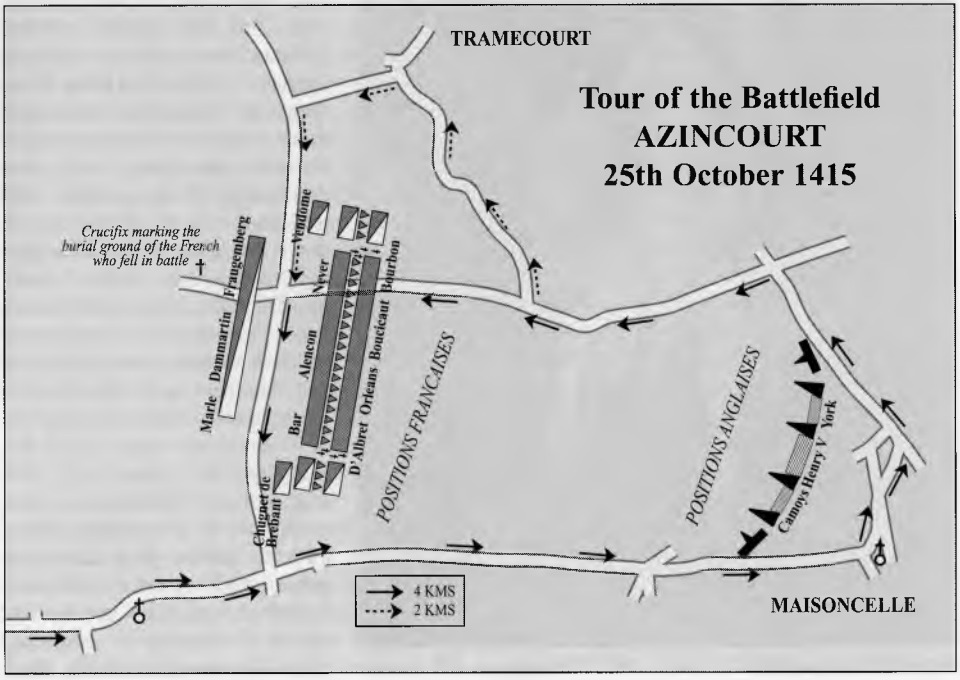
AGINCOURT
Pas de Calais

25 OCTOBER 1415

AZINCOURT
THEN AND NOW : 1415 - 2002

Report by Joyce Molyneux

On August 11th 1415 the 27 year old King Henry V sailed from Southampton bound for Harfleur to pursue his more than dubious claim to the throne of France. Harfleur was ill-defended since the French had expected Henry to attack from the English enclave of Calais. It was, however, strongly fortified and the garrison and townspeople endured a month-long siege until starvation compelled their surrender on September 22nd. The summer had been excessively hot and Henry's forces had made repeated attacks on the city walls in unbearably humid and swamp-ridden conditions. 'Once more unto the breach', thanks to Shakespeare, has indeed become a familiar catch-phrase in our language. Henry had lost relatively few men in the fighting, but dysentery and desertion had halved the size of his army. To move towards Paris was unthinkable and so Henry began his arduous march to Calais, there to rest and reprovision his troops ready for a further offensive in the spring. The march must have been gruelling: the French carried out a scorched earth policy ahead of the advancing English and destroyed the bridges across the Somme, a barrier Henry had to pass on his way to Calais. He was compelled to rebuild the broken causeway at Voyennes to get his troops across, only to



be confronted a few days later by the French army near the small village of Agincourt.

The French had at last got their act together, though feudal rivalries and a divided command did nothing to enhance their fighting capacity. Officially in charge of the army was the Duke of Alencon, but it was Charles d'Albret, Constable of France, commanding the French centre, who bore the brunt of the ensuing battle. Numbers engaged in medieval battles are difficult to estimate, but Henry can have had barely 5-6000 men, the French several times that number. Some estimate 40-60,000, but it is doubtful if more than 12,000 actually took part in the combat, those in the rear becoming dismayed spectators of the slaughter which unfolded in front of them.

The armies spent the night of October 24th within sight and sound of each other, a night graphically described by Shakespeare, the English bidden to prayer and silence by a sober and caring king, the French jousting and carousing in their tents.

