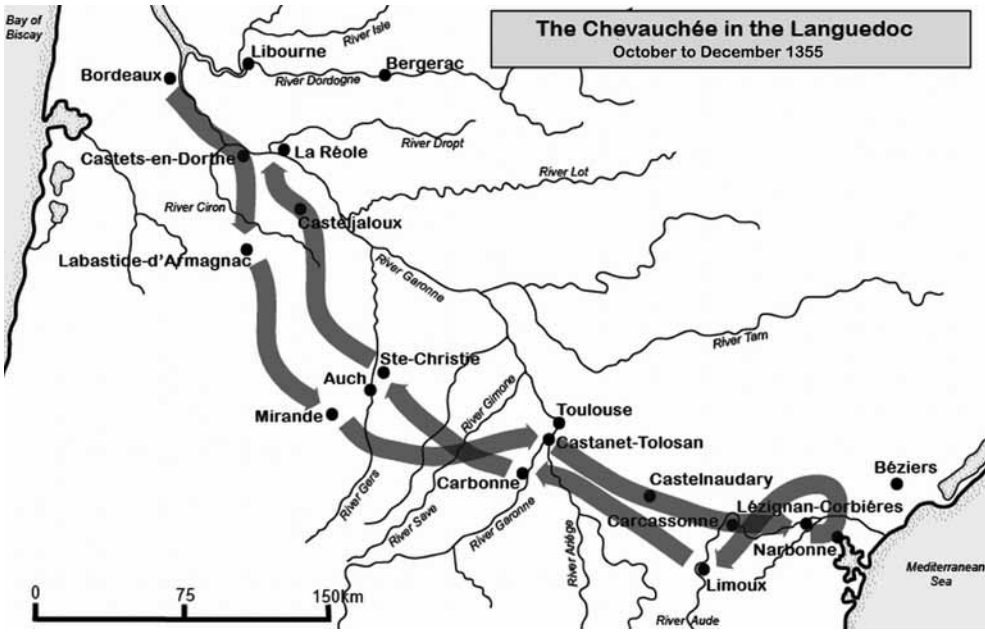
On the campaign trail:

walking the Hundred Years War

In the tradition of landscape historians, **Peter Hoskins** has explored some of the route marches taken by English armies during the Hundred Years War.

After the battle of Crécy in 1346 and the capture of Calais by Edward III in the following year the Hundred Years War settled into an uneasy truce which was due to end in the summer of 1355. Early in that the year there were signs of a return to war with French incursions into English Aquitaine. Edward III sent his eldest son, Edward of Woodstock, the Black Prince, to Bordeaux with around 2,600 men to reinforce loyal Gascons. In the autumn of 1355 the prince led a *chevauchée*, a mounted expedition generally characterised by the devastation and pillaging of towns, villages and crops, as far as Narbonne on the Mediterranean coast and back to Aquitaine. The following year he led a further *chevauchée* north to the Loire and on his way south back towards Bordeaux won his great victory over the French at Poitiers on 19 September 1356.



These *chevauchées* attracted my interest and in 2005 I started on a project to follow the itineraries of the expedition, taking me eventually on foot across 1,300 miles of France. During the second week of my project, on a clear, crisp morning in November 2005, I set out with my walking companion, Richard, from the small town of Nogaro in the south-west of France. After several days of walking in grey, cold, wet weather we were looking forward to a fine, clear day with some interesting sites to visit in glorious countryside. I had been planning the walking for some months and I should not have been surprised when, as we crested a ridge, the Pyrénées suddenly came into view: soaring, snow-clad ramparts stretching across the horizon more than 120km away.

