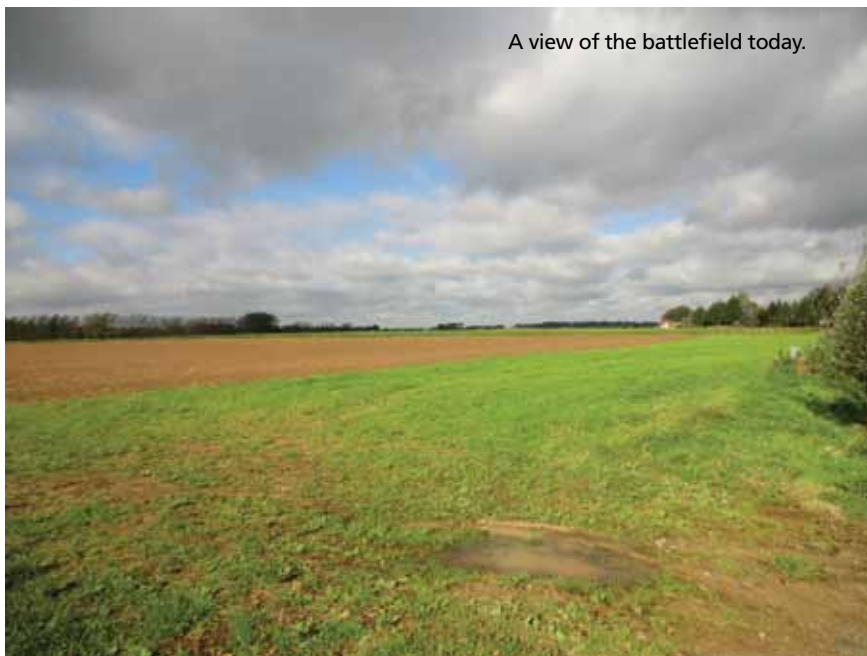
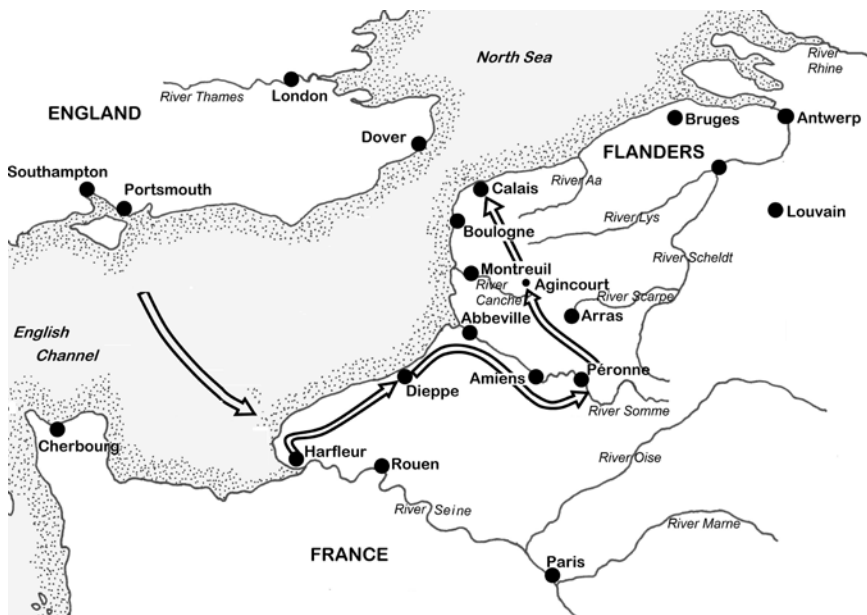
Battle of Agincourt (1415). Chroniques d'Enguerrand de Monstrelet.

English Life of Henry V, written in 1514 for presentation to Henry VIII, aimed to encourage the king in his war with France to emulate his noble progenitor. Shakespeare's *Henry V*, first performed in 1599, may have been prompted in part by fears of French invasion but also by the campaigns of the earl of Essex in Ireland. In Act 5 scene 1 of the Folio edition, Chorus compares Essex to Henry V on his triumphant return from France as a 'conquering Caesar'. Ben Jonson added adulatory verses to Michael Drayton's poem, *The Bataille of Agincourt* of 1627, calling the work 'a catechisme to fight'.

