

## Edward III and the Hundred Years War (History Medieval Realms, Britain 1066 – 1485, ISEB textbook)

### ○ Edward III, 1327–77

In many ways, Edward III was like his grandfather. He has become known as one of England's great warrior kings, along with Richard I and Edward I. But when he became king at fifteen, he was very much under the control of his mother Queen Isabella and her lover Roger Mortimer. Between them, Isabella and Roger ruled on his behalf, and the money that Edward II had collected was soon spent, leaving the young King with major financial trouble. At seventeen, however, Edward, with a group of young noble friends, burst into the Queen's bedroom and arrested Mortimer. Mortimer was found guilty of treason and executed. Queen Isabella was sent to live the rest of her days in a castle in Norfolk. She was buried in London in 1358 in the habit of a nun.

At first, Edward made some of the same mistakes as his father, by relying on a small group of friends, to the anger of most of the barons. But, over the years, Edward learnt that the best way to control England was to find a task that all Englishmen could join in, with him as their leader. That task was to be the pursuit of the throne of France.



■ Edward III; from a fifteenth-century manuscript

## The start of the Hundred Years' War

There were a number of reasons for the outbreak of war against the King of France:

- There had been more fighting against the Scots, who were receiving aid from the French.
- The English kings' control of Gascony was resented by the kings of France.
- The death, without children, of the last French king, Charles IV, meant that Edward III had a claim to the French throne through his mother Isabella, Charles's sister. However, the crown was given to Philip VI of Valois.
- Against this background, Edward was facing threats towards his French lands.

When the war broke out in 1337, Edward's first efforts gained very little, and cost him a great deal of money. In fact, the French successfully raided the south coast of England in 1338 and 1339, and threatened an invasion. Edward had spent all his money, and had to leave his wife and children in Antwerp as hostages until he could pay back his loans.

Having talked Parliament into raising more money, Edward set sail with a fleet to attack the larger French fleet off the town of Sluys. On 24 June 1340, the English ships attacked. The French had anchored their ships in three lines, and were unable to move to react to the English. Although he was slightly wounded in the battle, Edward led his forces to a great victory, with nearly 18 000 Frenchmen killed in the battle. The men in the court of Philip VI were frightened to tell their master about the defeat at Sluys. Finally the court jester asked the King a riddle: 'Why are the English more cowardly than the French?' When the King was unable to reply, the jester uttered the fateful words: 'Because the English do not jump into the sea with their armour on.' Philip then understood that he had lost his fleet.

On land, however, Edward was not doing well, losing more of Gascony. Money was again becoming short. But, as things gradually improved for Edward in the south of France, he decided to invade France from the north.



■ The Battle of Sluys, 24 June 1340; from a fifteenth-century manuscript of Jean Froissart's *Chronicles*

## The Crécy campaign, 1346

The Crécy campaign began when Edward gathered an army of about 15 000 men and, in July 1346, landed his force in Normandy. The King marched and sailed along the coast, plundering and destroying. He

then marched inland, taking the town of Caen and sacking it, killing 3000 of its citizens. The English were certainly terrifying the French and gathering riches, but this was not helping Edward's claim as king.

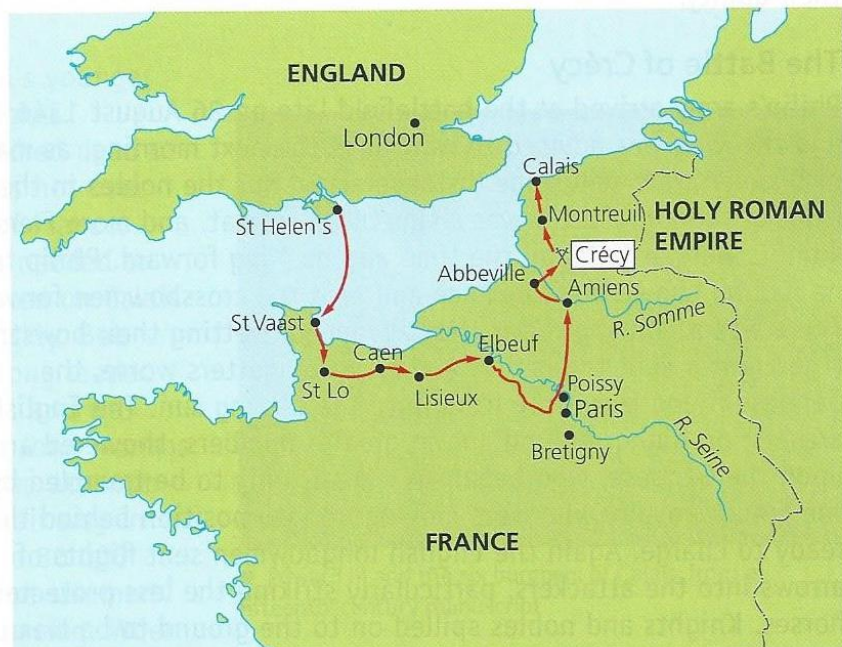
As Edward's army marched on east and north, it came to the River Seine. King Philip VI of France, who had gathered a large army at Rouen, was trying to cut off the English by destroying all the bridges. Marching on the south bank of the river, plundering and destroying as they went, the English were forced ever closer to Paris in search of a crossing. There was panic in Paris as the English came within twenty miles, but Edward only wanted to cross the Seine. At Poissy, enough of the bridge survived for the English to rebuild it, and they crossed on 15 August.