Even though I knew that our route approached the mountains, I had not expected to see them. The effect suddenly revealed to me something intangible that I knew I was looking for, but which I had not been able to formulate clearly: some sense, however imperfect, of the impact of the terrain and the experience of the adventure in which they were engaged on the men in the prince's army all those centuries ago. While I was mildly surprised to see the mountains, Richard was amazed. He is an old friend and he came along to keep me company, enjoy the walking and make the most of the food and drink as we progressed through the Languedoc. He did not bother to carry a map or show much interest in mine as we went along, and, frankly, he had no idea where we were, other than a vague impression that we were somewhere now well to the south-east of Bordeaux. Since he had had to bring his passport he at least knew he was in foreign parts. I was struck by how similar his experience could have been for an English or Welsh archer with the Black Prince's army, away from his native land perhaps for the first time and never having seen anything higher than Snowdonia. He would not have had a map, and would probably have had only the sketchiest

notion of where he was. Only 70 years before a representative of the sovereign of Persia had visited Bordeaux and, considering it to be the English capital, had returned home without bothering to visit England.[1] If an educated man could have such an imperfect knowledge of geography, how much more so would this be the case for our archer? Was he going to be asked to cross the mountains? What lay beyond? No doubt there would be muttering in the ranks and questions asked of those who were more experienced and senior.