It is no coincidence that the first serious study of the life of Henry V was published by Thomas Goodwin in 1704 during the War of Spanish Succession, nor that Shakespeare's *Henry V* enjoyed its first real revival in the 1740s when the English were once again at war with the French, this time in the War

battle on 25 October. At this stage, the battle was also invoked to suggest a falling away of patriotic duty and martial success. Commemoration in the *London Evening Post* declared that since the period of Agincourt 'corruption had chased away all the glorious spirit of this nation'. But for other commentators, the same 'radical fortitude' which had inspired the heroes of Agincourt was still at large.

The fact that the accession of George III in 1760 occurred on 25 October fanned the recollection of the battle as an auspicious day for Britain. During the Revolutionary wars, Agincourt was used to emphasise continuing French degeneracy and British resilience. A letter to the 'People of England' published in *The Times* on 16 October 1794 began 'Countrymen, remember Agincourt!'. The battle was also the subject of a 100 foot long painting by Robert Ker Porter displayed in the



A view of the battlefield today.

Lyceum in 1805, the year of Nelson's triumph at Trafalgar. For one shilling visitors could see this invocation of an earlier success against the French.

Waterloo and Agincourt

By 1815 there were new successes to parallel those of the past. Although the 400th anniversary of Agincourt on 25 October 1815 was not emphasised in the press, when the duke of Wellington was thanked in the Commons for his victory, Sir Thomas Ackland remarked 'we saw renewed the splendid days of Cressy and Agincourt'.⁴ The link between past and present victories was powerful. The publication of the first serious study of the battle in 1827, Harris Nicolas's *History of the Battle of Agincourt*, was dedicated to George IV, Prince Regent during the recent wars with France, 'under whose auspices the splendour

even of that victory has been rivalled, if not eclipsed'.

After Waterloo British troops occupied the area of the Pas de Calais in which Agincourt was fought. A link across the centuries was achieved by the presentation of Waterloo service medals at the battlefield in May 1816. One of the recipients, John Gordon Smith (1792-1833), a Scottish surgeon attached to the 12th Lancers, was aware of the reputation of the battle fought 400 years previously which he described, in comparison with Waterloo, as 'the scarcely less glorious triumph of Harry the Fifth of England'. Smith was not particularly impressed with the area ('a most un-interesting collection of farmers' residences and cottages') but he believed that he had managed to identify the location of the wood where 'the King concealed those archers whose prowess and valour contributed so eminently to

the glorious result', a reference to the 200 archers whom Henry had sent behind enemy lines. Another Waterloo veteran, Lieutenant Colonel John Woodford, conducted excavations where he believed the Agincourt grave pits to lie, until he was stopped by the complaints of the local inhabitants to the duke of Wellington.

During the Crimean War Britain and France were allies. The *Cheshire Observer* noted that the battle of Inkerman on 5 November 1854 'for the first in rank to the last, was a prodigy of valour scarcely inferior to the miracle of Agincourt'. It was in the Victorian period that the archer began to emerge as the hero of the day. He represented the gallant but socially humble Britisher, now represented by the rifleman, who was often portrayed as the true descendant of the archers of 1415. In his *Child's History of England* (1853), Dickens contrasted the high proportion of Henry V's army 'who were not gentlemen by any means but who were good stout archers for all that' with the 'proud and wicked French nobility who dragged their country to destruction'. Agincourt was therefore an early demonstration of British 'democratic' supremacy, something to be proud of as well as a key part of the collective past. In Preston a fund had been set up in 1850 so that the 'working man' should be able to visit the Great Exhibition and be as proud of 'the simple share of the laurel wreath gained by proving ourselves to be the first nation of the world for industry, skill, talent and ingenuity, than if the triple coronet of Agincourt, Trafalgar and Waterloo encircled his brown alone'.⁵

Fears of invasion in the time of Napoleon III prompted newspapers to claim that the contemporary Frenchman 'is the self same being as at the period when Agincourt was fought. Our boastful neighbours treated their antagonists as an undisciplined rabble easily swept away by the armed chivalry of France until ignominious defeat proved the contrary'.⁶ But in general, peace prevailed between Britain and her neighbour. The first formal battlefield tour can be dated to 1886 when Thomas Cook advertised a visit to the battlefields of Agincourt and Crécy open to 'any gentlemen who feel a real interest in inspecting the scenes of British prowess and in fighting over again the great battles recorded in English history'.

