

2008 Society of Ancients Battle Day: Poitiers, 1356 AD

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Sycamore Hall, Drayton Road, Bletchley, Milton Keynes, MK2 3RR

The Battle Pack

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This year we wanted to try a medieval battle, and after much thought settled on Poitiers. Why? Two main reasons I think: there are a fair amount of source material and modern scholarship from which to derive a view (or indeed several views) of the battle; but most importantly, it was a very close run thing – there should be chances for both sides to win. If your game is set up for English archers to sit behind prepared positions and “machine-gun” down the attacking French, then you are refighting the wrong battle. This was a battle of hard strokes fought largely hand to hand.

When examining the scholarship, one often does not look much beyond Lt-Col Alfred H. Burne’s classic book “The Crecy War”. However, his views that Edward was looking for a decisive battle and that the Anglo-Gascon army deployed in a carefully prepared defensive position do not convince me. Burne’s interpretation studiously ignores several of the sources which describe Edward attempting to slip away in the night before the battle and the troops already on the move having to turn round and return to fight the battle. These two different views are often called the “English” and French” schools of thought. Perhaps controversially I side with the “French” school in that I think Edward would have preferred not to fight, and I find the Osprey Campaign series book “Poitier 1356, the capture of a king” by David Nicolle to give a more balanced view of the possible events.

Sources for the battle

Froissart and the Herald of Chandos are both available online. Quotes from Geoffrey le Baker and the French Anonimalle Chronicle can be found in the Osprey book mentioned above.

Prelude to the Battle

Edward had left Gascony on a large-scale raid, or *chevauchée*, probably aiming to link up with a similar raid from Normandy led by the Duke of Lancaster. However, Lancaster was forced to turn back before the two armies could join, and Edward eventually found himself attempting to march away from the large army that King John II of France had now raised to face the raiders. It was now a race between the Anglo-Gascons and the French, the former looking to escape back to Gascony and the latter trying to bring them to battle.

Superior manoeuvring by King John, probably due to local knowledge, enabled the French to catch up with Edward near Poitiers on 17 September. Edward and his commanders drew up their army in a defensive position in front of a wood, with his flanks as well protected as he could manage. There then followed some attempted peace negotiations brokered by a local churchman, but these broke down on the evening of 18 September and seem to have served little but to allow the French army to properly concentrate in front of the Anglo-Gascon positions.

During the night the Anglo-Gascon baggage train and the vanguard, positioned on the left flank of the line, led by the Earl of Warwick appears to have begun withdrawing across a causeway over the marsh and over the River Miosson (which was really a stream). However, it seems the congestion of wagons etc meant very little progress was made, and as daylight

dawned and the advancing French were spotted Warwick's men had to begin to return to the battle line. How far they had got by the time of the first French attack is uncertain.

The Armies

Throughout I have assumed that the term "Men-at-Arms" is used to indicate fully armoured men who are capable of fighting mounted or dismounted - the classic medieval "knight".

English

The English army deployed dismounted in 3 battles under The Black Prince, Salisbury and Warwick, except for a small mounted reserve of 60 men-at-arms and 100 mounted crossbowmen commanded by the Captal de Buch. Each battle may have consisted of a central body of dismounted men-at-arms flanked by archers. An alternative view, which we prefer, is that most of the archers were deployed on the flanks of the army.

Type	Number	Comments
Men at Arms	2000	Includes the small mounted reserve. Probably evenly distributed across the three battles.
Archers	4000	We prefer the "split evenly on two flanks" interpretation. The accounts make it clear that the archers suffered from a shortage of ammunition as the battle progressed. If your rules do not limit ammunition supplies, it might be necessary to introduce a scenario rule, e.g. limiting the number of shots allowed to each archer unit, or maybe imposing a minus modifier to any English shooting after each French assault.
"Sergeants"/ "Others"	1500	Gascon foot? Spearmen? Camp followers?

French

The French army deployed with an advanced guard of mounted knights, possibly supported by crossbowmen and other foot, followed by 3 foot battles commanded by Normandy, Orleans and the King. The foot in the Advanced Guard can be considered optional as they are not included in all accounts, while the mounted component could be increased to as many as 1000.

Each infantry battle would probably consisted of a mixture of troops with different levels of equipment, ranging from fully armoured knights to lightly armed spearmen with the best equipped troops forming the front ranks. Note the dismounted men-at-arms had left their horses in their camp, so remounting is not an option.

