Conclusion and consequences

A defining moment in history?

We might expect a war to end with some kind of peace settlement that reflected and reinforced the victory of one side over the other. There was no negotiated settlement for the end of the Hundred Years’ War. Calais remained in English hands until 1558, and it was not until the Treaty of Amiens of 1801 that the title ‘king of France’ was abandoned: by then, of course, France no longer had a monarch.

A recurrent theme in the history of Europe between the late-15th century and the mid-19th century was Anglo-French hostility. But 1453 has much to recommend it as both the end of an era and the end of a war. It marked the final loss of the lands in south-west France which had been held by English kings since the 12th century. If we accept that these lands were the real long-term cause of Anglo-French hostilities, then their loss was a major turning point in Anglo-French relations. Never again were the English able to support a meaningful claim to the French throne by virtue of a major presence in France.

The fact that Normandy had been lost only a few years earlier was most significant. The occupation of Normandy had given the English control of one of the wealthiest and most strategically significant areas of France. And it had been lost all too easily. Worse still, it proved impossible to effect any recovery of any of the lost lands. Resources had to be poured into the defence of Calais. Henry VI’s descent into madness in the summer of 1453, which created governmental paralysis and further fanned divisions, not least between Somerset and York, towards civil war, was no doubt a major factor in why no effort was made to invade France again after 1453, although a shortage of money was also influential. The enormity of the task was first worried that the English would return, had ensured the firm defence of his conquests, and had encouraged attacks on the English coasts and shipping.

French historians have made it quite clear that Charles’s authority was much boosted by the recovery of Normandy and Gascony. So emphatic were the victories that he chose to exploit them for propaganda purposes and his loyal people followed in his wake. Economic recovery was slow but was assisted by the fact that the recoveries had been easy and not physically destructive.

*With the heart of a lion and courage of a prince he entered Normandy with a large army and by sieges, battles and surprise attacks as well as other means he drove you English out in one season, which is a very short time indeed. He has left you not a single place ... conquering all that you and your king Henry had conquered in thirty-three years.* (Treatise known as *The Debate of the Heralds of England and France*, c.1455)

All in all, therefore, the French emerged stronger from the war and the English weaker. Even though both suffered civil war in the decades that followed, it was in England that royal authority was dealt a major blow in the Wars of the Roses, whereas both Charles VII and his son, Louis XI, began the road to absolutism. Their military reforms and increased use of gunpowder artillery, backed up by a further expansion in royal authority and taxing capacity, paved the way for the large armies of the early modern period and in particular for French intervention in Italy at the turn of the century. In England, the armies imploded on themselves. Many who served Lancaster and York in the Wars of the Roses
saw two examples earlier in Trollope and Mundenford.

From the historian's privileged position of hindsight, there can be no doubt that the end of the Hundred Years' War, and indeed the whole war itself, were defining moments in English and French history. The war had been by far the most long-standing, and the most militarily and politically significant, conflict in western Europe in the later Middle Ages. It had involved virtually every other state at one time or another. It had divided France twice, in 1360 and in 1420 — events that did much to embitter the French towards the English. Their very freedom and existence were under threat.

The claim to the French throne was perhaps at the forefront of English ambitions only from the assassination of John the Fearless in 1419, but its very use since 1340 had elevated the war to a new status — no longer a war between vassal and sovereign but between two sovereigns. In such a scenario it is not surprising that ideas of national identity hardened and insults were traded between the two nations. They remained 'wars of kings' throughout, but the nature of the fighting, which targeted civilians in a way that they were powerless to resist, and the level of the taxation burden made them also 'wars of peoples'. The expression 'society at war' does indeed seem appropriate.

There can be no doubt of the war's importance in military terms. Because of its length and intensity, and the fact that it was often waged in several areas simultaneously, it had prompted an increase in the number of men for whom soldiering was a primary occupation. It had persuaded the English and French to increase the proportion of archers in their armies in order to generate numerical presence and effective 'human mass artillery'. It had increased demands for weapons, armour and fortifications, and had no doubt encouraged the development of gunpowder artillery. In this, the English had not moved as quickly as the French, being too complacent in their defence of Normandy and Gascony, and being constrained by the difficulties of holding lands overseas. But it had generated in Normandy what was essentially an English standing army, which was then outmatched by Charles VII's military advances of the mid-1440s.

The Hundred Years' War saw many forms of warfare, but a final note can be sounded about its major battles. It has become fashionable to downplay the significance of battles and to bring to mind that they were the least common form of conflict. None of the battles of the war was decisive — no form of medieval warfare could be decisive, as the scale was too small and the impact too localised. But Sluys, Crécy, Poitiers, La Rochelle, Agincourt, Patay and Formigny all had marked catalytic effects on the course of the conflict in a way that no other forms of action did or could have done. For contemporaries these were the defining moments, and clear testimony of the seriousness and bitterness with which the Hundred Years' War was fought.

The battlefield of Agincourt. The road between the villages of Tramecourt and Agincourt probably passes through the heart of the battle. The dump of trees is the site of a grave pit. (Anne Curry)