

Hampshire: A County's Role in the Agincourt Campaign

Of all the battles throughout the Hundred Years War, the Battle of Agincourt is by far the most well-known. The famous story of a small, bedraggled English army of 12,000 paid soldiers led by the gallant King Henry V defeating the well-equipped French force numbering over 30,000 in the summer of 1415 has gone down in English legend, perhaps being the greatest underdog tale in English military history. As a result, many novels, academic books and plays pay testament to the victory; most notably William Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Although the fighting took place on French soil, many significant events of the campaign - and much of the planning - took place in the county of Hampshire, located on the south coast of England. From treacherous plots to overthrow the king, to local knights who valiantly fought against their powerful foe, Hampshire played a pivotal role in the victory.

In order to send troops over to France, Henry V needed to muster his men in one place – being situated on the south coast, Southampton was one of the cities chosen to muster retainues for the expedition. This city, with its high stone walls and large natural harbour, was deemed to be the perfect starting point for the campaign, and became the assembly point for men from all over England and Wales who marched to honour their king's call to arms. In the weeks leading up to their departure, over 5,000 soldiers descended on the city and surrounding area, sleeping in billets outside the city walls. The St Marys Church in Michelmersh, for example, played host to the retinue of Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, the youngest brother of the king. The retinue consisted of himself, 6 knights, 193 men-at-arms and 600 archers – 800 men in total.¹ They spent the days before embarking on the campaign sharpening their swords and practicing their archery skills, whilst also paying respect to Sir Geoffrey Canterton; a crusader knight who travelled to foreign lands a hundred years before to fight, just like they would. All of Southampton's shops and farms worked overtime; bakers, butchers and blacksmiths all worked tirelessly to feed and equip the army and provide provisions for what would be a long and tiresome campaign.

However, rallying an army would be pointless if it could not be transported over to France. Moving 12,000 men² - along with equipment, horses and resources - across the English Channel required serious logistical planning and commitment. In March 1415, the English admiral Thomas Earl of Dorset ordered that all English ships weighing over 20 tons were to sail to Southampton to take part in transporting the invasion force, where they would patiently wait, bobbing in Southampton water until departure.³ From King Henry's flagship 'Trinity Royale' to small Thames barges, rows upon rows of ships lined the Hampshire coast as far as the eye could see. With modern estimates of over 400 ships being utilised in the invasion, this would prove to be one of the largest maritime operations of the Middle Ages.⁴

Hampshire did not just provide a base of operations, but also supplied a number of men-at-arms and archers who fought on the campaign. One such man was John Popham, a fresh faced 20-year-old who served as a man-at-arms in the retinue of Edward Duke of York.

¹ '13-19 July 1415: The Army Continues to Gather', *Agincourt600*, 16th July 2015, <<http://www.agincourt600.com/2015/07/16/13-19-july-1415-the-army-continues-to-gather/>> [Accessed 16th May 2017]

² A. Curry, *The Battle of Agincourt* (Yale University Press, 1 Edition, Oct 2015) p. 76.

³ 'Transporting the army to Agincourt', *Future learn*, 2015, <<https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/agincourt/0/steps/8849>> [Accessed: 16th May 2017]

⁴ Ibid.

Popham took part in all the prominent events of the campaign, including the deadly siege at Harfleur, the crossing of the Somme River, and the Battle of Agincourt itself, and was subsequently rewarded with a knighthood upon his return to England. He continued to be involved in France following the Agincourt campaign, taking part in numerous battles, most notably defending Paris from the notorious Jeanne d'Arc (Joan of Arc) in 1427. In his later life, Popham became involved in politics, becoming a Member of Parliament for Hampshire for over 20 years as well as being nominated for the role of speaker for the House of Commons in 1449.⁵

Although the Battle of Agincourt is remembered as a famous English victory, the whole campaign may never have even happened. Southampton also played host to a darker moment in history – the ‘Southampton Plot’. The scheme was headed by three main conspirators: Richard of Conisbrough, 3rd Earl of Cambridge; Henry Scrope, 3rd Baron Scrope of Masham and Sir Thomas Grey. Together, they planned to assassinate the king before he embarked on his campaign, but were thwarted by Edmund Mortimer. Ironically, it was Mortimer that the conspirators planned to install as the next king. Despite Shakespeare’s dramatization of a plot financed by the French to foil the English campaign, it is likely that the conspirators simply believed Mortimer had a stronger claim to the throne than Henry. Instead, Mortimer remained loyal to his king and betrayed the plotters. In the dead of night, Henry’s forces infiltrated Portchester Castle – a stronghold belonging to Henry - where the conspirators resided, and arrested them. They were found guilty of high treason, and sentenced to death in Southampton, where the 15th Century Red Lion Inn now stands. To this day, there have been rumoured sightings of a procession of mournful ghosts leaving the building; believed to be the plotters, heading to the block.⁶ Had the loyalty of Henry’s nobles not been true that day, we may have seen a different monarch to the one we know today.

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⁵ A. Curry, ‘Popham, Sir John (c. 1395-1463)’, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (Oxford, 2004); online edn, Jan. 2008

⁶ P. Legg, *Haunted Southampton*, (Stroud, The History Press, 2011)

Images



15th century depiction of the Battle of Agincourt



How Portchester Castle stands today