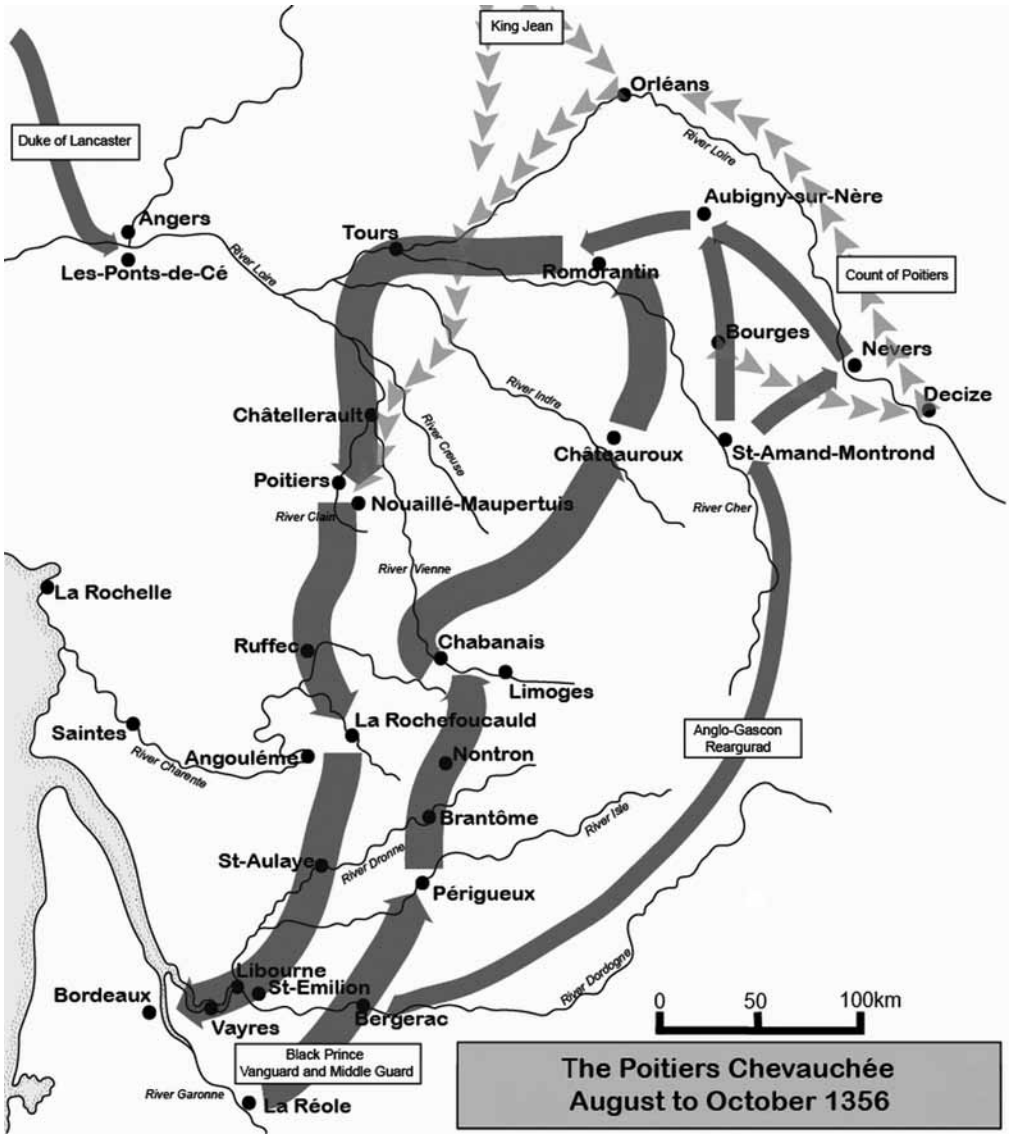
Walking the ground

I had embarked on the project to follow the Black Prince's expeditions having read the general histories of the period and the detailed contemporary itineraries.[2] Looking at even small-scale maps in some detail made it clear that in the general histories of the expedition some sweeping assumptions had been made about the route followed and the conduct of the operations. Although an RAF pilot by profession, I had always recognised the importance that my army friends attached to 'walking the ground' and their maxim that 'time spent on reconnaissance is seldom wasted.' It seemed to me that by walking the routes I would have a greater appreciation of the impact of the terrain on the campaigns and gain an understanding of the decisions taken by the prince. It would also help to resolve some of the uncertainties over the route and place-names.

I generally walked between 25 and 35km a day. This was representative of the progress of armies of the period which, even though many men were mounted, were still constrained by the speed of those on foot and the wagons of the baggage train. Could I have achieved my objectives travelling by car or from detailed studies of large-scale maps? Possibly, but the beauty of walking is that you have time to reflect on the topography you are crossing and there is also no doubt that you get a different perspective at walking pace as the terrain slowly unfolds before you, revealing towns and castles which, although close in terms of distance, are an hour or more away on foot.

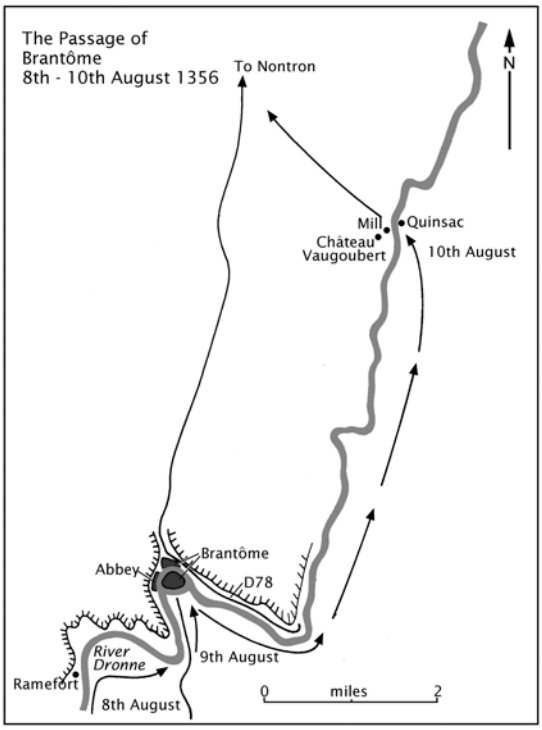
Approaching a town on foot, often on a minor path or track, gives an entirely different perspective to arriving by car on a busy road through built-up areas. The approach to Narbonne on the Black Prince's 1335 itinerary was a case in point. The modern road into the town is busy with traffic moving rapidly along a valley between the hills of the Minervois and Corbières, and the old town emerges eventually after

The incomplete cathedral of St Just and St Pasteur in Narbonne



Ramefort castle

Looking north to Nontron across the river Bandiat.



passing through sprawling suburbs. The army of the Black Prince generally advanced on a broad front to maximise foraging and pillage, and thus many of the troops approaching Narbonne would have been on the higher ground above the main road. My approach through vineyards over this ground resulted in a remarkable difference in perspective. Narbonne has relatively few high-rise buildings, and approaching in this direction shows the town much as it would have looked in the fourteenth century with the cathedral, unfinished then and still incomplete, dominating the sky line.[3]

