

Poetryclass Fresh Ideas for Learning from the Poetry Society

Honour and belief: The Battle of Agincourt

By Alf Wilkinson

This resource has been created to accompany the **Agincourt 600 Poetry Competition**, a collaboration between Agincourt 600 and The Poetry Society. You can find more details about the competition and how to enter your class's poems on The Poetry Society's Agincourt 600 webpage: poetrysociety.org.uk/competitions/agincourt-600

Note to teachers

The following resources and writing challenges are aimed directly at Primary Level pupils, and are intended to help you explore the Battle of Agincourt with your class. They encourage pupils to think about the history and themes of this famous battle, and equip them with the tools to create their own poems inspired by this extraordinary event.

Why is the Battle of Agincourt significant?

Why do we remember the Battle of Agincourt? What is the significance of the battle to us today? After all, we are now allies with the French, and English claims to rule France are long gone. At first the battle received relatively little attention, but in times of war with the French, such as the Seven Years War in the eighteenth century, or the Napoleonic Wars of the nineteenth century, remembering Agincourt became a very popular thing to do.

KS1

KS2

Topics at a glance

- Agincourt 600
- Descriptive language
- Letter poems
- List poems

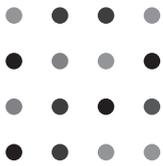


Illustration by Alex Foster.

In history, somebody or something is regarded as significant if it/they:

- changed events at the time they lived.
- improved lots of people's lives – or made them worse.
- changed people's ideas.
- had a long-lasting impact on their country or the world.
- had been a really good or a very bad example to other people of how to live or behave.

These are historian Ian Dawson's criteria for establishing significance. There are other versions but these are perhaps the most pupil-friendly ones! You could discuss with your pupils what they think makes someone or something significant. Perhaps they can think of their own criteria that are different, or add to the ones above.



Who was Henry V?

Henry became king in 1413 at the age of twenty-five. He had already helped his father put down various rebellions, and was a brave, battlehardy leader. He was determined to recapture lands lost in France that he claimed were his. His actions were part of the ongoing conflicts between the English and the French, known as the Hundred Years' War. The 1415 campaign was designed to reassert his authority over lost lands. He landed in France with an army of ten thousand men.

The Battleground

On their way to Calais in northern France, the English army was stopped near the town of Agincourt by a huge French army, much larger than Henry's. The French soldiers expected an easy victory. The result, however, was a disaster for the French, and Henry V's army emerged victorious. Henry V wasn't a straightforward heroic figure, though – in fact, after the battle, he ordered the deaths of several hundred French prisoners. This has led some historians to argue that Agincourt is really the end of chivalry and the start of modern warfare.

The Code of Chivalry

Chivalry was a key code of conduct at this time, and was taken very seriously – a bit like the list of rules or guidelines your school probably has about how pupils are meant to behave. Knights were to fight fairly, prisoners were to be treated well (often because, if they were important people, they could later be ransomed for a lot of money!). People were told to believe in God and follow the rules and teachings of the church, and to always have impeccable manners.

Chivalry was, in effect, a code of conduct binding together the whole of Europe. Books were written about the rules, novels and songs written about great chivalric deeds. Perhaps the best known of these is the *Morte d'Arthur*, the first published version of the stories of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table, written in the late fifteenth century – not so long after the Battle of Agincourt.

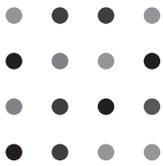


The Patron Saint of Shoemakers

The Battle of Agincourt was fought on 'St Crispin's day'. This is something that William Shakespeare refers to in his play, *Henry V*, which focuses on the battle. Many calendar days in medieval and early modern Europe were (and some still are) named after different saints of the Christian church. In the Middle Ages and beyond there were saints for almost every aspect of life, from having your tooth taken out to bringing in a good harvest, and they were a very important part of daily life. These saints' days or 'holy days' (from which we get the word 'holiday') usually marked a day of rest from work – although clearly this wasn't the case for Henry V's soldiers on St Crispin's day!

So who was St Crispin? No one is really sure. There are different versions of St Crispin's story, dating from Roman times and the early days of Christianity. One version talks of the Pope sending Crispin from Rome to France to spread Christianity there. In another, Crispin flees from persecution as a Christian in Rome and settles in France, working as a shoemaker. A third has Crispin in Kent, fleeing danger in Canterbury by setting off for London, but stopping in Faversham and settling there, again working as a shoemaker – St Crispin has long been the patron saint of cobblers.

If the details of St Crispin's life are so vague, why is the fact that the Battle of Agincourt was fought on St



Crispin's feast day so important, at least to people writing about the battle after it had happened, and for us thinking about it today? Clearly the idea of St Crispin as a courageous person sticking to his beliefs in difficult times is significant in the context of a great battle, where there was so much danger and many acts of bravery.

Most people have something that they look to for support, whether that's another person, or a religious or spiritual belief, or even something small like reading a favourite book, or enjoying a walk in the park with their dog. There are lots of ways in which people seek comfort during difficult times.

Workshop 1

Ask your pupils create a poem in the form of a letter addressed to St Crispin. There are several different points of view from which your pupils could write this.

Option A

Ask them to imagine that they are an English soldier journeying to France before the battle. This might be the first time they have ever stepped onto a ship – for some of the soldiers, it might be the first time they've ever seen the sea. Ask them to think about how they would be feeling during this long voyage before one of the greatest battles of their lives. They should picture their surroundings – the swaying ship, the crashing waves with their thick lips of white foam – but they should also concentrate on how they might be feeling. Are they anxious about the battle ahead? Or do they have complete trust in their leader, Henry V, and are simply enjoying the adventure?

