THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 119: THE ROAD TO WAR

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 119: The Road to War. In this episode, we're going to look at the lead up to the extended period of warfare between England and France that has become known as the Hundred Years War. For military historians, this is one of the most important conflicts of the Middle Ages. But its also important for our purposes. As the war dragged on, a sense of nationalism arose within both countries. And as English nationalism grew, so did the hatred and resentment of all things French. That included the French language. So this long, extended war was an important factor in the decline of French and the return of English as the official language of England. In this episode, we'll trace the events that led to the great conflict, and we'll see how it shaped the English language.

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So let's turn to this episode, and the road to the Hundred Years War. This is one of those major historical events that many people have heard of, but perhaps don't know very much about. In this episode, I want to trace the important events that led to the war, and I'll also discuss the early part of the war. But more importantly, I also want to focus on the linguistic consequences of the war. This long, extended conflict was one of several key events in the 1300s that allowed English to return to prominence by the end of the century.

We know that English had experienced a severe decline after the Norman Conquest. It was largely restricted to the peasants and serfs. And English writing virtually disappeared. The nobility and Church officials conducted their business in French and Latin. So English was very much at the bottom of the social pecking order.

All of that started to change in early 1200s when King John lost control of most of the English territories in France, except for Aquitaine in the far south of France. That certainly weakened the influence of French in England. Over the course of the 1200s, English starting to make a gradual recovery, but French and Latin remained the prestige languages. Those were the languages taught in school. And they were still the primary languages of literature, law, and government. It was also the language of the royal court.

That was still the state of things in the early 1300s at the current point in our overall story. But by the end of the century, just a few decades later, English had overtaken Latin and French. Geoffrey Chaucer had composed the Canterbury Tales. John Wycliff had translated the Bible into English. Other great works of Middle English literature had also been composed like Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Piers Plowman. English had also been declared the official language of Parliament and the courts. So English reclaimed its status as the primary language of England over these next few decades.

So what happened in such a short period of time to cause such a major linguistic change?

Well, the answer is that there was a social and economic revolution. The feudal system imposed by the Normans broke down and started to deteriorate. That system had been maintained by a nobility that valued French and imposed French on English society. But when that system fell into decline, so did the status of French. The collapse of the feudal system allowed English to return to its rightful place at the top of the heap. So this was very much a 'bottom up' movement.

We've already seen that there was a rising merchant class and urban middle class. These people had already secured representation in Parliament. They were commoners, and they came from classes of English society where English had always been the dominant language. They were also starting to acquire more wealth and power. And that process was accelerated in the mid-1300s. Several factors contributed to their rise to prominence.

The middle of the century was a period of great turmoil, death and destruction. England was wracked by famine, plague, warfare and social unrest. And all of that disruption set the stage for a new social order. English society was turned on its head. The traditional English-speaking classes reclaimed power, and that allowed the English language to re-emerge as the dominant language of the country. Over the next few episodes, we'll explore all these events. But we have to start somewhere, and the best place to start is where we left off a few episodes back – with the Scots victory over the English at the Battle of Bannockburn.

That victory secured Scottish independence, but the year after that victory, both Scotland and England were wracked by famine. This famine affected almost all of Europe. It is sometimes called the Great Famine of 1315-1317, and it was one of the worst famines to ever affect Europe. Scholars have estimated that it killed about 10% of the population of Europe. Some scholars think it was closer to 15%. Some towns on the continent lost half their residents to starvation and sickness. The famine was caused by constant rainfall in the summer months that damaged the grain crops. And grain was absolutely essential to the medieval diet. Grain was turned into flour which was then baked as bread. And much of the population depended on bread for survival. So when the grain crops failed, starvation and famine ensued. But as bad as this famine was, it was only a preview of things to come over the next few decades.

In a period when food supplies were so limited, many towns and cities where absolutely dependent on trade with other regions. If the local crops failed, the people needed access to products from other communities or other nations. Fortunately, the European trading networks ensured a constant movement of goods from region to region. But some of those trading networks started to break down about the same time as the Great Famine.

In order to move goods from the Mediterranean to northern Europe, the goods had to move over land. Most of the trading networks passed through France, and that included the trade between the port cities of Italy and the major cloth-making center in Flanders on the North Sea. That trade depended on those overland routes.

But by this point, a dispute had broken out between the Venetians in northern Italy and the French government. That dispute made it difficult for Venetian traders to use those traditional land routes through France. So in the year 1317 – in the midst of that famine – the Venetians came up with another option. They decided to send a fleet of ships westward through the Mediterranean and into the Atlantic. From there it traveled up the western coast of Spain, Portugal and France, and then entered the English Channel. Once in the Channel, the fleet docked in England on its way to its ultimate destination in Flanders.

This fleet paved the way for a new sea route to northern Europe. The Venetian ships that made this trek became known as the Flanders Fleet, and it provided a direct link between Venice and England via the sea. Trade between the two regions no longer had to pass overland through France.

Now I mention this new sea route for a reason. It points to the growing importance of sea routes in European trade. With access to the sea, merchants and traders could access new markets that were previously difficult or impossible to reach. These seafaring fleets created new ways to move and deliver goods. But sometimes, they delivered other things – like rats, fleas, and plague. I'll discuss the horrible impact of the Black Death in the next episode, but it's worth mentioning here that the disease was spread through trading routes, and it reached Europe on fleets of ships not very different from the fleet that made its way to England in the year 1317.

The plague that become known as the Black Death had its origins on the Eurasian steppe. It gradually spread southward and eastward over those trading networks – eventually reaching Western Europe in the mid-1300s. But there was something else that spread eastward with those networks, and that was gunpowder.

About four centuries earlier, Chinese alchemists had figured out how to combine sulfur, charcoal and saltpeter to make a highly flammable powder. When mixed together in the right proportions, it could explode, creating a loud bang. And if the makers weren't careful, it could also cause an uncontrolled explosion leading to loss of life and property. Since this powder was discovered by alchemists looking for magical elixirs, the Chinese called the powder 'huo yao' – literally 'fire drug.'

