

MEDIEVAL ENGLISH ARROW HEADS MADE OF STEEL:

THE DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

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Introduction

While the archaeology for medieval English arrowheads shows that wrought iron was the predominant material used, the written sources for medieval English arrow making and regulations in the 14th and 15th centuries seems to be in stark contrast to that evidence.

When the evidence of history and archaeology seem to be at odds with each other, this naturally raises many questions. I have addressed some of those in my videos and will continue to explore the available evidence.

Presented here are some of the main written sources pertaining to the manufacture, supply and storage of arrows in late-medieval England. This paper is likely to be updated in the future, and readers are welcome to offer new leads and information. Perhaps in time it will form the nucleus of a larger analysis.

I also encourage readers to explore other written works on the subject, but to defer to primary sources where possible. I also encourage readers to look at the most up to date and detailed tests conducted by Leo 'Tod' Todeschini (Tod's Workshop) and his team.

The sources

EDWARD III

Calendar of Close Rolls, Edward III: Volume 4, 1337-1339. Originally published by Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1900.

March 1337

Order to cause the same sheriff to have due allowance in his account for the costs which he shall have reasonably incurred in the following matters, having viewed the indenture, as the king ordered

the sheriff to cause 300 good and sufficient bows, and cords suited to them, and a tun of arrows, an ell long, of good and dry timber, and well steeled heads, for those arrows and with broad barbs (falas largas) for the king's use, to be bought and purveyed from the issues of that bailiwick, and to be sent to York, to be delivered to the sheriff of York by indenture, and by virtue of this order John bought 300 good bows and cords suitable for them, and a pipe of arrows containing 146 sheaves, with the heads thereof, and delivered them to the sheriff of York for the king's use, as may fully appear by an indenture made thereon, as he says.

Calendar of Close Rolls, Edward III: Volume 6, 1341-1343. Originally published by His Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1902.

1341. April 18. Westminster.

To the sheriff of York. Order to cause 500 white bows and 500 sheaves of arrows at 12d. the bow and 14d. a sheaf for steeled arrows and 12d. for non-steeled arrows to be bought and purveyed and taken to the port of Orewell to be there at Whitsuntide next at latest to be delivered to those deputed to receive them, as the king needs a great number of bows and arrows for his war with France on account of the passage which he will shortly make to those parts in armed force, and the sheriff shall not omit to do this under pain of forfeiture. By K.

Calendar of Close Rolls, Edward III: Volume 10, 1354-1360. Originally published by His Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1908.

1359. Nov. 8. Windsor.

To the sheriff of Lincoln. Order, upon pain of forfeiture, to cause 400 painted bows, 200 white bows and 1,000 sheaves of arrows well pointed to be bought and purveyed, so that he have them at the Tower of London on the octaves of St. Andrew next, to be delivered by indenture to William de Rothewell, keeper of the wardrobe there, and if by reason of some impediment he cannot have them promptly before that day to send 145l. 16s. 8d. to the receipt of the exchequer on that day to purvey as many bows and arrows, as the king must have a great number of bows and arrows speedily for the furtherance of his war with France.

Calendar of Close Rolls, Edward III: Volume 12, 1364-1369. Originally published by His Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1910.

February 1368

Feb. 5. Westminster. To the sheriff of Northampton. Order, for particular causes, of the issues of his bailiwick to cause 600 sheaves of arrows in places where he shall see best to be made and purveyed of seasoned and not of green wood, as he will answer it before the king, and to be fitted with steel heads to the pattern of the iron head which shall be delivered to him on the king's behalf,

sending the same to the Tower of London before Midsummer next there to be delivered to John de Sleford the king's clerk, keeper of his wardrobe in the said Tower, knowing assuredly that, if the same be not made of seasoned wood, the king will charge him with the cost over and above the punishment he will inflict.

Calendar of Close Rolls, Edward III: Volume 13, 1369-1374. Originally published by His Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1911.

1369. Oct. 27. Westminster.

To the sheriffs of London and Middlesex. Order on sight of these presents forthwith of the issues of their bailiwick to cause 1,000 sheaves of arrows of good and seasoned wood, and not of green wood as they will answer it before the king himself, to be made and purveyed in the said city and county within liberties and without, to be fitted with heads of steel, and come before Easter next to the Tower of London, to be delivered by indenture to John de Sleford the king's clerk, keeper of his wardrobe there, any assignments of payments to be made to any persons by letters patent, writs under the great or privy seal, tallies or letters of the treasurer or other the king's commands however made notwithstanding, knowing assuredly that, unless the said sheaves be made of seasoned wood and brought before that feast to the Tower the king will cause the sheriffs upon the view of their account on the morrow of the close of Easter next to be arrested and imprisoned, their lands, goods and chattels to be seized into his hand, and the said sheaves to be bought and purveyed of the issues thereof, and will further cause them as he may to be in such wise punished that their punishment shall be a terror to others who neglect the execution of the king's commands; as the king has particular information that his adversaries of France and other his enemies to them adhering are making ready with a host of ships and armed men to destroy the navy of the realm, to hinder the passage of the merchants and merchandise thereof, and destroy the merchants and other the king's lieges by every means they may, if not speedily opposed with a strong hand; and it is the king's will to resist their malice, and make provision for the safety of the realm and of the ships, merchants and merchandise thereof. By K. and C.