King Edward now led his force north. Philip followed, marching hard and reaching the River Somme first. Again the French attempted to destroy or guard all the crossing places to force the smaller English army into battle. The English had to move further west towards the coast, as they were unable to cross the river, and their food and supplies were fast running out. Philip had moved most of his army on to the south side of the Somme and was marching to catch Edward. However, the English learnt of a tidal ford at Blanchetaque and forced their way through the French guards.

Edward knew that the French were now too close and that it was futile to keep running. The time had come to choose a battlefield. Just beyond the village of Crécy, on 26 August, he placed his army on a ridge facing south-east, using a windmill as his command post. It is estimated that Edward had around 12 000 men.

### The armies

The English army had a small number of knights and mounted men at arms, heavily armoured in a mixture of **mail** and **plate armour**. Plate armour was made of thin but solid steel and, although heavier, gave much better protection to its wearer than ring mail. The English depended upon archers, equipped with the **longbow**. The longbow was 1.8 m (6 feet) in length and made of wood such as yew. Although the



■ The Crécy campaign, 1346

Consider the advantage that the English had with longbows, rather than crossbows. Have you ever fired a bow and arrow? If your school runs archery sessions, try it yourself and see how hard the bowmen had to work!

crossbow could fire further, the longbow could launch ten or more arrows a minute, making it much quicker than the crossbow. Used in large enough numbers and with the right kind of arrowheads, the longbow arrows could penetrate mail and plate armour, causing major problems to attacking armoured men.

The English had learnt, while fighting against the Welsh and Scots, that mounted charges by knights were not as effective as dismounted knights fighting alongside large groups of archers. They waited for the French in two large groups in front of the windmill under the commands of the Earl of Northampton and Edward's sixteen-year-old son, Edward Prince of Wales, nicknamed 'the Black Prince'. King Edward himself held another smaller group behind in reserve.

The French army had perhaps 30 000 to 40 000 men, consisting largely of mounted knights and men-at-arms. These men saw warfare as a chance to display their fighting ability and bravery, and were not easy to control. There was also a large force of hired Genoese crossbowmen, but the French knights thought little of their ability.

### The Battle of Crécy

Philip's army arrived at the battlefield late on 26 August 1346 and the King was advised to wait until the next morning, as many of his men were still some distance away. But the nobles in the front of the army felt it was shameful to retreat, and more French knights were arriving all the time and pushing forward. Philip felt he had no choice but to attack and sent the crossbowmen forward. There was a rain shower as they advanced, wetting their bowstrings (the English kept theirs dry) and to make matters worse, the Genoese found they were firing into the setting sun. The English archers, on higher ground and in greater numbers, showered arrows upon the Genoese, who began to retreat, only to be trampled by the French cavalry who were moving up into position behind them, ready to charge. Again the English longbowmen sent flights of arrows into the attackers, particularly striking the less protected horses. Knights and nobles spilled on to the ground to be trampled by their own side. As soon as the first charge was broken, another came, and then another. The English archers kept up their bloody work, but some brave French knights managed to reach the English lines. At one point word reached King Edward that his son needed help. According to one writer of the time, Edward refused, saying that he wanted the Prince of Wales to 'earn his spurs'. (Another writer reported that the King did send twenty knights, who found the Black Prince and his comrades leaning on their weapons and surrounded by French bodies.)



