England’s MEDIEVAL WARRIOR-KING
Edward III was born on 13 November 1312 at Windsor in Berkshire, and assumed the throne at the tender age of 14 after his father’s deposition and murder (the tradition was that the former Edward II had a red-hot poker stuffed up his backside in a Berkeley Castle dungeon).

The new king quickly showed an inner steel, however, as he turned the tables on his father’s tormentor, Roger Mortimer, arresting him in his bedchamber at Nottingham Castle and dispatching him to the Tower for execution.

Among his many achievements was his acceptance of Parliament, which he made as representative as he could, the House of Commons coming into existence for the first time. The alliance between strong monarch and middle classes which was to be so fundamental to subsequent English history began in the reign of Edward III. This alliance was both political and military, and the king is remembered above all for his battlefield innovations and triumphs.

A new way of war
Edward’s army was a mix of old and new, the traditional feudal host combined with modern volunteer service. It was a fully professional organisation, with all ranks being paid. Edward’s eldest son, Edward the Black Prince, was paid twenty shillings a day. Cheshire archers and Flintshire spearmen from Wales were paid two pence a day.

Devastating military tactics were developed, centred on units of longbowmen flanking armoured infantry equipped with spears and bills. These new tactics enabled the ‘humble’ archer to prove his military value and doomed to eventual extinction the chivalrous code of knightly warfare in Europe.

The high demands of skill and strength required in proficiency in the use of the longbow led various English monarchs to issue instructions encouraging the ownership of and practice with the weapon. In 1363, Edward III proclaimed: ‘Whereas the people of our realm, rich and poor alike, were accustomed formerly in their games to practise archery, whence by God’s help, it is well known that high honour and profit came to our realm, and no small advantage to ourselves in our warlike enterprises, that every man in the same country, if he be able-bodied, shall, upon holidays, make use, in his games, of bows and arrows, and so learn and practise archery.’

The range of the Medieval longbow is not accurately known, though it has been suggested that a professional archer of Edward III’s army might have had a maximum range of up to 400 yards; a typical operational maximum for a unit of longbowmen – the range at which significant damage might begin to be done – was perhaps 300 yards.

The longbow was the machine-gun of the Middle Ages – accurate, deadly, possessed of a long range and rapid rate of fire, and with the flight of its missiles being likened to a storm. Its weight of shot was much higher than that of its principal Western European rival, the crossbow.

Superior weapons and tactics meant that service in the English army was relatively safe (as well as profitable), as we can divine from the respective casualty figures from the battles fought in Edward’s reign.

An old social order
Alongside revolutionary innovations, however, was a continuing conservatism. Though the army was now professional,
it was still organised in a way that reflected England’s traditional social structure.

Career officers commanded smaller units, but larger formations were still in the hands of nobles. Promotion did not depend solely on military competence. Edward did promote low-born captains who had distinguished themselves, but only those who had acquired wealth and set themselves up as landed proprietors would be granted significant commands.

The 14th-century army, so innovatory in many ways, remained a delicate balance between change and stability.

Edward’s motives in waging war reflected England’s still essentially feudal character. What was new was the king’s canny ability to unite his people behind him in wars against the enemy ‘without’. His attentions turned first of all to Scotland, his initial job being to clear northern England of Scots raiders.

The Scots had been making constant and often devastating raids on the northern counties of England. Rather than fight the Scots, the regency regime of Isabella (Edward III’s mother) and Mortimer had signed the Treaty of Northampton in 1328, giving up all claim to Scotland in return for Scots agreement not to invade England.

Once Edward had assumed control, he sought an excuse to turn the tables on the Scots. A civil war between the Scots barons led to Edward Balliol seizing the crown and agreeing to pay homage to the English king in return for his support. Crucially, the border city of Berwick was also returned to the English.

The Siege of Berwick
MAY-JULY 1333
Supporters of the young David Bruce (son of King Robert Bruce), led by his guardian, Archibald Douglas, quickly dethroned Balliol and invaded the north of England, capturing Berwick. Edward III now had the excuse he needed to strike back at the Scots, without fear of being accused of breaking the Treaty of Northampton. Edward resolved to invade Scotland and restore Balliol as his ‘puppet’ king.

At the end of May 1333, new siege engines arrived by ship at Berwick, where the armies of Edward III and Edward Balliol, the nominal king of Scotland, had determined on breaking down the walls of the town being defended by Scottish ‘rebels’.

Edward III’s intentions in besieging Berwick were twofold. He wanted to recapture this strategically important border city, but he also wanted to draw a large Scottish army into open battle, as he was confident of winning any such engagement.

Once Berwick was surrounded, the Scots tried an old ruse of raiding deep into English territory to draw the besiegers off. This time, it merely provided Edward III with some very useful propaganda about Scottish atrocities, which were embellished to portray the Scots as bloodthirsty barbarians and so encourage the Borderers into an alliance with Edward. The English king may have lacked modern means of communication, but he had nothing to learn by way of...
now showed his determination to end the siege by threatening to kill these hostages. To show he was serious, Edward erected high gallows as close to the walls of Berwick as was safe and duly hanged the first of the hostages. This was the act of a ruthless, calculating military leader, prepared to abide by the conventions of the day but also willing to push them to their absolute extremity.

On the morning of 19 July 1333, just one day before the deadline for Berwick’s surrender, the Scots army drew up three miles north-west of the city. Before it was arrayed the English army. Edward had got his battle.

The Battle of Halidon Hill 19 JULY 1333
Edward III had secured the advantage of a strong position on Halidon Hill. It rises two miles north-west of Berwick and commands long views in all directions, except to the north, where Witches’ Knowe, the initial Scottish position, stands in the way.