Division	Number	Type
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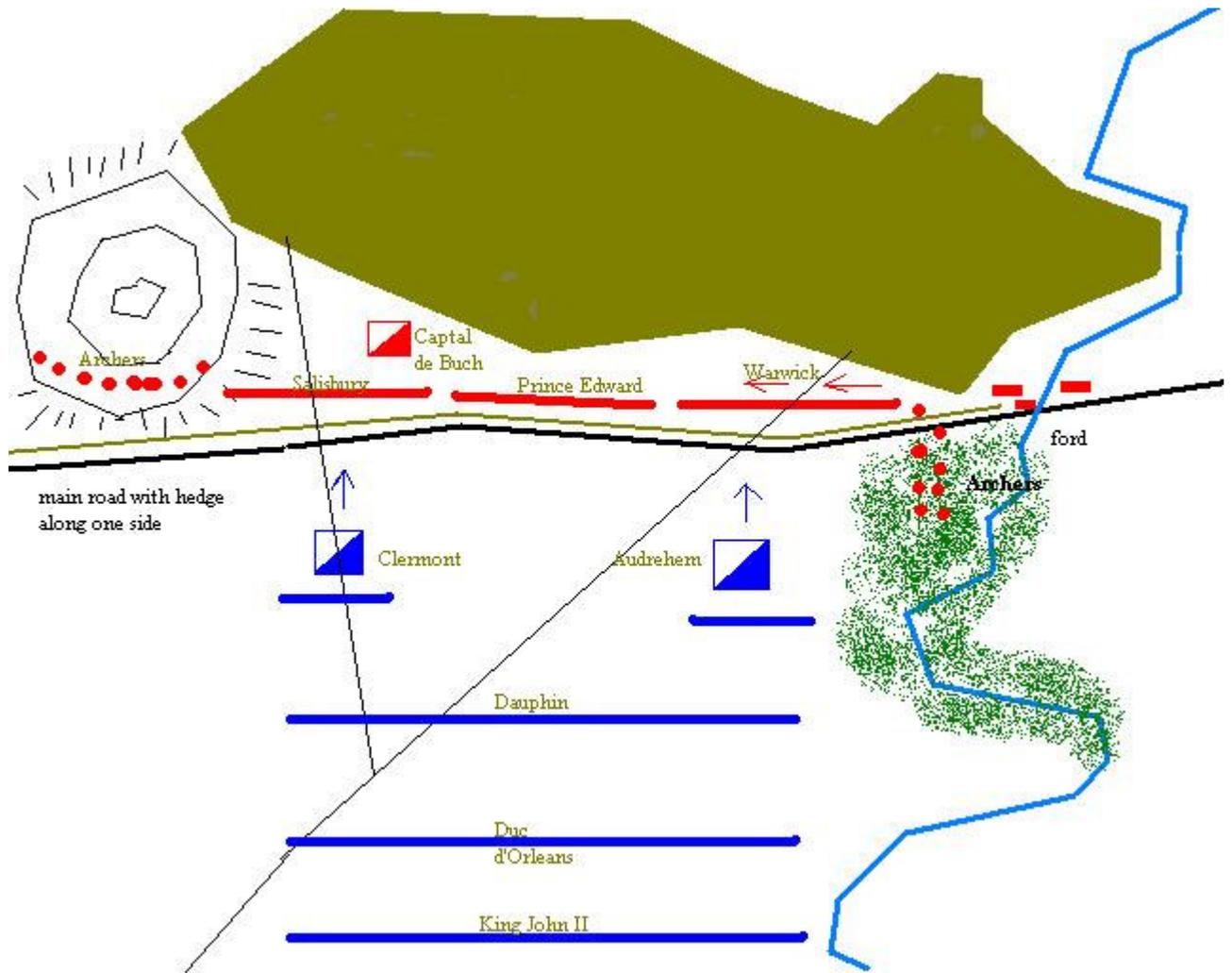
Advanced Guard	400-1000	Mounted knights
	2000	Crossbowmen
	3000	“Men”- Men-at-Arms?
	2000	“With spears and sharp darts”. Spearmen? Skirmishers?
Normandy	1000	Men-at-Arms
	3000	Other foot
Orleans	1000	Men-at-Arms.
	2000	Other foot.
King John	3000	Men-at-Arms.
	3000	Other foot, including some crossbowmen.

