

Visitors to Agincourt

There were visitors to the battlefield at Azincourt, even in medieval times. According to Gruel's chronicle Arthur of Richemont, who had fought at Agincourt, been taken prisoner there and released in 1420, visited the site 21 years later

And then he came by Agincourt and explained to those who were with him how the battle had been fought and showed them where he and his banner had stood and where all the other great lords had been or where their banners stood and where the king of England had camped

The English King, Edward IV, is known to have spent two nights at Agincourt during the abortive expedition of 1475, which ended so ingloriously at Piquigny, but few details of his visit survive. The Milanese ambassador to the Duke of Burgundy did however record the magnificence of Edward's camp, noting that the king had 20,000 men with him and a tent that was made of cloth of gold.¹

Until recently, the site of the battle has always been assumed to lie between villages of Azincourt and Tramecourt; and the place has been visited many times by modern historians and tourists. In 1833 Sir Harris Nicolas noted that several officers and soldiers of the 12th Lancers who had fought at Waterloo were presented with their medals at Azincourt and that 'those who travel to Paris via St Omer and Abbeville pass over the field of battle.'² The historian J.H. Wylie visited the site before the First World War, taking the view that the chronicle known as the *Gesta Henrici Quinti* (or 'Deeds of Henry V') was 'as good a guidebook for the tourist' as when it was written 500 years ago'. Dominique Paladilhe tells us that, on 25 October 1914, a French group which included the Marquis of Chabot-Tramecourt erected a memorial stone on the edge of his domains, containing Biblical quotations, 'in memory of their ancestors who had perished in the fatal battle of Azincourt'. A year later, on the 500th anniversary of the battle, a ceremony of reconciliation was held there, involving French and English now involved in a far larger struggle with a common enemy. Robert Hardy visited the area in 1961 when filming *The Picardy Affair*, though the family who owned the fields were reluctant to give permission. They told him that 'It was a bad day, for you as well as for us' and said 'we defended our fields in 1415 and in 1915, in 1939 again, and often in between.'

Things are different today. A Museum was opened in the village of Azincourt in 2001 which makes excellent use of modern techniques. The shape of the longbow is cleverly incorporated into the exterior design of the building and the centre is a triumph, though it is not the war memorial that René de Belleval wished

¹ *Louis XI et l'Angleterre*, 188.

² Nicolas, Appendix VI (n2). Nicolas cites Dr John Gordon Smith's account.

for in 1865. When I visited in 2009 there was a scale model of the battle and mannequins of Henry V and the French Constable d'Albret, which become animated and spoke to us, to great effect. The chief merit of the displays was that they contrived to make the battle palatable to the French, by portraying the English as underdogs (which, even if Professor Anne Curry's revised figures are right, they were). By contrast, the French were shown as proud bullies, heading for a fall. The displays also emphasized the dynastic nature of the struggle rather than the national. After all, why should it matter to a modern Frenchman, living in a country which has been a republic on and off for over 200 years, which branch of the royal family, Plantagenet or Valois, had the better title to the French throne? Even King Henry V's massacre of the French prisoners was presented dispassionately. Yet it is understood that most visitors are English, or British (despite the fact that the Scots were allied with the French at the time).

The view of history presented at the Museum was that the British progressed from Agincourt to Trafalgar and the Second World War (though this view would scarcely be a view acceptable to those Scots, Welsh or Irish who know their history). Henry was portrayed as the progenitor of the bulldog breed, with Churchill as his ultimate descendant. This is now a distinctly old-fashioned and 'Whiggish' view, even in this country. Strangely, we were shown nothing of Joan of Arc – or for that matter of France as 'the great nation', only temporarily displaced from its traditional position of pre-eminence by the accident of a morning's fighting.
