

Thomas Chaucer and Wars in France

Ewelme News, Oct-Nov 2015

The 600th anniversary of the Battle of Agincourt falls on October 25th, when we commemorate King Henry V's famous victory in the territorial campaign of The Hundred Year War with France. Ewelme's Lord of the Manor, Thomas Chaucer (1364-1434), as befitted a soldier and member of the King's Council, contributed a professional retinue of 11 men at arms and 36 archers to accompany about 2,500 men at arms and 7,000 archers (opinions vary on the size of the army) on the campaign. This was a very costly exercise, even for a man reputed to be 'the wealthiest commoner in England', as war horses, pack animals, armour, weapons and valets had to be equipped and provisioned, and the soldiers paid a daily stipend according to their status.

The army landed on August 13th and promptly laid siege to the port of Harfleur, but there is a mystery surrounding Chaucer's participation. Some sources state he could only send his retinue, as he was taken ill beforehand and received the King's dispensation to remain in England; others maintain that he took part in the siege, but was invalided home. Whatever occurred, he was not one of the '*happy few*' who fought at Agincourt on St Crispin's Day, nor did 2 of his men at arms who had died at Harfleur.

The siege of Harfleur lasted until 22nd September, during which King Henry's army was decimated with the 'bloody flux' (dysentery). One victim of dysentery was Chaucer's son-in-law Sir John Phelip, who died on October 2nd. He was a fellow King's Councillor and a 31 year old widower, recently married to Alice, the 11 year old only child of the Chaucer's. Phelip's status and wealth ensured he was not thrown into a common burial pit, but his body was boiled and his bones returned to England, and interred in the Choir in Kidderminster Church, next to his second wife with a Latin epitaph: '*Henry V loved this man as a friend; John was bold and strong and fought well at Harfleur*'. To his child-widow at home with her mother Mathilda in Ewelme, he left a covered cup of gold and a gold ewer, and similarly valuable gifts and £40 to her parents.



The Tomb of Thomas Chaucer and his wife Maud.

Thomas Chaucer continued to advance in the service of his King as a politician and diplomat. In 1420 he acted as a negotiator of the terms of the victor over the vanquished in the Treaty of Troyes, under which Henry V married Catherine of Valois and thereby claimed the throne of France for England after the death of her father King Charles VI. A year later Chaucer married 17-year-old Alice to Thomas Montacute, a 33 year old Lancastrian widower of high rank, and she became the Countess of Salisbury.

Ewelme Village Archive