Over the next few centuries, the Chinese perfected the mixture. They often packed gunpowder in sticks of bamboo and then detonated them. They mostly used this new powder for fireworks. People were fascinated by the bright, colorful explosions. By the 1100s, the Chinese were starting to experiment with the powder for miliary uses. Around this time, there are reports of Chinese armies using gunpowder in battle, but they didn't use it to fire projectiles at each other. They simply used the loud explosions to scare and confuse the enemy.

By the early 1200s, they had started to place the powder in iron casings to create an early type of bomb. They used those rudimentary bombs against the attacking Mongols, but the weapons were still very much a novelty. They often exploded by mistake – killing their own troops. So for now, the use of the bombs was very limited.

By the mid-1200s, gunpowder had reached Europe. The English scholar Roger Bacon wrote about the exploding powder used in the east as early as the year 1267. That was the first reference to gunpowder in Europe. It isn't clear how the knowledge arrived in the West. It could have been acquired through those trading networks, but no one really knows for sure.

All we know for certain is that Europeans were trying to figure out how to use this new powder for military purposes by the current point in our story in the early 1300s. The first recorded use of gunpowder in a European military action was in the year 1324. In that year, King John of Bohemia laid siege to the town of Metz in northeastern France. Accounts of that siege indicate that cannons were used, and that's the first known instance of a cannon or gun being used in a military action in Western Europe. King John of Bohemia later became known as John the Blind because he lost his eyesight around the age of 40. But that didn't keep him from fighting. Keep him in the back of your mind because we'll encounter him again a littler in this episode.

A couple of years after that siege at Metz, we get the first known illustration of a cannon in Europe. It was included in a manuscript composed by an English Chancery clerk named Walter of Milemete. The illustration shows a soldier firing a large cannon similar in the shape to a vase – or /vaze/ – depending on your pronunciation. The picture also shows an arrow-shaped projectile protruding from the mouth of the cannon.

By the way, the word ***cannon*** is derived from the same root as the word ***cane***, and that connection takes us back to the Chinese who packed gunpowder in bamboo. This type of weapon was also called a ***pot de fer*** which is a French term that literally means 'pot of iron' or 'iron pot.'

By the way, that English manuscript that contains the oldest picture of this weapon was commissioned by the Queen of England – Isabella. The manuscript was a guide to kingship, and Isabella requested that the text be prepared for young son Edward.

Edward was the young prince – only about 14 years old at the time. And its interesting that his mother wanted him to have a book on kingship because at the same time that the manuscript was being composed, she was plotting the overthrow of her husband Edward II. And she planned to have her young son crowned as the new king in his place.

Now this is one of those intriguing stories that makes medieval English history so fascinating. So let's backtrack for a minute to figure out what was going on at the time in the royal court. The last time I mentioned Isabella was a few episodes back when I talked about the coronation of her husband as king. You might remember that she was overshadowed by her husband's companion Piers Gaveston. At the coronation, the new king largely ignored Isabella and spent all of his time with Gaveston. Isabella was the daughter of the French king Philip IV. And when the French nobles who attended the coronation returned to France, they reported that the English king apparently loved his companion more than his new wife.

Needless to say, it was a rocky marriage. Isabella did give birth to several children, but it appears that it was strictly a political marriage. By all accounts, Isabella came to despise her husband over time.

A lot of the nobles continued to despise him as well. The Scottish victory over the English at Bannockburn only added to the resentment. Several years later, a group of barons from the north of England and from the Welsh Marches rose in rebellion, but Edward was able to defeat them. Most of the rebel leaders were either killed or imprisoned in the Tower of London. One of those Marcher Lord rebels was named Roger Mortimer. He was thrown in the Tower, but he soon escaped and made he way to France.

Meanwhile, Isabella's father – the King of France – died. The French crown then passed to her three brothers in succession because none of her brothers had any sons. So the crown passed from brother to brother to brother with the ultimate fate of the royal line left in doubt without any sons to inherit the throne. That wasn't the only thing in France that shrouded in uncertainty. The fate of Gascony in south of France was also left in doubt.

Gascony was the territory of southern France that was still held by Edward as a vassal of the French king. It was basically what was left of the old region of Aquitaine. And it was an on-going source of dispute between the French and English kings. The French kings were trying bring many of those semi-independent regions back under their direct control. In other words, they were trying to consolidate power and re-unify France under the direct leadership of the French kings. This was essentially the same thing that the English kings were trying to do in Britain. So in the same way that the English kings were trying to rule Scotland, the French kings were trying to regain control of Gascony and its lucrative wine trade. And that brought them into conflict with the English kings. To complicate the matter even further, France had become an ally of Scotland in its struggles with England. So the English kings found themselves in conflict with the French kings in both the far north of Britain and the far south of France.

Edward faced these same conflicts and the same challenges with France when he became the king of England, so he sent his wife Isabella to France to negotiate a settlement to the ongoing dispute. At this point, the French king was her brother Charles IV, so it was thought that she might be able to convince him to make a deal.

In France, Charles agreed to a truce with Edward, provided Edward would come to France and swear an oath of fealty in exchange for Gascony. But Edward refused to go. It was eventually decided that his son – the teenage Prince Edward – would go to France in his place and swear the oath. That was a bad decision because after the younger Edward went to France and joined his mother, they both decided to stay there. Isabella was now living in France under the protection of her brother – the French king – and she now had possession of the heir to the English throne. And to make matters worse for Edward back in England, he was about to lose his wife to one of his rivals. Isabella became the lover of Roger Mortimer, the Welsh Marcher Lord who had escaped from the Tower of London and fled to France a few years earlier. And together, Isabella and Roger Mortimer started to plot their revenge against Edward.

It was during this period that Isabella commissioned that book to be composed about kingship for her son, Prince Edward. And that may have been because she and Roger Mortimer were making plans to overthrow her husband and replace him with the young Prince. The plan was for Isabella and Roger to amass a small army of mercenaries and travel to England as a couple, along with the young prince. Once in England, they would gather support from the English nobles who hated her husband. And together, they would overthrow her husband and replace him with the young prince.