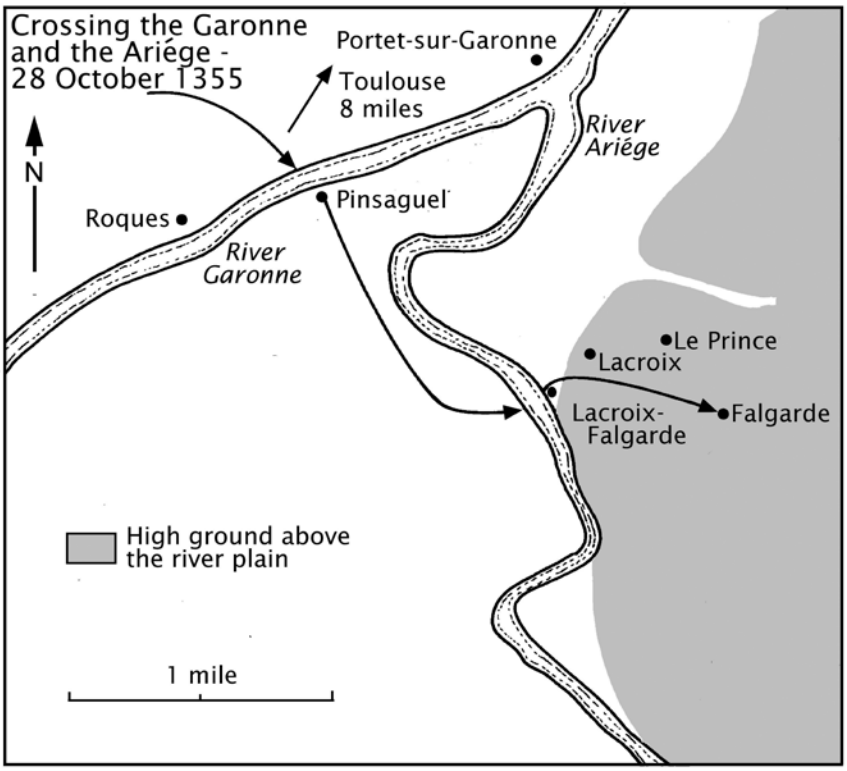
There are occasions when standing and looking at the landscape can tell a story that will not stand out from a written account. On Sunday 15 November 1355 the Black Prince lodged at the Dominican monastery of Prouille. This visit had been planned and during his stay the prince was admitted to the brotherhood. To mark his visit the prince donated the considerable sum of £32 in alms, delivered by the hand of a Dominican in the prince's service, Richard of Leominster. We also know that while the prince was at the monastery his men were burning the nearby town of Fanjeaux and earlier that day had burned the Dominican monastery at Limoux. These somewhat dry facts are thrown into sharp relief when you stand on the site of the monastery at Prouille and realize that Fanjeaux is only 1.5km away, standing 150m above the monastery, and that the destruction and burning of the town would have been clearly visible by those welcoming the prince.

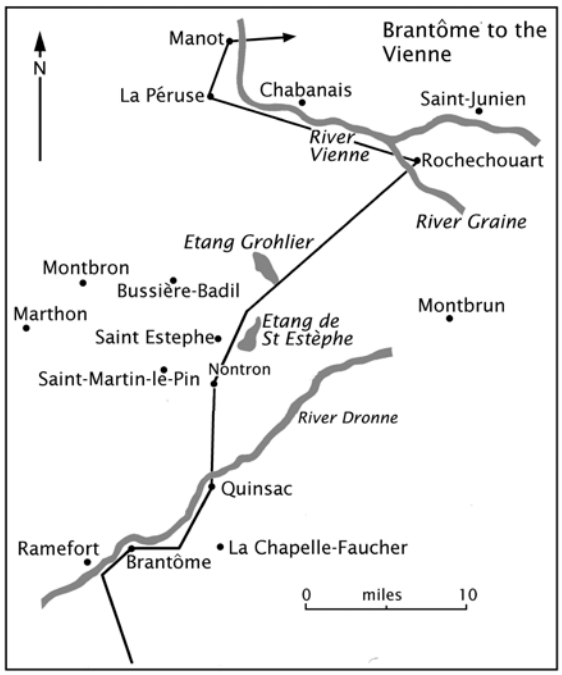
Retracing events through the terrain

An important aspect of the walking was to see what the route across the countryside could tell me about events. There were numerous minor examples where accounts in secondary sources did not make sense, simply it seems because a small-scale map had been used and the places on the itinerary joined by straight lines. Often this related to a purported river crossing. Advancing at walking pace and seeing the landscape unfold encouraged an analysis of the terrain and events.

