

The Art of War in High Medieval Europe.

by Susan Laflin-Barker

The art of war has evolved throughout the centuries and has been discussed by writers such as Oman, Contamine and Verbruggen. In considering the Battle of Shrewsbury, it is relevant to consider only those developments relating to English armies in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.

The battle of Shrewsbury in 1403 falls within the period of the "Hundred Years War" which lasted (Curry, 1993) from 1337 when the French attacked English possessions on the continent to 1453 when English Gascony fell to the French (actually 116 years). England and France had been at war many times before and after these dates, but the unifying factor which identifies the Hundred Years War is the claim (through the female line) of the English kings to the throne of France. Although Henry IV did nothing to deny this claim, he had too many problems at home to himself take an active part in a war in France.

Much has been written about a "military revolution" although there seems to be little general agreement about period over which this occurred (Parker, 1988; Downing, 1992; Ayton, 1995; Rogers, 1995). The term was first used by Michael Roberts in 1955 to describe the changes over the period from 1560-1660 in tactics, size of armies, strategy and impact on society. This was extended by Geoffrey Parker to cover the period from 1500-1800 (in fact starting with the invasion of Italy in 1494) and applied mainly to the changes resulting from the increasing reliance on firepower (archers, field artillery and later musketeers) in battle and the resulting reduction in the importance of cavalry. He also included the development of the "trace italienne" or earthwork artillery fortress as a response to the greater efficiency of artillery. Downing also places the revolution after 1500.

These developments are far too late to have any effect on a battle in 1403. However Clifford Rogers has claimed (Rogers, 1995, 55-93) that there was not one but a whole series of military revolutions, starting during the Hundred Years war. He described an "infantry revolution" which took place between the early and late fourteenth century, and included a change from an army of feudal aristocrats owing military service for their lands to an army drawn from the whole population and fighting for pay; from shock troops of heavily armoured knights on horseback to close-order linear foot relying on missile power; and from an army which fought to capture and ransom its foes to one which fought to kill them. His second change, called the "artillery revolution" and referring to the increased use of gunpowder artillery in siege warfare, occurred after 1403 and so is not relevant to the battle of Shrewsbury.

Andrew Ayton suggested that the term "revolution" may not be the most appropriate for gradual changes spread over such a long period, but identified four main elements included in these changes. These were the replacement of the heavy cavalry (knights) by infantry as the decisive part of the army, the introduction of gunpowder weapons, the increase in the size of the armies and the resulting increase in the length of time for a campaign - often resulting in the development of a standing army as troops had to be employed all year round. He commented on the nature of medieval warfare, with its emphasis on the control of castles and fortified towns, the use of attrition and the small number of battles. He claimed that England's military revolution took place in the middle decades of the fourteenth century - thus making it relevant to the situation

in 1403. This revolution included the increased use of longbows and dismounted knights and coincided with the increased political importance of the yeomen relative to the aristocracy. He suggested that this may have been the reason why the French, who wished to maintain the importance of the aristocracy, did not train their commoners to use the longbow.

Matthew Bennet discussed the battle tactics of the Hundred Years War (Curry, 1994) and showed that the two main types of troops involved were armoured men-at-arms and longbowmen. Ian Heath says (Heath, 1984, p6) that the men-at-arms were made up of bannerets, knights and esquires, but there was often a severe shortage of knights and so they had to make up the shortfall by increased numbers of esquires or other less-noble, less-well-equipped and less-expensive foot soldiers. They were armoured (as fully as possible) and used lance and sword when on horseback and pole-axe and sword when on foot. Frequently the centre of each of the three "battles" consisted of a block of dismounted men-at-arms, while a small proportion remained in a mounted reserve, to exploit any weak spots or pursue a fleeing enemy. The longbowmen had little or no armour and were expected to be much more mobile but could take part in close combat if necessary - they were usually equipped with a maul or axe in addition to their bow and arrows.

Bennet analysed a number of the battles of the period and considered the proportions of archers to men-at-arms and the way in which they were deployed on the battlefield as well as the choice of terrain. In general, the men-at-arms were grouped into three "battles", with archers on the flanks. He discussed the various interpretations of the "herce" formation - a term derived either from a branched candlestick or a harrow or from "hericon" - hedgehog or bristly hedge. Some explanations (Heath, 1984, p45 for one) have each of the three battles with its own group of archers on the flanks. If these archers are angled forward to attack an approaching enemy by shooting at both flanks, then the overall appearance of the battlefield has protruding spikes which are said to be the meaning of herce. Bennet objected to this on the grounds that it gives weak points in the line which could be exploited by the opposing men-at-arms.

The alternative explanation has all the archers gathered together into two large blocks on the flanks of the entire army, again angled forward and with their flanks protected by stakes, potholes, or even the baggage. This seems to be the explanation preferred by Bennet for his account of Crecy, but it suffers from the disadvantage that the range of the longbows would mean that there was very little covering fire to help the centre of the line. However later in the paper, Bennet suggested that the meaning of "herce" refers to the loose formation of archers within their blocks, possibly interspersed with stakes - i.e. one forward and one back giving a zig-zag frontage to the line rather than closely packed on a linear frontage. In the battle of Shrewsbury, the chronicler says that the archers were placed in the front of the armies at the start and the Cheshire archers in the rebel army, shooting from an uphill position, were especially effective. One of the restrictions on the size of armies was the perennial shortage of money on the part of their leaders. Although in theory, all land belonged to the king and his subjects held it from him in return for services, including military service, in practice this had become modified over the centuries. The payment of cash (scutage), more or less promptly, in place of supplying knights to fight for the king had become widespread, while those who had the correct equipment and were willing to fight expected payment to remain with the army for longer than the required period. By the late fourteenth century, there were three sources supplying men to fight in the armies.

The first was the feudal service by knights turning up for the expected 40 days; the second was the militia levies who were less well equipped than the knights; the third and most numerous were volunteers who had contracts which specified payment for their services. The use of mercenary companies who remained together for years and negotiated employment for different masters at different times was just starting and became more important as time went on. Frequently armies had about three archers to every man-at-arms, this may be true of the Battle of Shrewsbury.

In addition to the pitched battles, there were many more occasions when the armies declined combat, but instead retreated to within a nearby walled town and stood siege. Consequently, siege warfare became an important part of a campaign in this period. This reluctance to give battle resulted in the frequent use of chevauchee - literally a "ride" but actually a mounted raid which swept through enemy territory and looted and burnt the farms, villages and other undefended settlements while avoiding the castles and walled towns. This had a double purpose - to demonstrate the enemy's failure to protect lands claimed to be under his control and to collect additional supplies for the invading army.

In the weeks preceding the battle of Shrewsbury, the Prince of Wales had been leading just such a raid into north Wales where the rebel Owen Glendower claimed support. He had just returned to Shrewsbury when Hotspur arrived from the north with the rebel army. Prince Henry was occupying Shrewsbury with his troops and refused to join the revolt, but Hotspur needed to capture the town and its important river crossing. According to the chronicle, he set about besieging it when he was surprised by the arrival of the King and his army.

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