It may have sounded like a crazy plan, but it worked. In the year 1326, Isabella and Roger Mortimer landed in Suffolk in southeastern England. They were promptly joined by a number of English barons and nobles. In the fighting that ensued, the king and his supporters were driven into the Welsh Marches. A short time later, he was captured and imprisoned. And his teenage son – Prince Edward – was then declared as the new king, thereby becoming Edward III.

The elder Edward lingered in captivity for a while before he was finally murdered. According to legend, his death came at the hands of executioners wielding a red-hot poker. It was a brutal end for one of England's more ineffective kings.

His son Edward III was now the king, but given Edward's relative youth, the country was effectively ruled by his mother, Isabella and her lover Roger Mortimer.

Shortly after young Edward became king, that guide to kingship composed for his benefit was presented to him. Remember that the manuscript included that first crude picture of a European cannon. And perhaps that was appropriate because young Edward proved to be one of the most effective military leaders of the entire Middle Ages.

The book that Edward received was composed in Latin, and Edward could presumably read it because he had been educated to read Latin. He also spoke French and English like most of the highest nobles of England. It also appears that he could understand German and Flemish. And all of those languages came in handy over the course of his life – because he spent a LOT of time on the continent – fighting his enemies and forging alliances with various nobles throughout northern Europe.

But for now, he had to bide his time while his mother Isabella and her lover Roger Mortimer ran the country in his name. The next year, the scope of his realm was almost extended to France itself. In that year – 1328 – the French king Charles IV died. Remember this was Edward's uncle. He was the last of the three brothers to sit on the throne, and as I noted earlier, none of them had any sons. So there was no male heir. Without an heir, it meant that the family dynasty known as the Capetians came to an end. They had replaced the Carolingians in the 900s, and they had ruled France for three and a half centuries. But now the nobles had to choose a new king and a new ruling family.

Now remember that there was a surviving sister Isabella – mother of the young English king Edward. And if the line passed through her as the surviving sister, it meant that her son Edward was also entitled to the throne of France. And she made that claim on Edward's behalf to the

French nobles. But the French nobles didn't want an English king. So they looked elsewhere. They took the position that the succession could not pass through a female line, so they looked to a male cousin whose descent followed a male line from Isabella's grandfather. That cousin was Philip of Valois, and he was chosen as the new king of France in 1328, thereby establishing a new French dynasty – the House of Valois. Philip became the new king despite the fact that young Edward in England was more closely related to the prior king.

So all of this helps to set the stage for the long war to come because the Hundred Years War was in part a war for control of the French crown itself.

Meanwhile, back in England, the country was still being run by Isabella and her lover, Roger Mortimer. And for most practical purposes, it was really being run by Mortimer. The relationship between Isabella and Roger Mortimer was controversial to say to the least. It was in illegal act to overthrow a king, but at least Isabella was the queen. Roger Mortimer had no right to be a de facto king. Meanwhile, the couple used their power and position to enrich themselves and to increase the size of their estates.

They had also taken no action to secure Edward's rights in Gascony and to prevent French incursions there. Edward became frustrated at the decisions that were being made in his name by his mother and her lover. He harbored resentment at the way they had dethroned and murdered his father. By the year 1330, he had had enough of the regency that ruled in his name.

While Isabella and Mortimer lay sleeping at Nottingham Castle, Edward and a group of soldiers stormed in through an underground passage and dragged Mortimer from his bed. A short time later, Mortimer was hanged at a gallows that was used for common criminals.

Edward then declared that the regency was over. From now on, he would now rule in his own name. He was now the fully empowered King of England. His mother Isabella was exiled to a manor where she lived out the rest of her life – another thirty years.

In the same year that Edward seized power and ended the regency that governed in his name, an inventory was taken of all the munitions in Windsor Castle west of London. The inventory was composed in Latin, and it mentions one particular item in the following passage: "una magna balista de cornu quæ vocatur Domina Gunilda." In English, it reads: "A large ballista from Cornwall called Lady Gunhilda." A ballista was a weapon that resembled a large crossbow. It was used to shoot large stones at enemy troops. It was similar to a catapult. So it wasn't a cannon. It didn't use gunpowder, but it was still an effective weapon. And this large one in Windsor Castle was called Lady Gunhilda.

Now I've mentioned this weapon before. Way back in Episode 60, I mentioned it in the context of Old Norse because Gunhilda was a Norse name that become common in England. And that name was given to this weapon in the same way that the name 'Big Bertha' was assigned to a huge cannon mounted on a railway car in World War I. It has been common over the centuries to give weapons a female name. And you might remember from that earlier episode, that the name Gunhilda was soon extended to similar weapons – in particular those new cannons that fired

projectiles using gunpowder. And over time, the 'hilda' part was dropped at the end, thereby shortening the name from Gunhilda to ***gun***. And that is the origin of the word ***gun***. It can be traced back to this weapon maintained in Windsor Castle at the time Edward III took power in the year 1330.

Now a couple of notes about guns and cannons. I noted that this weapon in Windsor Castle that gave us the word ***gun*** was a type of crossbow. It relied on mechanical propulsion. It didn't use gunpowder. And that illustration of a canon in that book on kingship shows an arrow protruding from the cannon. So even though gunpowder was starting to become more common, it was still very much a novelty around the year 1330 when Edward seized power.

One of the problems with using gunpowder in cannons is that it was tough for metal-workers to construct a cannon that could withstand the blast. The metal tube would crack or explode when the gunpowder ignited. This problem was gradually solved by taking long metal slats and arranging them side by side in a circular manner to create a tube. The metal slats were welded together to create the long metal tube, and then that metal tube was surrounded by rings to hold everything in place during the blast. That was the same basic technique that was used to create buckets or barrels where long wooden slats were arranged in a similar manner and then held in place by metal rings. So this barrel-making technique was extended to cannons, and that helps to explain why that metal tube in a cannon or gun is called the ***barrel***.

As metal-workers perfected these techniques, iron cannons started to become more common. But at first, they were mainly used as defensive weapons. They were placed in castles and used to shoot stone balls or other projectiles at the men who were attacking the castle.