■ A knight of the fourteenth century



■ An English bowman of the fourteenth century

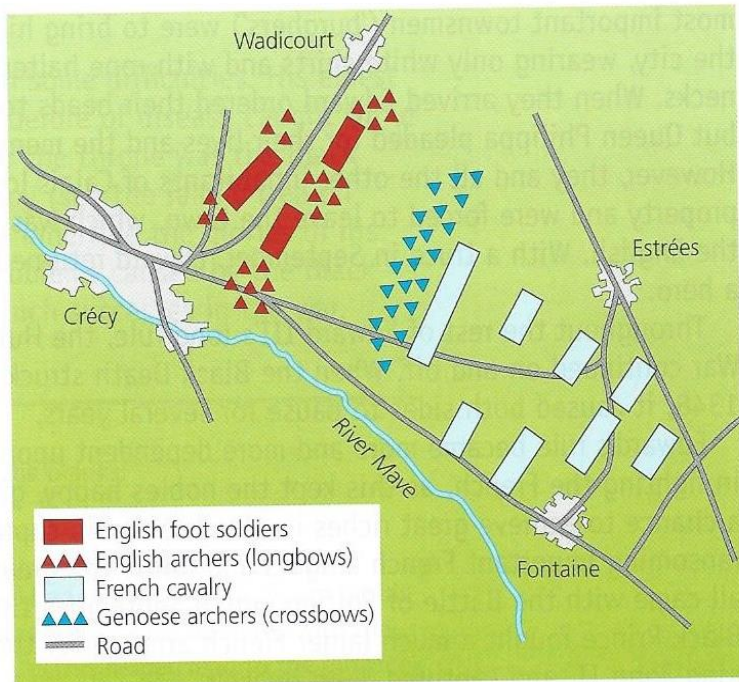
In all, the French charged fifteen or more times, until it was too dark to see. King Philip, who had had a horse killed under him and had been wounded, was led from the battlefield. Another king, blind John of Luxembourg, King of Bohemia, was an ally of the French and insisted that his followers lead him into the battle. His body was found the next day, still tied to his men. The Prince of Wales was so moved by this that he took for himself John's symbol of three feathers, and to this day the Prince of Wales has three feathers as part of his crest.

### The end of the campaign

The English victory at Crécy was overwhelming. The French lost 10 000 men, including Philip VI's younger brother and 1500 lords and knights. English losses were several hundred dead or wounded. But the campaign was not over and Edward was still not King of France.

King Edward decided that he needed to control a French port. He marched on Calais as he believed it would fall quickly. But Calais was commanded by a strong leader, Jean de Vienne, had stout walls and was surrounded by marshy land. For long months the town held out, while the one attempt made by the English to fight their way in failed. The English army grew to 30 000 men besieging Calais and, by the summer of 1347, the defenders were starving. When de Vienne sent several hundred women, children, elderly and sick people out from the town, Edward refused to let them pass and they were left to die just outside the town walls. Philip VI finally appeared on the cliffs above the town in July 1347, but was badly outnumbered by the English. Unable to do anything to help, his army marched away.

With no help, Calais was forced to surrender. Jean de Vienne and Edward's commanders managed to convince the King not to kill all the soldiers and citizens of Calais, but Edward did demand that six of the



■ The Battle of Crécy, 26 August 1346



■ Edward III and the six burghers of Calais; from a fifteenth-century manuscript

most important townsmen ('burghers') were to bring him the keys of the city, wearing only white shirts and with rope halters around their necks. When they arrived Edward ordered their heads to be cut off, but Queen Philippa pleaded for their lives and the men were spared. However, they and all the other inhabitants of Calais lost all their property and were forced to leave the town, which was resettled by the English. With a truce in September, Edward returned to England a hero.

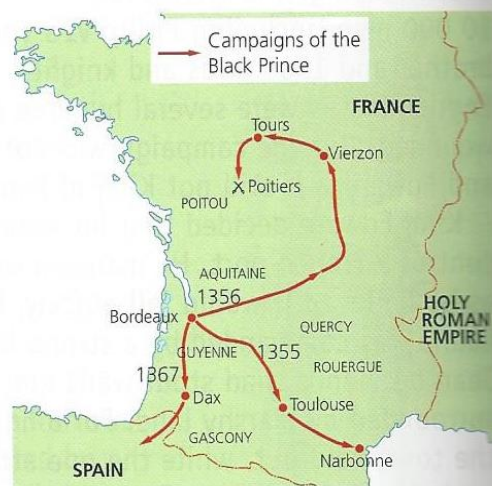
Throughout the rest of Edward III's long rule, the Hundred Years' War continued on and off. When the Black Death struck Europe in 1348, it caused both sides to pause for several years.