An example was the crossing of the Dronne in 1356, where the conventional wisdom is of the crossing being from west to east with the prince's army having passed through Brantôme. However, the prince's army had stopped for the night of 8 August 1356 about 5km south-west of Brantôme near the castle of Ramefort. The following day they moved on to Brantôme and then the next only a further 10km to Quinsac and crossed the Dronne. As I approached the town the questions that came to mind were: why did the army take two days to cover 15km when the average speed of marching during the Poitiers campaign was close to 25km per day, and why, if the army had passed through Brantôme, would they then cross the river at Quinsac which would have taken them away from the line of advance? Brantôme is a natural choke point on the route north, standing on an island in an oxbow of the river, surrounded by ramparts and with high ground to the west and the east. It was in French hands and even if lightly garrisoned it would have presented a formidable obstacle for the prince's army. It is likely that the pause here and the slow progress was due either to an attempt to negotiate a passage of the town or to assess the prospects of taking the town to secure the army's passage. When a safe passage could not be secured then a march up the left bank of the Dronne to cross at Quinsac where there were known to be fords was the logical step to take, resulting in a crossing of the Dronne from east to west and not as the assumption has generally been from west to east.

The next town of any importance on the itinerary north of Brantôme was Nontron. The town stands on high ground above the river Bandiat on a spur of ground in the shape of an upturned boat hull. It was fortified in the fourteenth century. The Bandiat is a very minor river and not a significant obstacle in its own right. Having said that, it runs in a deep valley just to the south of the town. Considerable effort would have been required to force a





passage through both the river and the town. Approaching from the south on foot the challenge that the town would have represented is immediately apparent. The day before stopping near Nontron the army advanced only 15km from the river crossing at Quinsac, but the next day they moved on 40km. There was not a deviation from the direct route on this occasion, and the question this time as I approached the town was: is there any evidence that they negotiated a safe passage, which could explain the rapid progress? The archives of the Dordogne showed that in early 1357 Ietier de Maignac forfeited 'all his goods, either in the manor of Nontron or elsewhere, since the said de Maignac is accused of having delivered the castle of Nontron into the hands of the enemy.'[4] The connection with the passage of the prince six months earlier is not explicit but it is likely from the circumstances that forfeiture relates to the passage of the prince.

The problem of crossing rivers

The countryside itself has a story to tell. A look at the map of the 1355 *chevauchée* will show you a series of relatively minor valleys running across the route, and if you drive the tour you may notice the undulating terrain. But walking the route, with successive climbs and descents and crossings of rivers, even with modern bridges, gives you some idea of the physical challenge facing armies of the period. One example is the significant feat during the prince's expedition in the Languedoc in 1355 of his crossing of the rivers Garonne and Ariège south of Toulouse. The primary sources name the crossing points, and maps can help refine our interpretation of where the rivers were forded. But approaching the rivers on foot gives an appreciation both of the nature of the river banks and the position of relatively shallow water to enable a much more precise assessment of the crossing points and of the difficulties faced by the army. Indeed, approaching the Garonne on foot and contemplating wading into the swirling, fast-flowing waters, broken as they flow past rocks, of a river some 125m wide, puts into perspective the prince's laconic report that: 'we took our march and crossed in one day the two rivers of Garonne and Ariège, one league above Toulouse, which are very stiff and strong to pass, without losing scarce any of our people.'[5]