The Terrain

There is debate about the exact location of this battle, but there seems to be enough agreement about the terrain that affected the battle that we can probably make enough assumptions to build reasonably representative terrain.

- The front of the English army was covered by a hedge, which had 2 gaps in it where roads ran through it. This hedge was an obstacle to the French cavalry but does not seem to have hindered the following waves of foot.
- There was marsh/boggy ground in front of the English left flank.
- There was slightly higher ground on the English right flank, possibly reinforced by a barricades or a wagon laager made from baggage wagons. The ground slopes down towards the marshy area and river. The French did not attempt to outflank the English right flank on the hill, so probably the slopes and/or the improvised defences should be graded as difficult terrain in sufficient a way to discourage (but not necessarily prevent!) a massed flank attack.
- There were woods to the English rear, and the river to its left. Organisers should decide whether to include these or not. If the river is not included it may be necessary for Warwick to start the battle off table and march on as the first French attack is under way.
- There is an upward slope towards the Anglo-Gascon position, which is shallower the nearer to the river one gets.
- It would also appear that the initial French positions were on the other side of a hill, because the appearance of King John’s division came as a surprise and shock to the Anglo-Gascons.

See the basic sketch map drawn below with the Anglo-Gascons in Red and French in blue. English archers on the flanks, baggage straddled either side of the ford. The arrows for Warwick indicate his men returning from the ford or even the far side of the river – but how quickly were they able to get back?



The Battle

On the morning of 19 September the French mounted vanguard, led by the Marshal d'Audreham and the Marshal de Clermont, consisting of the best armoured horses and knights and probably supported by some dismounted knights and crossbowmen, advanced towards the Anglo-Gascon positions. The rest of the French army was in three divisions, one after the other, and led respectively by the king's eldest son the Dauphin, the king's brother the Duke d'Orleans, and the king himself.

As the French vanguard advanced, it is possible that they saw what appeared to be the enemy withdrawal on the French right. The Chandos Herald certainly quotes the Marshal d'Audreham as saying to his fellow Marshal "*Soon we shall have lost the English if we set not forth to attack them*". Either way, the mounted French, backed up by their foot supports, launched an attack, Audreham on the Warwick's division and Clermont on the Earl of Salisbury. It would seem that both charges were aimed at gaps in the famous hedge.

At first the English archers had no effect on the advancing well-armoured men-at-arms and horses of Audreham's force, but the Earl of Oxford led some or all of the archers further into the marshy area, probably onto the flanks of the attackers, where their arrows were able to

take greater effect against the less well-protected flanks and rear of the horses. This disrupted the charge, and after some fighting with Warwick's men-at-arms at the hedge and gap, the French attack suffered severe casualties and was broken, Audreham being captured.

On the other flank it seems Clermont did a little better – perhaps the English archers were not able to get onto the French flanks since there was no protection for them. Nevertheless, Geoffrey le Baker says “*nor did the archers fail in their duty but, from a safe position protected by the mound, they attacked those above the ditch and beyond the hedge*”. Despite this Clermont, supported by the dismounted men-at-arms of Constable de Brienne, succeeded in passing thorough and breaking the hedge. They were only thrown back with great loss, including their two leaders, when the Earl of Suffolk arrived with reinforcements for Salisbury.

The Herald of Chandos says the fighting was hard: “*The French book says, and the account likewise, that the Earl of Salisbury, he and his companions, who were fiercer than lions, discomfited the Marshals and all the barded horses, before the vanguard could be turned and brought across again, for it was over the river; but by the will of God and Saint Peter they joined all together and came, methinks, like people of noble bearing, right up a mountain until they brought their ranks up to the Dauphin's division, which was at the passage of a hedge, and there, with steadfast will, they came to encounter together, plying the business of arms in such right knightly fashion that it was great marvel to behold.*” Note another reference to the fact that not all the Anglo-Gascons were in the battle line as they were still “over the river”.

This also suggests that the Dauphin's division arrived before the fighting in this sector from the vanguard's assault had finished. In any case, the dauphin's dismounted division arrived at the hedge line and a desperate hand to hand combat ensued. The hedge was further broken down, and is not mentioned thereafter by the sources. The struggle seems to have lasted some hours, and once gain it seems it was Salisbury on the Anglo-Gascon right flank who was hardest-pressed – Edward had to send further reinforcements. Nevertheless, after protracted fighting and the capture of the Dauphin's own standard-bearer, the French division began an orderly withdrawal.