Edward's rule became more and more dependent upon doing well in fighting the French, as this kept the nobles happy, giving them a chance to achieve great riches in plunder, and in capturing and ransoming important French knights and lords. The greatest catch of all came with the Battle of Poitiers on 19 September 1356, when the Black Prince fought a much larger French army under the new French King John II, and captured John himself.

### Edward III and Parliament

In spite of these victories, Edward was no closer to becoming King of France, and not everybody was happy. Even though Parliament provided money for the King, there were protests about the heavy taxation. Edward had learnt that he needed to appear to give something to his Parliaments to earn their support. He was the first monarch to address Parliament in English and he allowed Parliament more control over taxation.

By 1376, Edward was an old and feeble man. The war in France was going badly, and all that the English had of France was a narrow strip of Gascony and the town of Calais. Queen Philippa had died some time before, and Edward had fallen under the influence of Alice Perrers who, along with several advisors, was accused of taking advantage of the old King. Because of the need for taxes, Parliament was called and for once it was the Commons, not the Lords, who took the lead. Parliament demanded reforms, including the removal of the bad advisors, before any money would be raised. John of Gaunt, one of Edward III's sons, argued strongly against the reforms, but they were popular with the people and the process came to be known as the Good Parliament. Nonetheless, John of Gaunt used his influence to reverse many of the reforms within a year. By 1377 the advisors had returned and the Commons' leader was imprisoned.



■ The French campaigns of the Black Prince

## The death of Edward III

The King's death in 1377 left England in some difficulties. His eldest son, the Black Prince, had died shortly before of disease caught while leading troops in France. Next in line to the throne was the Black Prince's son, Richard, a nine-year-old boy (see the family tree on page 157). Crowned King Richard II, he inherited the glories of his grandfather's successes, but also the problems caused by the Black Death, heavy taxes and the growing French successes in the war.

### Exercise 6.11

Write out the following paragraphs, filling in the blanks:

Edward III became king after his mother \_\_\_\_\_ and her lover \_\_\_\_\_ seized power from \_\_\_\_\_. After taking control, Edward had to deal with problems on his northern border with \_\_\_\_\_. He was also having problems with the King of France over control of \_\_\_\_\_. This helped lead to the outbreak of the \_\_\_\_\_ War. Edward III had some successes against the French King, including the naval battle at \_\_\_\_\_ and at the Battle of \_\_\_\_\_. The war was halted when the \_\_\_\_\_ struck both France and England.

At the end of his reign, however, the \_\_\_\_\_ in 1376 showed that not every Englishman was happy. Because the \_\_\_\_\_ had also died, Edward III's death meant that nine-year-old \_\_\_\_\_ was to be the next king.

### Exercise 6.12

Write a sentence or two about each of the following:

- 1 Philip VI of France
- 2 The Battle of Sluys
- 3 The Siege of Calais
- 4 The Battle of Poitiers
- 5 The Good Parliament

### Exercise 6.13

Read the following sources, then answer the questions:

**SOURCE A:** Written by Geoffrey le Baker, a monk who had talked to Thomas de la Moore, a knight who fought for Edward III at Crécy.