The crossing of the Vienne the following summer was less a question of where but why? On the approach to the river there is a sharp dog-leg in the route, adding a day or more to the march of the army which, up to this point, had been generally north. None of the accounts of the campaign discusses this diversion, but there is nothing quite like a deviation adding an extra 50km of walking to make one question the route taken. There were bridges across the river at Chabanais and St Junien which could have allowed the army to maintain this direction and avoided the diversion, so why did they not attempt to use them? The most likely reason is that in both cases the bridges were defended. In Chabanais the road over the bridge passed through a castle on the north bank. At St Junien, although the town stood back a little from the north bank of the river, the army would have had to pass within bowshot of the town ramparts. In both cases an opposed river crossing would have been necessary. With an army 6,000 strong, these crossings could have been made successfully, and the two towns would no doubt have provided welcome plunder for the prince's men. There would undoubtedly have been losses, however, and the route chosen tells us something of the prince's strategy. The dog-leg in the route added time but it saved resources and carried less risk with a crossing of the river at the ford at Manot. In a post-campaign letter the prince reported that he had set out with the objective of intercepting the count of Poitiers at Bourges.[6] For such an engagement he would need his army to be at maximum combat strength. He would not have wished to fritter away irreplaceable men in unnecessary actions, and hence the route via Manot.

A further aspect of the walking was evidence of the cultural impact of the English in France in the medieval period. A local historian in the small town of Ouveillan told me how in the 1930s, if he was complaining, his grandfather would rebuke him with the words: 'Don't moan, little lad, you'll see how bad it gets when the English army comes through.' The one and only time an English army had been in Ouveillan had been for one day in 1355: its passage had clearly had a profound impact. Contacts with local people also showed how the English involvement

The castle at Arques-la-Bataille

in Aquitaine between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, when English kings were also dukes of Aquitaine, was still felt. Some inhabitants of Toulouse, on learning that I had come from Bordeaux, exclaimed that the Bordelais were dull, boring and uninteresting with no sense of fun. This was attributed to their English heritage. A few days later an historian from Bordeaux told me that the people of Toulouse were brash and uncultivated, without the interest in the finer things in life of the Bordelais, which he attributed to their English heritage.

The Agincourt campaign

With the approach of the 600th anniversary of the battle of Agincourt the logical next step was to extend my walking to cover Henry's itinerary from landing near modern Le Havre, which did not exist in 1415, to Harfleur and on through Agincourt to Calais.

It is worth noting at this point that the marches of the Black Prince and Henry were essentially different in character. The Black Prince's campaign of 1355-56 had had the objectives of damaging the economic power of France and, if the circumstances were right, bringing the French army to battle. Henry V's objective was different: on leaving Harfleur after the capture of the town, his aim was to take his army safely to Calais to return to England. His great victory at Agincourt was the result of the French intercepting him and cutting the route to Calais rather than an active attempt by Henry to bring them to battle. By and large Henry's army did not destroy towns and pillage the countryside, but restricted itself to foraging for supplies and to negotiate for supplies with local communities, which were keen to buy themselves out of attack. He did not attempt to besiege or conquer any places en route.

Much of Henry V's route to Agincourt took him across the flat plains of the Somme and Picardy. The essential aspect of a sparsely populated landscape with scattered villages, with their church towers and spires standing out from the plains, remains much as it was in the fifteenth century. A moment's reflection brings home to the walker the problem of feeding many thousands of men in such countryside, where the French had adopted a scorched earth policy and in any case the reserves of an area of such low population density would not have been great, even in October 1415 when the harvest would have been recently gathered. Similarly, approaching on foot the castles of Arques-la-Bataille and Boves along Henry's route gives a much stronger impression of their well chosen sites than that which can be gleaned either from study of the map or driving past in a car.

As with Narbonne during the Black Prince's expedition of 1355, the approach to Amiens on foot is revealing. Henry V's army skirted to the south of the city. In a car you speed past Amiens in a matter of minutes, but moving on foot at the speed of a medieval army approaching from the west and passing to the south the city and its cathedral are in view for several hours. It is impossible not to reflect on the thoughts of the inhabitants as they apprehensively watched Henry's army pass. Within line of sight of Amiens is Boves castle, standing high on a ridge 10km to the east. No doubt the progress of Henry's army would have been signalled to the garrison of Boves, and walking at 5kph demonstrates clearly, in a way that passing in a car cannot, the value of such vantage points for tracking and communicating the passage of the invaders.