The cannon was sometimes placed in a window or opening in the side of the castle. That protected the men who loaded and fired the cannon. Of course, traditional archers also fired arrows from those holes since the small openings offered protection from incoming arrows and projectiles. This type of small opening in a castle wall was called a ***loop***, which was a word apparently borrowed from Dutch. It first appeared in English in the late 1300s, and it is unrelated to the word ***loop*** in the sense of a string or rope tied in a circular or ring-like manner. The use of the word ***loop*** as a small opening used for shooting projectiles ultimately gave us the wood ***loophole***. A ***loophole*** was a literal opening that provided protection, and it allowed an archer to avoid direct fire. And that gave us the more modern sense of the word ***loophole*** which is a legal opening that provides protection. It's a technicality that allows someone to avoid prosecution or other legal attack. So the word was extended from its original military use to a specific legal use over time.

So loopholes were initially used by archers, but with the advent of cannons, they started to be used by gunners firing stones or cannonballs at attackers. And the new English king – Edward III – would soon extend the use of those cannons to the battlefield.

Over the next couple of years, Edward found himself in repeated conflict with the French king Philip. The major source of animosity was the old disputed province of Gascony in southern France. Edward still held that region as a vassal of Philip, but Philip wanted to take it back and rule it directly. And that was the ultimate source of conflict that led to the Hundred Years War.

In the spring of 1337, the French king Philip sparked the war by invading Gascony with the intent of bringing it under his direct rule. He declared that Edward no longer had any rights to the region as a vassal. But Philip underestimated Edwards' response, and in doing so, he initiated a century of warfare between England and France that became known as the Hundred Years War.

Now I should note that this war wasn't called the "Hundred Years War" until the 1700s. And in fact, that name is misleading in many respects. First of all, it didn't last exactly a hundred years. It actually lasted 116 years. Also, it wasn't a continuos war. It was a conflict that ran hot and cold. There were long extended periods of several years when there was no fighting at all. But then the conflict would flare up again and the fighting would resume. Part of the reason why this is seen as a distinct war, separate from the many battles that preceded it, is because it was a war for the French crown itself. Previously, the English kings were vassals of the French king, and when they fought the king, they usually did so as vassals. But now Edward III claimed to be the actual king of France. He asserted that he was the rightful heir to the French crown through his mother. So this war was in large part a power struggle to determine the rightly claimant to the French throne.

In the same year that Philip invaded Gascony (1337), Edward called a meeting of Parliament to address the conflict. At the assembled Parliament, Edward's representative explained the nature of the French threat, and he asked for money to finance a war with France. Interestingly, the arguments were made in English – not the usual French. According to the chronicles of the period, the king's representative spoke in English "to the end that he might be better understood by all."

Edward did receive some funding for a war, but his invasion plans were so massive, that it wasn't enough. It actually took him a couple of years to secure the money he needed though taxes, loans and other financing. So the war had begun, but the actual fighting was put on hold for a while.

Even though that 1337 Parliament had been addressed in English, Edward realized something very interesting about the relative importance of English and French when it came to war. The nobles and commoners who met at Parliament spoke English as their native language, and the men who filled the ranks of the English army spoke English, but the language of war was French. That had been the case since the Norman Conquest in large part because the Norman Conquest was a conquest. The Anglo-Saxons had been defeated in war, and the French language had been imposed upon them by the conquerors. In fact, as we saw in an earlier episode, the word ***war*** was one of the first words to be borrowed from French after the Conquest.

In the same way that French came to dominate English law and government, it also dominated the English military. From the time of the conquest, most of the English military leaders came from the Norman ruling class, so they had traditionally spoken French as their native language. Knighthood also became an established institution in England, and many aspects of knighthood were borrowed from France. Knights wore impenetrable armor. They fought on horseback. And they were bound by notions of chivalry. That was the new type of warfare that the Normans had brought to England, and it dominated much of the Middle Ages.

The English had also fought many battles in France over the prior two and half centuries as they tried to hold on the vestiges of the old Angevin Empire, which included a large portion of France. That meant that they formed alliances with other French nobles, and they routinely negotiated with their French opponents. So French was the language of war and diplomacy – even in England.

Being well aware of this, Edward told his assembled Parliament that they should encourage their children to use French. According to a French chronicler of the period named Jean Froissart, Edward told the assembled nobles and commoners that "all lords, barons, knights, and respectable men of good towns should take care and diligence to teach their children the French language in order that they might be more able and familiar with it as they go off to war."
[Source: The Auchinleck Manuscript, New Perspectives, Susanna Fein, ed., p. 64.]

This shows how much French had declined as a spoken language in England. Even the barons and nobles had to be encouraged to teach their children French. But more importantly, it shows that French was still the language of war and diplomacy in England. No alliance could be forged, and no lasting truce could be negotiated, without fully understanding French. Notice the subtle shift in the status of French. Knowledge of the language was now being encouraged, not because it was the cultivated language of the English nobility, but because it was the language of the enemy across the Channel. It was encouraged to ensure that English soldiers and diplomats fully understood the subtle intentions of their rivals. So knowledge of French was now a weapon a war.

All of this helps to explain why so many words associated with warfare were borrowed from French during this period. Through the late 1300s, English borrowed words like ***army***, ***navy***, ***soldier***, ***scout***, ***spy***, ***battle***, ***armor***, ***enemy***, ***ambush***, ***retreat***, ***defeat***, ***besiege***, and ***garrison***. English also borrowed words that reflect the nature of warfare during that period, and which mostly survive today as relics of that earlier period. That includes words like ***archer***, ***lance***, ***dart***, ***banner***, ***mail*** and ***moat***.

English also borrowed terms for certain positions within the military. It borrowed ***marshal***, ***constable***, ***sergeant***, ***captain***, and ***lieutenant*** (or /left-tenant/).