The twentieth century

That Agincourt had an undisputed place in the long list of British military achievements by the turn of the nineteenth century is witnessed by its

inclusion in the Army Pageant held at Fulham Palace in 1910 to raise funds for military charities, probably the first time any re-enactment was attempted. The Master of the Pageant was the well-known Shakespearean director, F. R. Benson. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the assigned dialogue was dominated by Shakespeare, peppered with a little Drayton. Shakespeare continues to dominate popular ideas about Agincourt even today. The link with war also persists, and not simply in the UK: an edition of the play was issued to US soldiers going to Afghanistan and Iraq. Richard Inverne's article in this issue of *The Historian* reminds us of the significance of Olivier's film of the play in 1944 as a landmark both in British cinema and in Britain's wartime spirit. The material issued by Eagle-Lion distributors 'for use in factories and schools in connection with the Laurence Olivier presentation of Henry V' includes a lecture text which drew analogies between the archer of 1415 and the 'Tommy Atkins' of 1944.⁷

As we commemorate the 600th anniversary this year, we also remember the 500th anniversary in 1915 when the British and French were allies against a common German foe. The place of the battle lay well behind the front lines but saw much coming and going, being used as a place of rest and recuperation, as well as preparation. For the anniversary, the French stationed at the Château de Tramecourt just to the east of the battlefield invited British officers stationed locally 'to join them on the scene of the battle and to commemorate the day in unison', as the report in the *Illustrated London News* of 11 December 1915 put it. Agincourt was now 'an ancient battle-day of honourable memory to both'. Appropriately, this meeting will be recalled in the commemorations of 25 October 2015. But the event reminds us that a historian should always check his or her sources. While the joint commemoration in 1915 was planned for the 25 October, the records of the battalion of *chasseurs à pied* stationed at Tramecourt indicated that it rained too heavily that day so it was moved to the following day,⁸ a point not noted in either the British or French press reports. No one wanted to spoil a good story.

In 1917 on their visit to 'the Battlefield of France', King George V, Queen Mary and Edward, Prince of Wales stayed at the Château de Tramecourt along with the king and



queen of the Belgians, as a film reveals.⁹ We can only assume that they saw the battlefield of Agincourt. George V was at the château again in August 1918. The Germans heard of his presence and even attempted, but failed to put into effect, an aerial bombardment of the place.

