

The Longbow

The English longbow is an icon of the medieval battlefield. Bringing the flower of French aristocracy to its knees at battles such as Agincourt and Crecy. Yet was it the wonder weapon of the age? How did it achieve its fearsome reputation and why only the English? What are the advantages over other weapons such as the cross bow?

The first thing to consider when looking at the longbow is that not all bows are the same and just as importantly not all archers are the same either. The strength required to pull a large long bow needs a special breed of archer - someone trained from an early age to pull and aim a very powerful weapon. The resident demonstration archer at Warwick castle (well worth a visit) told the author that when he takes a break from archery it takes him time (a few days) to get back to the strength required to pull the larger bows. So constant practice is required. So it took organisation (and legislation) to ensure a supply of effective archers. This is probably why it was not accepted in other countries. It is far easier to train a crossbow man than a longbow archer. Another factor is that of trust. In many countries the ruling classes simply could not risk having such a dangerously armed peasant wandering around.

The other thing to bear in mind is that the effectiveness of archery varied a great deal. There are accounts of crusaders coming out of battle literally peppered with arrows from enemy horse archers. These knights were wearing chain mail not plate armour and yet the arrows did not penetrate their protection. It should be noted that chain mail is usually backed up with a padded or leather jacket. A full on English longbow has no trouble penetrating mail armour so there is obviously a big difference in the power of the release.

The chief advantage that the longbow has over the cross bow is speed. An archer can probably loose three times the number of arrows as a simple crossbowman. When you move to more complex machines such as arbalests which incorporate a winch to pull the string back it gets even slower. However arbalests are capable of greater power than the longbow. There are two distinct advantages to the cross bow. Firstly the training of a crossbowman does not take much time as it was simply about technique rather than physical strength and secondly it is a much handier weapon to use from fortifications as the crossbow can be used from any position. The longbow can only be used standing up (or lying down with the stave under the feet and both hands used to pull the string).

We have already discussed the effect of the longbow arrow on chain mail, but most of the French knights at Agincourt were wearing full plate armour. So how effective is the arrow against plate. The answer is surprising - not very! Well made plate armour is not flat. It is designed with curves and angles so that most blows and arrows will

impact at an angle and glance off. So how was so much carnage caused during these battles? Tests performed at Warwick castle on a replica helm give some clues. Several arrows were loosed at fairly close range, all but one glanced off. The arrow that penetrated hit the edge of the eye slit (obviously a weak point) and broke as it went in. This would have killed or incapacitated the wearer. But how can we rely on a lucky shot to account for Agincourt? Well there are a number of other factors which may come into it:

1 Not all armour is the same quality. Lesser nobles may have lower quality, older armour. The effects of age and rusting etc would weaken the plate.

2 Armour does not cover the body perfectly. This would have left enough gaps for lucky shots to penetrate. The archers were deployed en masse. Literally showering the target with arrows (turning the sky black with arrows).

3 The knight's armour does not fully protect the horse. I believe that the archers created confusion and broke up the charge rather than killing large quantities of knights. The horses when hit would have thrown their riders, other knights would have crashed into them. Once the charge had been broken the archers dropped their bows (they would have run out of ammunition very quickly anyway) and set about the struggling French knights with knives and hammers. The English foot knights in the centre of each position were actually hard pressed until helped by the archers on the flanks.



Conclusions

So was the bow a battle winning weapon? I personally don't believe it was on it's own. When used in conjunction with other arms it was deadly. An example of this is Falkirk against the Scottish schiltrons (dense formations of spearmen). The bowmen shot gaps in these formations which allowed heavy cavalry to get into the formation and destroy it. It is unlikely that the cavalry alone could have easily broken these troops and archers would have been vulnerable to a counter charge. Together though, the horse forced the Scottish infantry to stay in dense formations for protection which provided a easy target for the archers. In the end it was the knights that caused the carnage in the final stages of the battle. At the other great "long bow" battles it's disruptive and damaging effect was decisive but it was always in conjunction with other factors and weapon types. This is not to detract from the skill and courage of these men armed with one of the most powerful weapons of the day.