By the way, you may be wondering why Americans tend to say /loo-tenant/ and Brits tend to say /left-tenant/. Well the first part of that word is the French word ***lieu*** meaning 'place.' We also have that word in the phrase 'in lieu of' meaning 'in place of.' The second part is ***tenant*** meaning 'one who holds something.' Today we tend to think of it as a person who holds a piece of land,

but it originally had a broader meaning. So a ***lieutenant*** was literally a 'place holder' – in other words, it wasn't the primary leader. It was a substitute or a deputy or a viceregent. Over time, it became a formal title. Now the French sometimes pronounced ***lieu*** as /loof/ with a slight 'f' sound at the end. And it appears that some English speakers picked up on that pronunciation, and they started to pronounce it as /loof-tenant/. And over time, it became /left-tenant/. Both pronunciations were once common in English, and this is one of those words where British English settled on one pronunciation and American English settled on the other. Sort of like ***herb*** (/herb/) and ***herb*** (/erb/).

Lieutenant entered English around the same time as words like ***captain*** and ***sergeant***, but the larger point is that French influenced the language of warfare long after it died out as the primary language of the English nobility.

As I noted earlier, the Hundred Years War officially began in 1337, but it took several years for any major battles to occur. Edward spent that time forging alliances with several important German provinces and accumulating the funds for a major invasion of northern France.

By the later part of 1339, Edward and his allies were finally ready to begin their campaign. Edward traveled to the city of Ghent in Flanders to make preparations for the invasion of France. While in Ghent, Edward formally proclaimed himself to be the King of France. According to Edward, the planned invasion was designed to arrest the throne from a usurper.

But after he launched his invasion, Edward couldn't manage to get the French forces to fight – not even a skirmish. It was all part of the French king's strategy. By avoiding a direct confrontation, he forced Edward to pay his mercenary troops to march around northern France accomplishing nothing. As the weeks passed, Edward started to run out of money. So he decided to head back to England to ask for more funding for the war.

Now I said that Edward couldn't even manage a skirmish during this initial campaign. And the word ***skirmish*** was another French loanword that came into English around this time. It appeared for the first time in an English document about 30 years later in the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer. The word ***skirmish*** is actually based on a word that meant a sword fight or sword fighter. And almost exactly 600 years after Chaucer introduced the word in his writings, another English poet introduced a variation of the same root word to modern popular culture. That later poet was Freddie Mercury of the rock group Queen. And here is the version that he introduced:

[BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY SOUND CLIP]

Did you catch it? It's the word ***scaramouche***. That's obviously a short passage from the song Bohemian Rhapsody, and the popularity of that song over the past 40 years or so has caused that word ***scaramouche*** to pass into popular culture, even if most people don't know what it means and only associate it with that song. Some people think it was a made-up word, but it's not.

The word is actually the name of a common character in a popular form of Italian theater called Commedia dell'arte. It was popular throughout Europe from the 1500s through the 1700s. And it used a lot of stock characters that represented certain stereotypes in Italian culture. For example, a character that represented a stereotypical Venetian merchant was called Pantalone. The character almost always wore a costume with a pair of red leggings. Through that association, the name Pantalone passes into English as ***pantaloon*** meaning long trousers or similar attire. And within American English, the word was shortened from ***pantaloon*** to ***pants***. So the word ***pants*** can be traced back to one of these Italian characters.

Well, another common stock character in that style of Italian theater was called ***Scaramouche***. The character usually dressed like an Italian nobleman, but the name was derived from the Italian word ***scaramuccia*** which literally meant 'little skirmisher' or 'little sword fighter.' The character was foolish braggart, and the name of the character actually become somewhat common in early Modern English when that type of Italian theater was so popular. The word ***scaramouche*** came to mean a rascal or scamp. But its association with musical theater is presumably why Freddie Mercury incorporated it into Bohemian Rhapsody.

Now I began this digression by noting that ***Scaramouch*** and ***skirmish*** are both derived from a common word that meant a 'sword fight' or 'sword fighter.' The common root word was the Italian word ***scaramuccia*** which today simply means 'skirmish.' And I know what a lot of you are probably thinking, especially if you follow American politics. For a very brief period in 2017, the White House communications director was Anthony Scaramucci. And a lot of people were intrigued by that surname. Well, that surname is derived from the same root word. So it's an Italian occupational surname – literally a 'skirmisher' or 'sword fighter.'

That old Italian root word passed into French as ***scaramouch*** in the Middle Ages, and it then passed into English as ***skirmish*** in the 1300s. Again, it is first found in writings of Geoffrey Chaucer.

And speaking of Geoffrey Chaucer, he was born in the year 1343 around the time that Edward was organizing the initial campaigns of the Hundred Years War. So that's how close we are to the period in which Middle English literature reached its peak. Many of the people who contributed to that movement were born during this period in the mid-1300s. And as we'll see in a future episode, Chaucer was actually a soldier in the Hundred Years War, and he was later an English diplomat during the war. So he lived his entire life in the midst of the Hundred Years War.

One of Chaucer's most important supporters and patrons was actually a son of Edward III named John of Gaunt. In fact, John of Gaunt and Geoffrey Chaucer were married to sisters at one point, so they were actually brothers-in-law. Well, John of Gaunt was called 'John of Gaunt,' but ***Gaunt*** was actually an Anglicized version of the word ***Ghent***, as in the city in Flanders where Edward had formally proclaimed himself as the King of France. The reason why John of Gaunt was named after the city of Ghent is because that's where he was born shortly after his father made that proclamation and then launched his first ineffective campaign into northern France.

As I noted earlier, the French king avoided any direct confrontations, and Edward started to run out of money. So he headed back to England to ask for additional funding. He actually left his pregnant wife in Ghent in Flanders. And she gave birth to John while Edward was away.

John of Gaunt will become an important figure in our story, not only for his later support of Geoffrey Chaucer, but also because he was the founder of the House of Lancaster – one of the two families that fought for the English crown in the so-called 'Wars of the Roses.' So we'll see more from John as an adult in a few years.