The cause of what happened next is open to question, but whether so ordered by the king or through premature defeatism, the Duc d'Orleans and his division withdrew from the battlefield as well, taking the King's sons with him. However, the sources record that some of the Duc's troops joined the King's division advancing behind them. At this point, the Anglo-Gascons believed the battle won, and some mounted their horses and set off in pursuit. However, as Geoffrey le Baker reported, “*there was not one of them all, but either he was wounded or quite wearied with great labour*”.

This was a crucial moment in the battle, for now King John II advanced with his final division – fresh troops that probably included the elite of his army. From thinking that they had achieved victory, the Anglo-Gascons were dismayed to see yet another large body of enemy advancing on them. The Herald of Chandos says: “*When the Prince saw him come he was some deal abashed, and looking around him saw that divers had left who had set out in pursuit, for truly their weened that by this time they had accomplished everything; but now the battle waxed sore, for the French King came up, bringing so great a power that it was a marvel to behold.*” It was probably at this point – although it could have been a little earlier when the Duc d'Orleans was seen withdrawing – that Edward ordered his men-at-arms to

mount their horses. At the same time he sent his mounted reserve of 60 men-at-arms and 100 Gascon crossbowmen, led by the Captal de Buch, to ride out wide of his right flank. The Prince then ordered a mounted charge, and they rode out to meet the French King. The English archers and other foot seem to have joined in, but clearly would have taken a little longer to arrive.

The fighting seems to have been desperate, but the difference was made when the Captal de Buch appeared on the flank or rear of the French and attacked. Despite groups of French men-at-arms fighting on, the battle was over and the French began to flee. King John himself fought on, but was finally persuaded to surrender when surrounded. Large scale slaughter now ensued in the usual way at the end of a battle, and the majority of the French casualties were incurred at this point. The Anglo-Gascon army was widely dispersed in the pursuit, and Prince Edward had to raise his banner on a bush in the field to attempt to rally his men.

Start point of the Battle

We favour our refights starting at the point of no return for each commander, when they are committed to battle. In this case, the advance of the mounted French vanguard seems the right start point.

Special points to consider

This is the bit where we list the points that you as a Game organiser may have to consider how you and your chosen rule set will allow for certain features of the battle, or not.

First is the famous hedge. This was clearly an obstacle to the French mounted charge, funnelling them towards the two gaps. However, it does not then seem to feature in the accounts. I think that points to an obstacle for mounted but not for foot. It was probably as much a hindrance for the defending foot as for the attackers when it came to hand-to-hand fighting.

Foot support for the French mounted attack. Certainly Clermont had some support from dismounted men-at-arms, and there is a suggestion that Audrehem had some crossbowmen with him. The latter seemed to play little part – perhaps the hot-headed Audrehem left them behind in his rush to attack the enemy before they withdrew.

Warwick. How far away had he got in the withdrawal? Assuming at least part of his battle would have led the way across the ford before the baggage wagons started crossing, then you may want to allow for the chance that he arrives too late to help repel the French mounted attack, or at least some of his battle does.

The Duc d'Orleans. If the Dauphin is repulsed, should it be compulsory for the Duc to withdraw? Perhaps a mechanism to allow a varying proportion of his division to join King John's division is appropriate. We think it would be reasonable to not even deploy this division if you are running short of figures! Just have a chance of the King's division getting bigger.

French attack sequence. Because the French attacked one division after another, there could be a case for playing the battle as three separate scenarios that are linked by the results from

each previous fight. We think this could work well, but note that there is some evidence that the Dauphin's division arrived while the fighting on Salisbury's flank was still in progress.

Remounting the Anglo-Gascon men-at-arms. Whether this was done because Prince Edward thought the battle already won before King John's division appeared, or whether because he felt he needed to raise the morale of his weary army by taking the fight to the French king, or even because his defensive position was now a shambles of the wounded, dead and dying, this should be an option open to Anglo-Gascon players.

The attack of the Anglo-Gascon mounted reserve. This appears to have been the decisive moment in the final struggle. The terrain was such that it was able to slip out of the flank of the Anglo-Gascon right flank, advance round the far side of the hill and fall on the French flank and rear unseen at just the right moment. But what if it had not arrived in time? Or too early? Or not at all? This is an interesting variable to play with.

Conclusion

Ok, so there you have it – our thoughts on how you might refight this battle. No doubt you will also have your own ideas! Have a go – we look forward to seeing the result at the Battle Day!