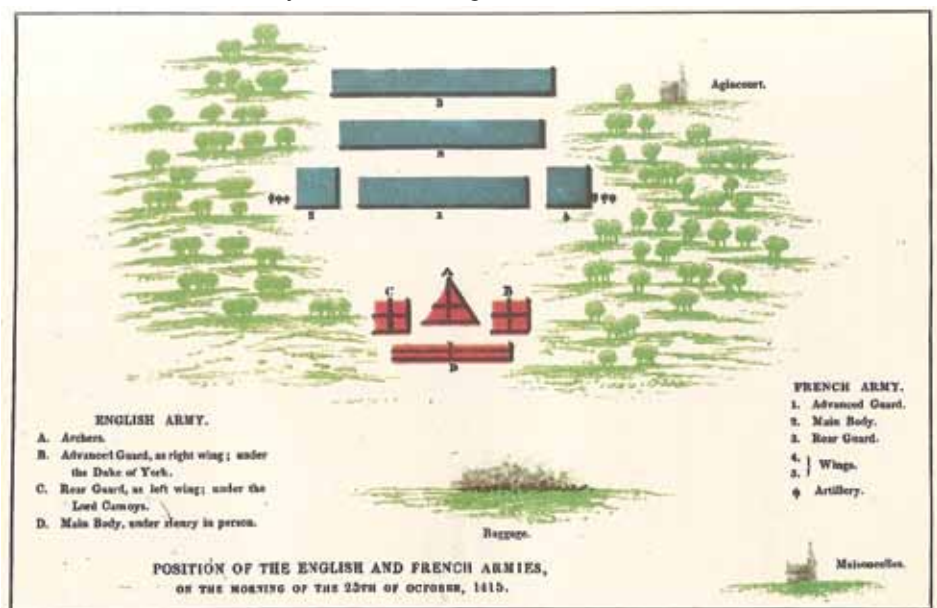
Memory and history

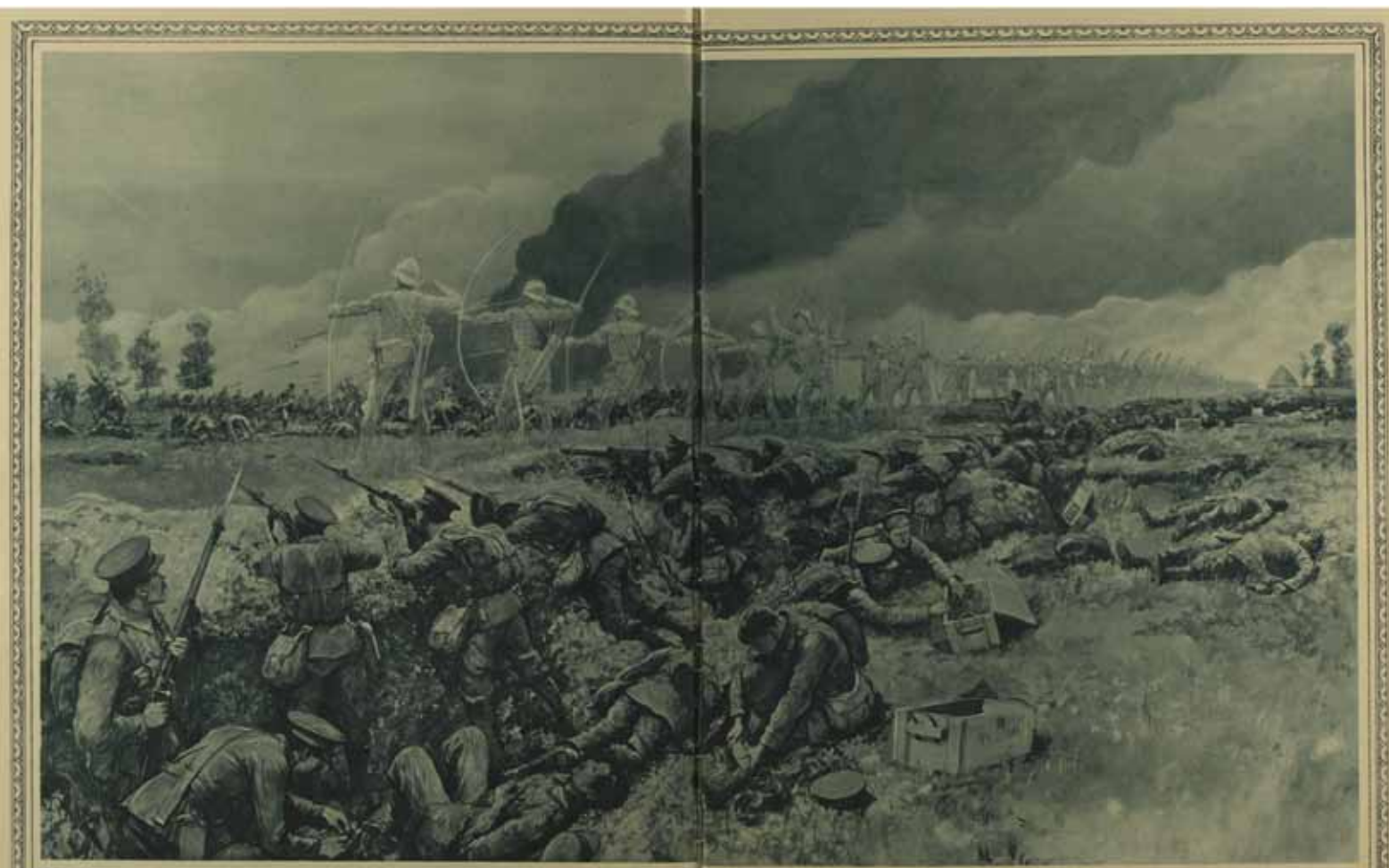
This brief review of how the battle of Agincourt has been evoked across the centuries provides several lessons about the nature of history. It shows that each age makes its own history influenced by the events of the time. Sometimes these warp the actual original event: in no way, for instance, was England a democracy in 1415 even though the king needed the consent of the Commons in parliament in order to levy taxation for war. A study of the cultural

