The English victory over the French king’s army; immortalized in Williams Shakespeare’s play "Henry V".

**War:** Hundred Years War.

**Date:** 25th October 1415.

**Place:** Northern France

**Combatants:** An English and Welsh army against a French army.

**Generals:** King Henry V of England against the Constable of France, Charles d’Albret, Comte de Dreux.

**Size of the armies:** The English army landed in France and besieged the port town of Harfleur some 30,000 strong. The siege took its toll, many in the army dying of disease, and a strong garrison had to be left to defend the captured port. At the Battle of Agincourt Henry’s army was probably around 5,000 knights, men-at-arms and archers. Estimates of the size of the French army vary widely, from 30,000 to as high as 100,000.

**Uniforms, arms and equipment:** Knights wore steel plate armour of greater thickness and sophistication than at Creçy with visored helmets. Two-handed swords were coming into vogue as the battle weapon of the gentry. Otherwise weapons remained the lance, shield, sword, various forms of mace or club and dagger. Each knight wore his coat of arms on his surcoat and shield.

The English and Welsh archers carried a more powerful bow than their fathers and grandfathers under Edward III and the Black Prince. Armour piercing arrow heads made this weapon more deadly than its predecessor, stocks of thousands of arrows being built up in the Tower of London in preparation for war.

For hand-to-hand combat the archers carried swords, daggers, hatchets and war hammers. They wore jackets and loose hose; although many were rendered bare foot by the time of the battle from the long harrowing march from Harfleur. Archers’ headgear was a skull cap either of boiled leather or wickerwork ribbed with a steel frame.

It is claimed that many of the archers stripped off their upper garments for the battle to ease the use of their bows.

King Henry wore a polished and plumed bascinet helmet for the battle, surmounted by a gold crown. His surcoat was emblazoned with the arms of England and France.
During the night Henry made his way around his army giving words of encouragement; again a dramatic episode made much of by Shakespeare.

The next morning, 25th October 1415, the feast of St Crispin and a public holiday in England, the English army marched out of Maisoncelles, taking up position across the road to Calais in three divisions of knights and men-at-arms; commanded by Lord Camoys on the right, the Duke of York in the centre and Sir Thomas Erpingham on the left. The Archers formed wedged divisions along the front.

Further down the road the French army was forming for battle.

The Constable of France led the first French line. The Dukes of Bar and d’Alençon led the second and the Counts of Merle and Falconberg led the third.

In front of the English position two forests approached the road from each side, leaving an area of muddy plough between them, insufficient for the French army to deploy with ease when every French knight of significance wished to be in the front with his retinue; the mass of knights and men-at-arms too compacted and unwieldy to manoeuvre or control.

The English soldiers knelt down before the battle commenced and kissed the ground as a symbol that they might be returning to the earth before the day was over.

Henry’s men waited for the French to begin the attack but there was no movement in the opposing army. It may be that there was inadequate overall command and no central decision made when to commence the assault or it may be that the French were waiting for further contingents to arrive and take their station.

Finally Henry, urged to begin the battle by his commanders, gave the command “Forward banners” and the army advanced with trumpets blaring. Once in arrow range of the French Henry gave the command to halt and the divisions closed up, the archers setting their pointed staves in the ground forming a fence.
leaning outwards towards the French. Now within the confines of the two woods Henry directed parties of archers and men-at-arms to move through the trees nearer to the French.

On the king’s signal the English archers opened a devastating fire on the compact mass of French knights and men-at-arms. After the initial shock the front line of the French army moved forward to the charge. In the narrow confines of the muddy rain soaked ploughland the charge quickly reduced to a stumbling walk, impeded by the floundering men and horses shot down by the archers, the arrow storm from the front compounded by the fire of the English concealed in the woods on the flanks.

The battle raged over the stake fence along the English line, the archers abandoning their bows and joining the knights and men-at-arms in hand to hand combat with the French cavalry, much of it now dismounted; the soldiers from the woods attacking on the flanks. Within two hours of the battle beginning it was clear that the English had won. While individual French soldiers fought hard, it was from desperation as the English knights, men-at-arms and archers overwhelmed the struggling mass, taking as prisoner those who might be worth a ransom and killing the rest.

The Duke D’Alençon bringing up his division to assist the first line was overcome and about to surrender to Henry himself when he was struck dead. The Constable of France, Charles D’Albret, was killed with numbers of other prominent French nobles, the Dukes d’Orléans and de Brabant among them.

The French third line hovered on the edge of the field uncertain whether to take the risk of joining the fight until Henry sent a herald to order them off the battlefield on pain of receiving no quarter. The third line melted away.

On the English side the Duke of York died, trampled into the mud, while Henry himself defended his wounded brother, the Duke of Gloucester, against a mob of Frenchmen.

The main battle was finished by midday, the remnants of the French army streaming away from the battlefield while the English rounded up their prisoners.

At this point a small French force led by local nobles, Isambart d’Agincourt and Robert de Bournonville, used their local knowledge to march around the forests and fall on the English baggage at Maisoncelles. Fearing a renewal of the battle with an attack on his rear Henry ordered the French prisoners put to the sword, enforcing this order with the threat of hanging, and reformed his army to face the threat. The French raiders were quickly repelled but not before many of the prisoners were killed, an incident that marred the English victory by depriving the soldiers of the considerable sums they could have raised through ransom.

The final act of the battle was to disperse the remnants of the third line and ransack the French camp; before resuming the march to Calais, previously so difficult, now triumphantly easy.

**Casualties:** It is believed that some 8,000 Frenchmen died in the battle, including many of the most senior nobles of France. English losses are thought to have been in the hundreds. The Duke of York died in the battle as did the Earl of Suffolk, whose father had died in the siege of Harfleur the month before.