To help them think about what they might write to St Crispin, ask them to write a list of five fears they have during this time, and five hopes. Each fear and each hope should be a full sentence addressed to the saint – these might take the form of a question, a plea, a memory, a description of the environment they find themselves in and so on. Once they have five of each, they could alternate each sentence to create a

contrasting ten-line poem, expressing their innermost thoughts and feelings (without worrying about what anyone will think of them).

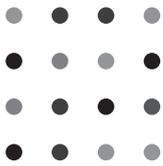
Option B

Ask your pupils to write their St Crispin letter from the perspective of those left at home in England. It must have been almost unbearable for waiting families to hear if their husbands, sons, brothers and fathers would come back from the Battle of Agincourt. Remember, in those times there wouldn't have been the quick and easy channels of communication that we have today.

Your pupils might choose to take on the character of the wife or parent of a soldier, or their child. It might be a sibling, a friend or a neighbour – it might even be their pet dog! What would they be thinking about during those long, difficult weeks without much news? What might be the things they would miss the most? And what might they do to cope in this difficult situation?

Ask them to think about what kind of tone they want to take in their letter to St Crispin. Will they be trying to put on a brave face and sound cheerful? Will they be upset, missing their loved one badly? If it's from the viewpoint of someone left at home, they might even be angry that their father or son – or whoever the person is – has gone away for such a long time, leaving them behind.

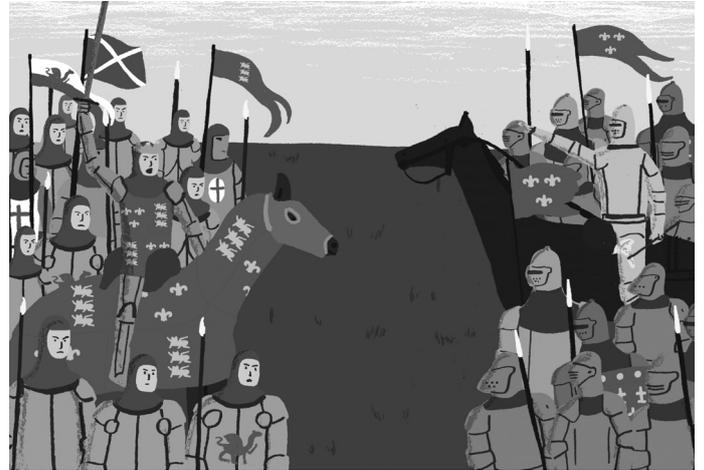




For inspiration, have a look at this excerpt from the poem 'From Home' (bit.ly/101Fu5W) by Mary Anne Clark, which was the runnerup in the first Timothy Corsellis Prize for writing responding to the poetry of the Second World War. Mary Anne has taken on the voice of a young woman talking to her husband, who is away fighting:

I look at the morning paper over breakfast.
Later I help Miss Dean to clean the church.
Sometimes, like fledglings on a perch, I pause,
And stop whatever I'm doing round the house;
And sometimes in the street I stand quite still
And hear the news boys cry the news they sell.
I write to you last thing when dusk is dim.
After I've unpinned and brushed my hair,
I take a sheet of paper from the drawer;
Smooth it flat across the desk; write your address

(‘From Home’ by Mary Anne Clark)



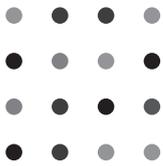
Workshop 2

Get your class to discuss what their ideal ‘Chivalric Code’ for 2015/16 might be. This might include some of the same rules that your school has for behaviour, or it might not. Some pupils might think that things like manners and politeness are very important – others might not place these things very highly on their list. Ask them to consider the importance of kindness, fairness and empathy, alongside maybe a few wackier ideas – ‘You must eat ice cream for breakfast at least once a week’, perhaps!

When everyone has contributed their ideas, ask your pupils to create a list poem about their ideal chivalric code.

Ask your pupils to think about how they will describe their different codes. They should use a variety of nouns, verbs and adjectives throughout the list they make to conjure up an effective and distinctive picture of the codes they think are important.

They could think about how they might want to appear, what hobbies are important to them, and also about how they behave in certain situations, especially difficult ones. How do they act towards other people? Remember, these can be taken from the list your class has created together.



Your pupils might even want to include a chorus or a refrain for their poem – perhaps something along the lines of ‘These are my rules for how to live well’, or ‘I’m a modern day knight in shining armour’.

In Rudyard Kipling’s poem ‘If’ (bit.ly/KbUxCk), the poet talks about how he thinks people should behave in order to be their very best selves:

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don’t deal in lies,
Or being hated, don’t give way to hating,
And yet don’t look too good, nor talk too wise

(‘If’ by Rudyard Kipling)

Ask your pupils to discuss whether they agree with Kipling’s chivalric code. The girls in your class certainly might not agree with the result of behaving in this way – “You’ll be a Man, my son!” How might they update these ideas to suit their own beliefs? Remember, it isn’t necessary for the children to use rhyme in their own poems – the most important thing is to enjoy creating a unique poem based on their own ideas and beliefs.

About the author

Alf Wilkinson taught history in a range of schools for many years. Until March 2015 he worked for the Historical Association, with an emphasis on developing Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for members. He is the author of textbooks, journal articles and online teaching resources, as well as an experienced deliverer of CPD.



*Illustration by
Alex Foster.*

Agincourt 600 Poetry Competition

You can now enter your class’s poems in the Agincourt 600 Poetry Competition. Visit poetrysociety.org.uk/agincourt600 for the full rules, terms and conditions and prizes, and download a class set entry form. Send your poems to: Agincourt 600, The Poetry Society, 22 Betterton Street, London WC2H 9BX. You can also send them via email to educationadmin@poetrysociety.org.uk