At dawn the following morning, the famous feast of Crispian, both sides assembled their ranks, the English knights flanked by companies of archers, the French foot-soldiers by lords and knights on horseback. For several hours they faced each other, each waiting for the other to make a move. At length, to the sound of drums and trumpets, it was Henry who led the attack. What followed was a scene of utter carnage. Hails of arrows from English longbows brought down the heavily armoured French knights; in the confusion they jostled and unseated each other; once down on ground made soggy by persistent rain their cumbersome armour rendered them completely impotent. English swords, axes and pikes did the rest and the French were driven back. Thousands of Frenchmen were killed for the loss of relatively few Englishmen. Shakespeare puts it as low as 4 named nobles and 25 others, but this is a gross underestimate: several hundred would be nearer the mark. Henry ordered, probably unsuccessfully, that

Knight on Horseback. *Photograph: D.S. member*

Town Hall, Azincourt. *Photograph: Jack Woolford*

no plunder should be taken, but he did kill his prisoners, mistakenly thinking that they were a threat to his rear. Within days he was safely back in Calais. A glorious victory had been won and England went wild with excitement and pageantry. The aftermath is an anti-climax. In 1417 Henry captured Rouen and the French agreed to treat.Prolonged negotiations resulted in the Treaty of Troyes in 1420. Henry promised to marry Katherine de Valois, while her father, Charles VI, acknowledged Henry and his heirs as his successors. The future Henry VI arrived in 1421. Henry V's remaining years were spent in defending his conquests against the Dauphinist party. He died on campaign, probably of dysentery, in 1422. He was 34 years of age.

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Our expedition started from Dover on September 21st, 2002, when 29 members of the Society reached Azincourt, the present name of Agincourt, after travelling in comfort, first on P&O Stena's 'Aquitaine' and then by luxury coach across the pleasantly undulating country-side of the Pas de Calais. Within the village roadside figures of archers and knights and the medieval emblems of England and France welcomed us into the fifteenth century. We were taken straight away to the new medieval centre, most attractively and imaginatively built to house a memorable representation of the heroic events of 1415. The entrance to the building is overhung with huge wooden bows, door handles are bowshaped, while parts of the outer walls are faced with steel-tipped wooden stakes to represent those that Henry dug into the ground to protect his archers and impale the advancing French troops. Inside the centre the walls are lined with placards givng the historical facts surrounding the battle, while one wall commemorates the names of the English dead.

Our guide showed us first a panorama of the battlefield, the beautifully made and brightly coloured figures representing the English and French positions before battle began. The battlefield itself occupied an imperfect rectangle of land situated between the three villages of Agincourt,

Tramecourt and Maisoncelle, the English occupying slightly ground to the south and in front of Maisoncelle, the French barely half a mile to the north on a broad front between the villages of Agincourt and Tramecourt. Next came a clever representation of the night before battle: medieval tents on either side of a small room represented the opposing armies, the French tent holding a figure of Charles d'Albret, the English that of Henry V. Their mobile faces described the waiting night from either point of view in words from the text of Shakespeare's Henry V. A further room used computer graphics to show the movements of the forces on the field and

Azincourt Church. *Photograph: Jack Woolford*

that part of the tour finished with a short film outlining the artistic legacy of the battle from the fifteenth century poetry of Michael Drayton to Kenneth Branagh's film of Henry V. There remained the hands-on experience allowing us to wander at will among exact replicas of medieval armour and weapons of war. Some of us found swords we could scarcely and lift, bows that we could not draw, helmets we could barely see through and armour that would have rendered us useless on any battlefield. Indeed the plate armour of a fully equipped knight weighed in the region of 401bs, a crucial factor in the incapacity of the French to retaliate against the English attack.

I am sure that we all found the displays an objective and memorable exhibition of one of the messiest and bloodiest battles in medieval history - though it did make one proud to be English!

Next there was a break for lunch and the description of the available menu in the only cafe still open in the village made two of us thankful we had brought a packed meal. Afterwards our driver took us on a tour of the perimeter of the battlefield. At one corner stands a simple, rough-hewn granite column, the only memorial to all who died at Agincourt, named by Henry from the castle that bore that name.

I cannot end without a tribute to Azincourt today, a pretty, flower-filled, carefully tended village whose quiet calm belies those cruel events of 1415. Thanks are due to our driver, Peter, who joyfully entered into the spirit of the day and to Joan, as always, for organising a wonderfully memorable expedition.

Azincourt Memorial. *Photograph: Jack Woolford*