

Articles

A Short Biography of Henry V

Henry V was born on September 16, 1387 in Monmouth Castle. He was the second son of Henry IV (also known as Henry Bolingbroke) and Mary de Bohun. John of Gaunt, his grandfather, had been one of the wealthiest men in Western Europe. Henry was one of the first English Kings after the Norman Conquest to be able to read and write the English language with proficiency. The stories of his youth appear to be mostly an invention of Shakespeare. His contemporaries noted that he was stern, ruthless and a humorless man. In fact, several of them remarked that he looked more like a churchman than a soldier. He loved books and was a patron of church music. He had a strong interest in theology. He was also charismatic and capable of inspiring incredible devotion among those who served under him. However, Henry was marked by one single overriding trait. He was determined in his quest to regain English lands in France.



Henry was largely raised by Henry Beaufort, his uncle. He was knighted by Richard II shortly before his father, Henry IV, overthrew Richard and assumed the throne of England. At age 12, Henry was made the Prince of Wales, Duke of Cornwall and the Earl of Chester. From 1400 to 1408, he received his military training under both his father and Sir Henry Percy while fighting Owain Glyn Dwr and other Welsh rebels. He was wounded in 1403 (at age 16) when he took an arrow through his face while fighting English rebels such as Henry Percy. The wound would have killed most men but Henry survived and carried the scar for the rest of his life. By age 22, he was made Chancellor of England. He became King of England at age 26. While his reign lasted only nine years, it was one of the most successful of all of the medieval Kings of England.

The Hundred Years War was a dynastic conflict between the English and the French over who had the better claim to rule various territories within France, notable Normandy, Gascony and Flanders. This latter territory was one of the major markets for English wool. The conflict lasted 116 years (from 1337 to 1453) and was actually a series of wars with long periods of tense truces. It can be divided into three or four phases. During the first phase (1337-1360), Edward III and his son, Edward, the Black Prince of Wales, lead England to victory over the French forces. The French were forced to recognize Edward as the ruler of Aquitaine and England received Calais during the treaty of Bretigny in 1360. During the second phase, the French won control over the interior of France and the English withdrew to their coastal fortresses. By the later part of the

14th Century, the English gains in France had largely been undone. Henry V started the third phase of the War (1415-1420). He was able to do so largely because of a civil war among French Nobles who were divided into the Burgundians and Aragnac's camps over who had the right to the throne of France. Contrary to William Shakespeare's play, he did not begin his campaign against France over a gift of French tennis balls. He negotiated with both sides of the civil war and continued to make a series of territorial demands which he knew neither could ultimately accept while arming his country for war.

In August of 1415, Henry and his armada set sail across the Channel. He had over 8,000 archers and 2,000 men at arms supported by sixty-five gunners and a large artillery train. After a five week siege, he regained the port of Harfleur in northwest France. The siege cost him almost a third of his army through wounds or disease. Despite his diminished army, he proceeded upon a series of raids with the ultimate goal of capturing the city of Calais. By this time, the Dauphin of France had been able to assemble a large army with the sole goal of destroying the English King. The two armies met at the village of Agincourt on Friday, October 25, 1415. Henry's small army was severely outnumbered by the French. It was tired and ill-supplied. Despite these facts, Henry won one of the greatest battles of the Middle Ages. His victory was the result of the efforts of English long bowmen, his ability to inspire his troops, and the terrain. The English long bowmen, who were surrounded by woods on either side slaughtered the French Knights as they charged their position. The battle decimated the nobility of France and the French lost between 6,000 to 10,000 men. It also demonstrated the effectiveness of the longbow on medieval battlefields.

Henry returned to England amid an ecstatic welcome. Between 1416 to 1417, he devoted himself to building up a navy which proceeded to crush the French and gave him command of the English Channel. By 1417, Henry and his army returned to France and continued to campaign. By 1419, he had completely re-conquered Normandy. By 1420, Henry negotiated the treaty of Troyes, with the aid of the Burgundians. The treaty made him the heir and regent of France as well as the husband of Catherine, King Charles VI of France's youngest daughter. The treaty was one of the greatest triumphs of the English over the French during the Hundreds Years War.

In April of 1421, Henry received news of the death of Clarence, his brother, at the hands of Armagnac forces at the city of Bauge. Henry returned to France in June of 1421 seeking to put down the rebellion as well as to avenge his brother. In October of 1421, he began a siege of Meaux, the Dauphin's stronghold. The siege broke his health but not his spirit. Despite his illness, he stayed with his army through the winter amid famine, dysentery and small-pox. The City finally surrendered on March 9, 1422. Henry returned to Paris as an extremely ill man. He died at age 35 on August 31, 1422. His dream of ruling as both King of France and England died with him. Ironically, Charles VI, the King of France, would die only six weeks later. Henry left to his infant son a Kingdom the size of which had not been seen since the days of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine. His body was boiled in a cauldron and brought back for burial in Westminster Abby. Henry V is regarded as one of the greatest of all English monarchs primarily

because of his military achievements in France during the Hundred Years War and his efforts at increasing English national pride.

Lord Sir Paul de Marseilles

Sources: Desmond Seward, *The Hundred Years War* (Penguin Books, 1999), Norman F. Cantor, General Editor, *The Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages* (Viking, 1999), Mike Ashley, *A Brief History of British Kings and Queens* (Carroll & Graf, 2002), and *Henry V* on Wikipedia.