On the slopes of Witches’ Knowe, the Scots were also well placed for a defensive battle. This, however, was no advantage now, for they were obliged to attack or accept the loss of Berwick. Ahead of the Scots lay an inhospitable area of boggy land, which would render their horses useless. They waited until

Below A Medieval trebuchet in action against the walls of a castle.
midday, then prepared to advance, on foot, uphill, through a treacherous marsh.

The sizes of the respective armies are unknown, but it is believed that the Scots were more numerous, possibly 14,000 men against 10,000. But the Scots army, made up predominantly of spearmen formed into dense ‘schiltrons’, would prove frighteningly vulnerable to Edward’s waiting longbowmen.

The Scots trudged towards the English king’s well-drilled army and into a storm of English arrows, ‘as thick as motes on the sun beam’ according to an English chronicler.

Hundreds of Scots would have fallen before the ragged and dispirited force was able to come to grips with the English on Halidon Hill. As the two armies came to blows, the English formations – fresh, intact, with the ground in their favour – simply threw back each Scots onslaught. The attackers fought desperately but without any real chance of success, and eventually the Scots line broke, on the right, ironically on the flank where it faced the troops of Balliol, the pro-English puppet king. As the schiltrons wavered, Edward III gave the order to mount, and the English knights harried the fleeing enemy with lance, sword, and mace.

The Scots grooms, attending their masters’ horses on Witches’ Knawe a mile to the north, witnessed the disaster ahead of them and rode off in panic, leaving the floundering Scots chivalry to an almost certain death. The pursuit, as was often the case, lasted until nightfall and continued for mile upon merciless mile. There may be exaggerations at play, but Scottish historians estimated that 10,000 Scots died that day, including Douglas and 70 Scottish lords, plus 500 knights. English historians could find fewer than 20 casualties on their side.

At only 20 years old, Edward III had shown himself a master tactician, using ‘bill and bow’ in perfect combination, and keeping his horse in reserve to capitalise upon success. He was also displaying the ruthlessness characteristic of all great commanders.

On 20 July 1333, King Edward accepted his prize by riding through the gates of Berwick. The English singers of ballads were able to celebrate his victory and their country’s revenge for the humiliation of Bannockburn: ‘Scottes out of Berwick and out of Aberdeen,/ At the Burn of Bannock ye were far too keen./ King Edward has avenged it now, and fully too I ween.’

The Hundred Years War

With the Scots subdued Edward now proclaimed himself rightful heir to the French throne and declared war on France. This was to be the opening salvo in an on-off series
The Battle of Sluys
24 JUNE 1340

The Battle of Sluys was the Trafalgar of its day: it resulted in the destruction of the French fleet and wrecked any possibility of a French invasion. It ensured that the war henceforward would be fought on land in France.

The encounter took place in front of the town of Newmarket or Sluys (French Écluse), on the inlet between West Flanders and Zeeland. A French fleet, which the English king, in a letter to his son, the Black Prince, put at 190 sail, had been collected in preparation for an invasion of England. Although many English historians speak of King Edward’s fleet as inferior in number to the French, it is certain that he sailed from the Orwell on 22 June with 200 sail. His admiral for the North Sea, Sir Robert Morley, then joined him on the coast of Flanders with 50 more.

Edward anchored at Blankenberge on the afternoon of 23 June and sent three squires to observe the position of the French. The dispositions of the French were made in accordance with the usual Medieval tactics of a fleet fighting on the defensive, with three or four lines chained together, with a few of the largest ships stationed in front as outposts. This was disastrous, as it

Edward made the bold assertion that ‘our progenitors, Kings of England, were lords of the English sea, on every side’ – the historical origin of ‘Britannia Rules the Waves’.

The idea was to recover the English king’s possessions in France, even though these were a throwback to a time when England had actually been itself a possession of an empire based in Normandy. Such details were forgotten as patriotic feeling generated a momentum to war.

If there was any doubt about Edward’s personal military prowess, this was dispelled by his offer of single combat to the French king at the start of the War, a challenge which failed to elicit a response.

The decade 1340-1350 was to be a time of great military success for England. A string of victories started with the destruction of the French fleet at Sluys in 1340, and then continued with a land war starting in July 1346.
Edward III's legacy

English use of longbows proved effective against the French for much of the Hundred Years War, particularly at its start, with English victories at the Battles of Crécy (1346) and Poitiers (1356), but also, most famously at Agincourt in 1415.

It was also responsible for further victories over the Scots, notably at Neville's Cross in the same year as Crécy. This victory allowed Edward to remain in France and lay siege to Calais in September. After a year-long blockade, the city, with its huge double walls, finally surrendered.

At sea, too, Edward III's English were destined to win further victories. In 1350, the king rounded off a successful decade by sailing his fleet out of Sandwich and defeating a force of Spanish galleys off Winchelsea.

Edward's later years were not as commanding as his early ones. His reign was marked by international setbacks and domestic strife, largely as a result of the king's inactivity and bad health. He was predeceased by his wife, Philippa of Hainault, who died in 1369, and then in 1376 by his eldest son, the Black Prince, who died after a long-lasting illness.

The king played only a limited role in the government of his realm after 1375. Around 29 September 1376, he fell ill with a large abscess. After a brief period of recovery in February 1377, he then died of a stroke at Sheen on 21 June. His ten-year-old grandson, King Richard II, son of the Black Prince, succeeded him.

Edward III restored royal authority and transformed England into one of the foremost military powers in Europe. He brought the tactics of combining large blocks of longbowmen with supporting blocks of dismounted men-at-arms to a new level, exploiting to the full the military potential inherent in England's distinctive and evolving Medieval social structure. He was also a master of surprise and subterfuge, and of propaganda and spin.

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