Now so far, the Hundred Years War has gotten off to a slow start. Three years in, and there still had been no major battles between the English and French forces. Edward had returned to England and raised some more money, but he faced a more immediate threat. The French were amassing a fleet on the northern coast of France with plans to launch an invasion of southern England. So Edward assembled some ships and made a surprise attack on the French fleet while it was still in port. His forces killed many of the sailors and destroyed many of the ships, which ensured that there would be no invasion of England for the foreseeable future.

So interestingly, the first significant battle of the Hundred Years War was a naval battle. And ***navy*** is one of those French and Latin words that was borrowed into English in the mid-1300s. While the victory thwarted any French invasion of England, it did very little to help Edward win the war itself. In order to do that, he had to invade France with a land force – an ***army*** (another new loanword from French). The problem is that he had already tried that, but the French had avoided a direct battle. So he didn't make any real progress, and he burned through a lot of money, so he had to come up with a new plan.

Edward soon decided to forego grand alliances with European kings and expensive invasions with massive armies. He decided instead to use a smaller army, and he adopted a scorched-earth policy. This was when the war shifted from a traditional feudal conflict to something resembling a terror campaign.

Edward planned another invasion, but this time he intended to use a smaller contingent of soldiers, and they would burn and loot and plunder every town and village they encountered. They would destroy everything in their path. This would bring the war to the actual people of France. It was no longer going to be a conflict between nobles and paid mercenaries. Instead, it was going to a direct attack on the peasants and townspeople of northern France. The plan was to destroy the morale and will of the people – to scare them and intimidate them and make them so sick of the destruction that they would surrender.

There's actually a word for this – the word ***havoc***. And that word actually comes from a military command that was used during this period. It's a command that was borrowed from French. It was 'Havoc!' and it was the order given to an assembled army that they should loot and plunder a village or town. This became Edward's standard policy going forward, and his forces 'wreaked havoc' on the French countryside in the year 1346.

In that year, Edward crossed over to Normandy with an army of about 15,000 men half of which were archers. He was accompanied by his eldest son who was also named Edward. He was the heir to the English throne, and he is better known to history as the 'Black Prince' because he wore black armor into battle. He will also become an important figure as the war proceeds.

After arriving in Normandy, Edward kept to his strategy of conducting raids, sacking towns, burning crops, and robbing and killing anyone in the way. His army then moved eastward across the northern part of Normandy parallel to the coast. The French king Philip got word of the raids, and he soon left Paris with his own army in pursuit of Edward's forces. The two kings finally met outside the town of Crecy on the northeastern coast of France. The English forces arrived first and took the high ground on a slope. Edward's right flank was commanded by his son the Black Prince.

When Philip's French army arrived, it was much larger than Edward's. There were about there times as many French soldiers. That was one of the dangers of relying on a smaller army. It was cheaper and more mobile, but it was easily outnumbered on foreign soil.

Despite the French numerical advantage, Edward had several things going for him. First, he took the high ground on a slope, thereby forcing the French cavalry to charge up the slope at his forces. He also had two weapons in his arsenal that the French weren't prepared for.

The first was a cannon – actually several cannons. The battle of Crecy was one of the first major battles in European history to use cannons and gunpowder as offensive weapons. The other weapon in Edward's arsenal was the longbow. And this was the real advantage. In fact, other than size, the major difference between the English army and the French army was the type of archers that each one possessed.

The French army relied on traditional crossbows. The crossbow had a handle or stock that resembled that of a rifle, and it had a bow across the top that was parallel to the ground when fired. The weapon fired projectiles called bolts, and it was a very effective weapon. At close enough range, it could pierce the armor of a knight, but generally speaking, crossbows were no match for the mounted cavalry and armored knights. Crossbows were much more effective against an opposing infantry. At the battle of Crecy, most of the crossbowmen in the French army were actually mercenaries from Genoa.

But Edward's men had a new weapon – the longbow. This was a weapon that probably has its origins in Wales, but it had been adopted by Edward's grandfather Edward I, also known as Longshanks. Longshanks had discovered the value of the weapon in his Welsh campaigns, and he had incorporated it into the English army.

As its name suggests, the longbow was literally a 'long bow.' It was about 5 or 6 feet long, so it was as tall as the average archer. That meant that the arrow could be pulled back much further – and when released, the arrow would travel with tremendous force. It could easily pierce a knight's armor. But its major advantage over the crossbow is that it could also fire arrows in rapid succession – as many as 10 in a minute. Crossbows had to be re-loaded each time they were

fired, and that took a while. The crossbow had a mechanism that had to be cranked to get the bow into the firing position. So it was a much slower weapon that couldn't match the volleys of the longbow.

The only real problem with the English longbow is that it was so big that an average archer couldn't use it. The bow was big and heavy. It required a lot of strength to use it. It was best to identify potential longbowmen as children, and then train them as they grew up. That allowed them to develop the arm and shoulder muscles required to use the heavy bow. So Edward trained boys from youth in archery on the village green of towns and cities. He went so far as to ban all other sports from the village green. That meant that early versions of tennis and football (or soccer) were outlawed. This allowed potential longbowmen to be identified early on and to be thoroughly trained until adulthood.

Just like today, archers trained by shooting arrows at targets. Targets used concentric circles and the goal was to place the arrow as close to the middle as possible. Targets usually had a very small circle in the middle. Today, we call that small circle a ***bulls-eye***, but that's a very modern term. The term wasn't used to mean the center of a target until the 1800s. Before that, some people used the French term for the center of the target which was 'de pointe en blanc.' It literally meant the 'white point' or 'white mark' because the bulls-eye was usually white on archery targets. That French term was borrowed into English and Anglicized as ***point blank***. So the ***point blank*** was the bulls-eye. The term ***point blank*** was first recorded in English is the 1500s.

The only way most archers could hit the ***point blank*** – or bulls-eye – was to stand very close to the target. So within English, the term ***point blank*** came to refer to a very close archery shot or a very close shot from a firearm. That's what we mean when we say that a shot was fired from 'point blank range.' We mean very close. That also produced the extended sense of the term as something direct or blunt. So if your boss asks you point blank, "Why did you miss work on Monday?" he or she is being very direct and to the point just like an arrow shot at point blank range.