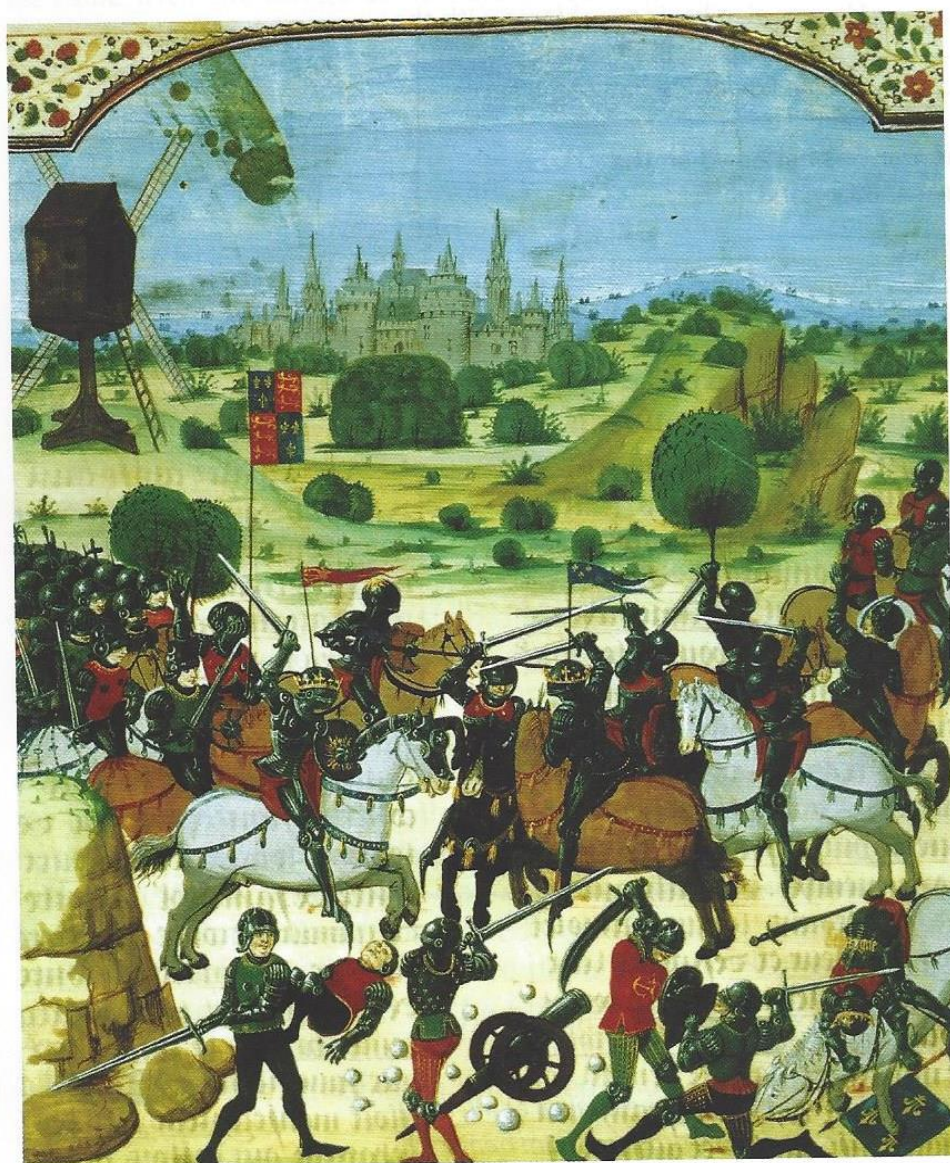
*When they saw that their crossbowmen were not harming the English at all, the French men-at-arms rode down the crossbowmen. They crushed them beneath the feet of their horses, and charged headlong forward ...*

**SOURCE B:** Written by Jean Froissart, a French priest born in 1337 who travelled widely to research his writings. He produced his work for Edward's wife Queen Philippa, and claimed to have spoken to people who were actually at the battle.

*[The Genoese] advanced with their crossbows presented, and began to shoot. The English archers then advanced one step forward, and shot their arrows with such force and quickness that it seemed as if it snowed. When the Genoese felt these arrows which pierced through their armour, some of them cut the strings of their crossbows, others flung them to the ground, and all turned about and retreated quite discomfited.*

*The French had a large body of men-at-arms on horseback to support the Genoese, and the King, seeing them thus fall back, cried out, 'Kill me those scoundrels, for they stop up our road without any reason.' The English continued shooting and, some of their arrows falling among the horsemen, drove them upon the Genoese so that they were in such confusion, they could never rally again.*

**SOURCE C** is a picture of the Battle of Crécy from a fifteenth-century chronicle.



■ The Battle of Crécy; from a fifteenth-century manuscript



- 1 Look at Source A. What happened to the crossbowmen?
- 2 Look at Source B. How did the Genoese react when the English archers fired upon them?
- 3 Look at Source C. What does it show happening? Does this agree or disagree with what each of the other sources say? How does it support what the other sources say about the crossbowmen?
- 4 Look at all the sources. Remember to look at who produced each source and when, and think about how much each author would know. Ask yourself if he was an eyewitness. Are there clues that any of the authors were one-sided concerning the battle?

Now write a paragraph comparing all three sources and judging which source would be the most useful to a historian wanting to know what happened to the Genoese crossbowmen. Remember that by the term 'useful' we mean both the extent to which we can trust the source and the kind of information it gives the reader. While a source may not always give a truthful or balanced account, it might very well tell the reader a lot about the viewpoint of the person or people who produced it.

- 5 Using all the sources and your own knowledge, how far do you agree that the French defeat at Crécy was caused by their crossbowmen?