On foot the most direct route is often on poorly surfaced tracks which will not be used by the tourist in a car. To use some of these tracks after wet weather evokes the conditions faced by foot-soldiers and carters of Henry's army day in and day out as they trudged towards Calais and safety. Due to the changes in the river brought about through construction of a canal and railway, it is difficult to judge the challenge of the

View from Blanchetaque on to the high ground beyond the ford.

Bethencourt-sur-Somme where Henry V may have crossed the Somme in 1415.

crossing of the Somme at the ford of Blanchetaque, used by Edward III in 1346 on the eve of the Battle of Crécy but rejected by Henry in 1415. It is certainly difficult in a car, but descend into the valley on foot and cross the wide flood-plain with its narrow raised causeways across the marshland; look up and contemplate the prospect of fighting your way on to the high ground beyond defended by French men-at-arms. This gives some idea of what a daunting obstacle this must have been.

Having failed to cross the Somme at Blanchetaque Henry still needed to find a crossing of this river if his army was to reach Calais safely. There are a number of possibilities for the crossing place, but the most likely is close to the village of Béthencourt-sur-Somme near the town of Péronne. Approaching the river on foot, and walking along the bank, shows just what a challenge crossing such a river must have been. It is not simply a single water course, but a river with a patchwork of flooded ground and small lakes on both sides creating an obstacle of considerable width.

Walking campaign routes today cannot, of course, give a true sense of the terror and the devastation inflicted on the local population by the marauding English armies in the Hundred Years War, but it has introduced me to many interesting people and has helped me to discover some wonderful parts of France away from the tourist trail. More importantly, it has given me a depth of understanding and a unique perspective on events during the great campaigns of the reigns of Edward III and Henry V.

Suggestions for further reading

Richard Barber's *Edward, Prince of Wales and Aquitaine, a Biography of the Black Prince* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1978), has stood the test of time and his *Life and Campaigns of the Black Prince* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1979), reproduces chronicle extracts and letters relating to the Prince's campaigns. For the Crécy campaign Barber's *Edward III and the Triumph of England: The Battle of Crécy and the Company of the Garter* (London: Allen Lane, 2014), is recommended. For a general study of Edward III's strategy and the use of *chevauchées* see C. J. Rogers, *War Cruel and Sharp, English Strategy Under Edward III, 1327–1360* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2000). The best walking maps for the campaign routes are at 1:25,000 scale published by the Institut National de l'Information Géographique et Forestière. They can be purchased on line from www.ign.fr.

REFERENCES

1 J. M. Tourneur-Aumont, *La Bataille de Poitiers (1356) et la Reconstruction de La France* (Poitiers, 1943), p. 31.

2 The primary sources for the Black Prince's itineraries for 1355 and 1356 are respectively Galfridi Le Baker de Swynebroke, *Chronicon*, ed. E. M. Thompson (Oxford, 1889) and *Eulogium Historiarum,* vol. 3, ed. F. S. Haydon (London: Rolls Series, 1863).

3 The consuls of Narbonne had resisted attempts by the Church authorities in 1344 to compel demolition of part of the town walls to enable the cathedral to be completed. The result was that the walls were intact when the Black Prince arrived. The transept and nave were never completed.

4 R. Laugardière, 'Essais topographiques, historiques et bibliographiques sur l'arrondissement de Nontron', *Bulletin de la Société Historique et Archéologique du Périgord*, 12 (1885), p. 431.

5 Robertus de Avesbury, *De Gestis Mirabilibus Regis Edwardi Tertii,* ed. E.M.Thompson (London: Rolls Series, 1889), p.436.

6 H. T. Riley, *Memorials of London and London Life, in the XIIIth, XIVth, and XVth Centuries* (London: 1868), p. 285 for the Black Prince's post-campaign letter to the City.

Peter Hoskins is the author of *In the Steps of the Black Prince: the road to Poitiers 1355-1356* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2011); Following the *Black Prince on the road to Poitiers 1355-1356: a handbook and guide for tourists* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2014) and, with Anne Curry, of *Agincourt 1415: a tourist's guide to the campaign* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2014). He is working, with Richard Barber, on a guide book to the Crécy campaign of 1346 and on a study of siege warfare during the Hundred Years War.