Now with a fair amount of training, Edward's archers found it easy to hit the bulls-eye even if they weren't at point blank range because the longbow was a massive bow that could deliver large arrows at high speed. Given that speed, the arrows could maintain a straight trajectory for a long distance which made it easier to hit the bulls-eye at a long distance.

But again, the major advantage of the longbow is that it could be fired repeatedly. The longbowmen could deliver one barrage of arrows after another with little, if any, break in between. So Edward's 'army' was 'armed' with 'armaments' and 'artillery' including longbows that could pierce the 'armor' of mounted knights. The French knights were probably 'alarmed' when they realized the devastating power of that weapon. You might have noticed a common theme there – ***army***, ***armed***, ***armaments***, ***artillery***, ***armor*** and ***alarm*** – they're all cognate.

They're all derived from a common Indo-European root word which was something like ***ar**. It meant 'to fit things together.' We also have that root in the Greek word ***harmony***. Within early Latin, the word evolved into ***arma*** which specifically referred to tools or weapons. Since it could refer to tools, it also became associated with craftsmen who worked with tools. They often had to fit things together. So within Latin, the word became associated with craftsmen. This process also gave us the words ***art*** and ***artist***.

As I noted, the word was also applied to weapons which were 'tools of war.' That gave us the word ***arms*** in the sense of weapons. It also gave us the verb '***to arm***' meaning to equip with weapons. Both versions of the word ***arm*** entered English in the early 1200s. So they were very early loanwords from French after the Conquest.

By the way, the military sense of the word ***arm*** is also distantly related to the body part. We might use our arms to wield certain arms like a bow and arrow. I noted earlier that the longbow required a tremendous amount of arm strength and shoulder strength. Well ***arms*** in the sense of weapons comes from Latin and French, but ***arms*** in the sense of body parts is an Old English word. They both come from same Indo-European root, but within the Germanic languages, the sense of fitting things together came to apply to a joint where two things fit together. And that produced the English word ***arm*** meaning the body part that extends from the shoulder joint. In fact, Latin and Greek also used the word in a similar sense. Latin had the word ***armus*** which meant shoulder. And Greek had the word ***arthon*** which meant a joint. It gave us the word ***arthritis*** which means an inflammation of the joints. So the shoulder joint provides the literal connection between ***arms*** as body parts and ***arms*** as weapons.

By the year 1300, English had also borrowed the word ***armor*** from French which was another variation of the same root word. ***Armor*** is related to the word ***arms*** in the sense of military weapons or equipment. So armor was considered another tool of war. Knights were armed with weapons and armor. And that made then almost invincible against swords and traditional bows and arrows.

Around the time a***rmor*** was borrowed, English also borrowed the word ***armory***. An ***armory*** was a place where arms where kept.

By the end of the 1300s, English had also borrowed the word ***army*** from French. An ***army*** was a collection of armed men or soldiers, so the word ***army*** came in around the same time as ***navy***. Both words appear for the first time in the second half of the 1300s.

Shortly after the word ***army*** appeared in English, English picked up the word ***alarm*** which believe it or not was originally a military term. It was a call to arms. It was literally 'a le arme' which means 'to the arms.' When a scout identified that enemy troops were approaching, the call was 'All arme! All arme!' Literally 'To the arms! To the arms!' And 'All arme!' became ***alarm*** in English.

Another military term with that same root is the word ***artillery*** which first appeared in an English document around the year 1400. Today, we tend to think of artillery as large-caliber firearms like cannons, mounted guns and mortars, but the word was borrowed at a time when most projectiles were fired from bows or similar mechanical devices. So originally, the word ***artillery*** referred to bows, slings and catapults.

That meant that most artillery was originally used by ***archers***. And ***archer*** was another new word in the language at the current point in our story. It comes from an altogether different root word, but it was borrowed from French in the late 1200s. By the way, ***bow*** and ***arrow*** are Old English words. So a person who used a bow and arrow was either a ***bowman*** using a native English construction or an ***archer*** using that French loanword.

And as I noted earlier, Edward III of England stocked his army with a large number of bowmen or archers most of whom used the longbow. And that was the weapon that made the difference in that famous battle at Crecy in northern France in the year 1346. Edward's archers were stationed along with the rest of the English forces at the top of the slope where they had taken position before the French troops arrived. When the battle commenced, the French king tried to weaken the English lines by having his crossbowmen fire bolts at the English forces. But they were no match for the English longbows. Soon the French crossbowman started to fall back, and they were replaced by the French cavalry which charged up the slope. For most of the Middle Ages, the mounted cavalry had been invincible. The well-protected knights usually had their way with opposing infantrymen. But all of that changed at Crecy. The English longbows pierced the knights' chain-mail and armor, and it repelled the cavalry time and again. Around a dozen times, the French knights tried to make it up the slope, and every time they were turned back.

In the midst of this melee, Edward directed that his cannons be fired. These early cannons were small bronze or iron tubes strapped to wooden frames. The frame was probably similar to a wheelbarrow. The guns weren't strong enough to do any actual damage, but the sound they made frightened and confused the French troops. Remember that most of those troops had never heard a cannon fired before. And if you've ever stood near a cannon when its fired, it can be a startling experience even if you know it's coming. But most of the French troops didn't expect it in the middle of a battle.

The noise sounded like thunder. It frightened the soldiers and their horses. And it added to the mass of confusion on the French side. You might say that the French troops was ***stunned***, and ***astounded***, and ***astonished*** by the thundering sounds of the cannons. Well, not only are ***stun***, ***astound***, and ***astonish*** three variations of the same Latin root word ****extonare***, they were also all borrowed from French in the early 1300s around the current point in our story. And that original Latin root word ****extonare*** was a combination of the Latin prefix ***-ex*** meant 'out' and the root word ***tonare*** meaning 'thunder.' In fact, ***tonare*** has the same Indo-European root as the Old English word ***thunder***. So ****extonare*** literally meant 'to leave someone thunderstruck.' And that also means that words like ***stun***, ***astound***, and ***astonish*** are all cognate with the word ***thunder***. And that's why Edward's thundering cannons literally left the French troops ***stunned***, and ***astounded***, and ***astonished***. It was the sound of the cannon that was the real weapon, not the projectiles that were fired from it.

