

The President's Column



I wrote my last column shortly after the Great Debate. This time it is a few weeks after the AGM in Sheffield, which I much enjoyed, and I hope others did too. In recent years the AGM has become the main means whereby the HA can get together as a whole. For me it is very rewarding to meet representatives of all its constituencies at the same time, and to sense the collective energy in our association. We try hard to make it an event for all. I am in the enviable position of being able to attend a wide variety of sessions aimed at different audiences. Those of us who teach in HE could learn a lot from the secondary sessions. In the foyer I picked up the useful joint publication of the HA and the Higher Education Academy History Subject Centre on transition from A level to HE, an excellent example of what can be achieved together.¹ The value of collaboration – in this case between academics at Sheffield Hallam and community groups – is also evident in the fascinating project funded by the HLF on woodlands around our host city. For someone of my age the session on the History of Education Project could not fail to bring back memories not only of those teachers whose small handwriting across three blackboards we copied in silence but also of those who fired my imagination and above all my curiosity.

'Tempus fugit', even if we are to believe newspaper reports that nowadays we are getting younger as we are getting older. (Middle aged women knew that already, of course.) Life expectancy is ever increasing. Males born in the UK today can expect to live until they are 77 and females until they are 81. In the later middle ages it is thought that most people did not expect to survive their forties. When the on-line *New Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* was launched a few years ago, I was commissioned to draw on its entries for a discussion on old soldiers in the Hundred Years War (1337-1453). For the centuries before parish registers (a Tudor invention), we are largely dependent upon materials arising out of landholding to ascertain dates of birth. When a tenant of the crown died, royal officials wanted to know whether his heir was old enough to inherit (i.e. at least 21). They therefore carried out inquisitions *post mortem* where

much reliance was placed on oral testimony. Witnesses might reminisce about the birth or baptism of the heir, locating it in time by reference to events in their own lives. In the military context we can also draw on records of disputes over heraldic coats-of-arms in the court of chivalry: men testified on when they first took up arms and on which campaigns they served. It is all 'self-assessment', of course, but since members of the military classes knew each other well and intermarried, it is unlikely that they did not tell the truth.

So I began to explore. Using the DNB's Advanced Search facility I asked for all soldiers active between 1337 and 1453. My search returned 202 results, of whom 53 lived to be more than 60. This was a much greater proportion than I had expected. Fair enough, these were people with a gentry lifestyle but they had also run the risks of action. Sir Ghillebert de Lannoy, a Frenchman who later served the English cause, was 29 when wounded at Agincourt in the head and the knee. He was pulled out from under the dead and placed into a barn with 10 or 12 others. When the shout went up that the duke of Brabant was approaching and that all prisoners should be killed, the barn was set on fire but Lannoy managed to crawl out and was recaptured. He lived to be 76 and, fortunately for us, wrote a memoir of his life where he tells us that he had first served as a soldier in his early teens.

Twenty-nine of my 202 soldiers lived into their seventies and beyond, five dying in their eighties. Retirement age from service was not far short of 60 (obligations to serve in defence of the homeland lay on all those between 16 and 60). A handful continued at least into their mid 60s (such as Thomas, Lord Camoys, who was 65 when he commanded the rearguard at Agincourt). As now, genetics played its part. There were some families, such as the Scropes and the Douglas earls of Dunbar, where longevity was common. Intriguingly too, those knights who favoured the late medieval heresy known as Lollardy were generally long lived. Were they men who today would be writing for lifestyle magazines?

As ever, the past holds many surprises and raises as many if not more questions than answers. It cannot be reduced to a series of supposed key dates and facts, as the press too often suggest. It is not just received *wisdom* but also intellectual *enquiry*. From what I have seen of history in schools today (well, at least when taught by HA members!) there is a constant aim to help children explore and think for themselves. It is the never-ending journey of trying to find out about the past which makes history fascinating and which keeps even old historians like me going.

References

¹ *History in Schools and Higher Education: enhancing the study of our subject and understanding the transition to HE*, 2010. ISBN 978-0-9564603-3-2. Copies are available from www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/eahistory/publications/briefingreports/historyinschoolsandhe

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. C. ...' with a stylized flourish at the end.