legacy of Agincourt also shows that invocation has often been of Shakespeare's Agincourt rather than the Agincourt of 1415. Shakespeare did write, or at least collaborate in the writing of, a play entitled *Edward III*, which contains the battles of Crécy (1346) and Poitiers (1356). But it is a comparatively poor play and relatively little performed in comparison to *Henry V*. That difference goes a long way to explaining why Agincourt is remembered and the other English victories largely forgotten.

Agincourt has become the stuff of which legends are made: one of the most famous myths also links to the First World

The earliest known attempt to show the deployment of troops in pictorial form, from Harris Nicolas's *History of the Battle of Agincourt* (2nd edn, 1832)





War. On 29 September 1914, Arthur Machen, a journalist on the *Evening News*, published in his newspaper a short story, 'The Bowmen'. In this imagined account of the retreat from Mons in the previous month, British soldiers saw St George and the ghostly archers of Agincourt fighting for them.¹⁰ What is fascinating is the response which the article triggered, with some claiming they too had seen the vision and others seeking to discredit Machen as a liar. For the historian, it is equally fascinating to see a similar story in English chronicles written within 60 years of the battle. 'On that day the French saw St George in the air over the host of the English fighting against them...thus almighty God and St George brought our enemy to the ground and gave us victory that day'.¹¹ Both stories were inventions but they remind us of the powerful emotional response which historical events can produce as well as how the boundaries between literature and history are often blurred.

The 600th anniversary of Agincourt provides a wonderful opportunity to recall and clarify the actual events of 1415, but also to reflect on why the battle has continued to be remembered and why it still means so much in the English-speaking world today. It has become a battle for all time and all people.

Further reading

S. Cooper, *Agincourt: myth and reality 1415-2015* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2014)

A. Curry, *Great Battles: Agincourt* (Oxford University Press, 2015)

A. Curry, *The Battle of Agincourt: sources and interpretations* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2000, 2009)

S. Goebel, *The Great War and Medieval Memory: war, remembrance and medievalism in Britain and Germany 1914-1940* (Cambridge, 2007).

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- ¹ *Gesta Henrici Quinti. The Deeds of Henry the Fifth* (1975), ed. F. Taylor and J. S. Roskell, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 179.
- ² *The Register of Henry Chichele, Archbishop of Canterbury, 1414-1443* (1943-47), ed. E. F. Jacob, 4 vols, London: Canterbury and York Society, iii, pp. 28-29.
- ³ Anglo, S. (1957) 'An Early Tudor Programme for Plays and Other Demonstrations against the Pope' in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 20, p. 178.
- ⁴ *Morning Post*, 24 June 1815.
- ⁵ *Preston Guardian*, 4 May 1850.
- ⁶ *Reynold's Newspaper*, 20 November 1859.
- ⁷ British Library Additional Manuscript 80475B.
- ⁸ Archives Nationales de France, 26N916/2. I am very grateful to Christophe Gilliot, Director of the Centre historique médiéval at Azincourt, for this reference and for all his help and friendship over many years.
- ⁹ www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060008209. The relevant section is at the end of part 2 and beginning of part 3.
- ¹⁰ Machen, A. (1915) *The Angel of Mons: the bowmen and other legends of the war*, 2nd edn, London.
- ¹¹ Curry, A. (2000, 2009) *The Battle of Agincourt: sources and interpretations*, Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, p. 95

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The £1m funding provided by HM Government will facilitate many other activities and generate an abiding legacy for the 600th anniversary. Full details of events and news of funding awards can be found on the web site: www.agincourt600.com.