By the way, Dutch-speaking soldiers of the Netherlands had the same impression when they first encountered the sound of the cannon. They called it a ***donderbus***. ***Donder*** is the Dutch word for thunder, and again it's derived from the same Germanic root as ***thunder***. It's just the Dutch version. And a ***donderbus*** was literally a 'thunder box' or 'thunder tube.' As I've noted before, English borrowed a LOT of Dutch words in the 1600s when England and the Netherlands were maritime rivals. And ***donderbus*** was one of those Dutch words borrowed into English. But English speakers confused ***donder*** with ***blunde***r, and the word became ***blunderbuss*** within English. But again, the word ***blunderbuss*** was derived from the Dutch word for thunder, and it shows how medieval soldiers were often stunned by the sound of the weapon. And that was certainly the case at Crecy.

When all was said and done, the heavily outnumbered English troops were victorious. Estimates suggest that the English lost about 500 men in the battle, but the French lost over 10,000 men – twenty times as many. But the French losses were ultimately worse than that. Much of the French nobility lay dead on the battlefield. When the English counted the dead after the battle, about 1500 lords, knights and lesser nobles were found among the dead. *[Source: The Historical Atlas of Knights and Castles, Barnes, 109-110]*

That included King John of Bohemia who was ally of the French. I mentioned him earlier in the episode, and I noted that he may have been the first European king to use a cannon in a military action, but he died on the battlefield in Crecy. He had gone blind by this point, so he is often known as John the Blind. Despite his blindness, he wanted to lead a charge with his men, so he and his men tied their bridles together so he could join the attack. But he was cut down just like the others.

One of the English soldiers discovered his body and took his crest back to Edward's son the Black Prince. The crest consisted of three tall white ostrich feathers. The king's motto had been Ich Dien – literally "I serve." The young English prince was so impressed by the dead king's bravery that he adopted both the crest of feathers and the motto, and both have been incorporated into the official badge of the Prince of Wales ever since.

And according to many sources, this is also the origin of the phrase "a feather in your cap" to mean a significant accomplishment. John the Blind's crest consisted of three ostrich feathers, and the Black Prince adopted those feathers for his own official badge. Supposedly, it thereafter became a common practice to honor a knight who had fought bravely in battle by giving him a feather to wear in his helmet. And that's why today a particular honor or distinction might be described as 'a feather in your cap.' Despite the popularity of this etymology, it's a little bit sketchy. Displaying a feather to mark an accomplishment is actually widespread among many cultures. It was even a common practice among some Native American tribes who added a feather to the head-dress of a warrior who performed a brave act. And the phrase "a feather in one's cap" isn't found in English until around the year 1600, so it's hard to link it directly to the Battle of Crecy. But again, many sources do make that connection.

Now the Battle of Crecy is significant because it was the first major battle of the Hundred Year's War, and it was a somewhat surprising victory for the English. No one really thought that the English could muster a force that could defeat the French on their own soil. Memories of the English defeat at the hands of the Scots a few years earlier were still widespread in France and the rest of Europe. So the English victory at Crecy was a shock to many observers at the time. But the English masterly of the longbow gave them an advantage at Crecy, and it continued to give them an advantage for several more years. The French were slow to adopt the weapon. And remember that English longbowmen were trained from youth. So even when the French realized the value of the weapon, it took them several years to train enough soldiers to make it viable option. That allowed the English to dominate the early years of the war.

Thanks to the longbow, the Battle of Crecy marked a major turning point in medieval warfare. The mounted knights and the French cavalry had been soundly defeated by archers. This was the beginning of a shift in power. The days of the armored knight were numbered. And as firearms became more common, the knights' demise was hastened even further. The archers and gunners who replaced them were mostly commoners who spoke English. And whereas the knightly class had placed a high value on French culture and the French language, the English archers and infantry didn't. This was another part of that larger societal shift that allowed the English-speaking classes to become more powerful and influential in England.

By the late 1300s, cannons had been perfected to the point that their projectiles were more dangerous than their sound. The cannonballs fired from a cannon could take down stone walls. And that brought an end to another common symbol of the Middle Ages – the castle. When William the Conqueror defeated the Anglo-Saxons, he secured his hold on England by building castles around the country. For nearly three centuries, they had been a symbol of Norman and Plantagenet miliary power and superiority, but the brand new cannons fired by English commoners brought down those castle walls with relative ease.

Again this was a gradual process that took place over the course of a century or more, but we can find its origins here in the mid-1300s, and more specifically we can find it on the battlefield of Crecy in the year 1346.

The English victory at Crecy was followed by a siege on the port city of Calais. The city eventually fell to the English forces after a protracted siege. That gave the English a foothold in northern France for the rest of the war. In fact, it remained under English control for two centuries.

These early English victories certainly stunned the French, and it probably gave Edward III reason to believe that he would soon wear the French crown as well as the English crown. But that didn't happen. The French eventually re-grouped and fought back. And as the war progressed – year after year and decade after decade – a sense of nationalism took hold on each side of the Channel. This sense of English pride was combined with a hostility toward all things French. The French language became the language of the enemy. And that hostility was another factor in the return of English as the dominant language of England.

As I noted earlier, the Hundred Years War ran hot and cold. There were extended periods when there were no battles at all. And one of those lulls took place after Crecy. The fighting stopped because the French and English had a bigger threat to deal with. That threat was the Black Death. It arrived in northern Europe at almost the exact same time that the English forces captured the port city of Calais.

So next time, we'll turn our attention to the horrible plague known as the Black Death. We'll see how it wiped out a large portion of Europe. And we'll see how it turned English society on its head as the surviving peasants suddenly found their labor to be in very high demand. In the same way that new weapons brought an end to the military aspects of feudalism, the Black Death brought an end to the economic aspects of that system.

So next time, we'll look at those developments, and we'll explore how it impacted the English language. Until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.