Calendar of Close Rolls, Edward III: Volume 13, 1369-1374. Originally published by His Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1911.

1369. July 8. Westminster.

To the sheriff of Lancastre. Order, under pain of forfeiture, without any delay to cause the 600 sheaves of arrows by the king commanded, of seasoned wood and not of green as he will answer it before the king, to be purveyed in his bailiwick within liberties and without, fitted with heads of steel after the pattern of the iron head delivered to him on the king's behalf, and to come to the Tower of London there to be delivered by indenture to John de Sleford the king's clerk, keeper of his wardrobe in the Tower, so that they be there on Michaelmas day at latest, knowing assuredly that, if the same be not of seasoned wood, the king will cause the sheriff to be charged with the costs thereupon laid out, and punished by forfeiture; as the sheriff has hitherto taken no heed to do aught concerning the said sheaves which the king commanded to be purveyed and delivered as aforesaid

for his service, and thereby the furtherance of the king's business affecting him and the defence of the realm is delayed, whereat he is moved to anger. By K.

Calendar of Close Rolls, Edward III: Volume 13, 1369-1374. Originally published by His Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1911.

1371. Feb 14. Westminster.

To the sheriff of York. Order, for particular causes, on sight of these presents forthwith of the issues of his bailiwick to cause 1,000 sheaves of arrows, over and above those which the king lately commanded him to purvey to his use, to be made and purveyed in his bailiwick, within liberties, and without, of good and seasoned wood and not of green wood as he will answer it before the king himself, and to cause those so to be newly made as those formerly commanded which are in arrear to be made ready with steel heads and come to the Tower of London before the quinzaine of Trinity next, there to be delivered by indenture to John de Sleaford the king's clerk, keeper of his wardrobe in the Tower, any assignments of payments whatsoever to be made given by letters patent, writs of the great or privy seal, tallies, letters of the treasurer or otherwise notwithstanding, knowing assuredly that if all those arrows be not made of seasoned wood and be not brought to the Tower by the date assigned, the king will cause the sheriff's lands, goods and chattels to be seized into his hand, and the arrows to be bought and purveyed of the issues thereof, and will further cause him so to be punished that his punishment shall be a terror to others negligently executing the king's commands. By K.

RICHARD II

1385. Oct. 16. Westminster.

To Nicholas Brembre mayor of the city of London. Order by advice of the council to cause all and singular the fletchers of the city to come before him, and under a strait and fitting pain to lay down such an ordinance touching their craft that all arrows by them exposed for sale shall be wrought of good and sufficient wood, suitably feathered, and the heads good and hard, on the king's behalf charging the fletchers under that pain truly to observe such ordinance, and chastising from time to time all who shall contravene the same, which the king's will is that they cause to be enrolled in the chamber of the Gihall of London; as he would make effective provision on every side for matters which concern the advantage and defence of the realm.

HENRY IV

Memorials of London and London Life in the 13th, 14th and 15th Centuries. Originally published by Longmans, Green, London, 1868.

Ordinance of the Fletchers.

4 Henry IV. A.D. 1403. Letter-Book I. fol. xxiv. (Latin and Norman French.)

Ordinance of the trade of Fletchers, made by John Walcote, Mayor of the City of London, and the Aldermen, on the 16th day of June, in the 4th year etc.; and which was proclaimed on the 20th day of June, in the year aforesaid.—

In the first place,—that the folks of the said trade in the said city shall have power every year, at the Feast of St. Edward the King [5 January], to elect two persons to be Wardens of the trade, to survey and make search during the year then next ensuing as to all manner of arrows and heads of arrows and quarels, as well of citizens as of foreigners, within the said city; and that they shall have power to seize such artillery as shall be found to be false and deceitful, as well in houses and the king's highway, as in every other place within the franchise of the said city; and to present the same to the Mayor and Aldermen, for the time being, there to be forfeited and destroyed; the persons who shall have made such false work, to be punished and amerced, at the discretion of the said Mayor and Aldermen, for the time being; one half of such amercement to go to the use of the Chamber, and the other half to the use of the said trade.

Also,—that no one of the said trade, citizen or foreigner, shall sell in any place within the franchise of the said city any work of such trade pertaining to warfare, before that it has been assayed by the said Wardens, as being good and able, for the advantage of the King and of the realm; on pain of forfeiture and amercement, in form aforesaid. So always, that the Wardens of the said trade shall be ready at all fitting times to assay such artillery, on pain of making fine, at the discretion of the Mayor and Aldermen.

Also,—that the said Wardens shall have power, so often as they shall please, to cause search to be made in every place within the franchise of the said city, to see **that all arrows and quarels in the said trade are made of good and dry wood, and that the heads of the arrows and quarels are hard**: that so, no arrows or quarels be made by night, nor yet by day in deceit or prejudice of the King and of the realm. And that those who are rebellious against the said Wardens, if any such shall be found, shall be punished by advice of the Mayor and Aldermen, the same as rebels in other trades of the City. Provided always, that all manner of folks, freemen and foreigners, having, and bringing to the City, brodearwes [broad arrows] and boltes to sell, shall not be restricted by this Ordinance; but may freely sell the same, without survey or search by the Wardens aforesaid.

Also,—that no one of the said trade shall sell in any way to an alien any manner of work belonging to such trade, before that he has had especial leave from the King, and it is known that the same is not to the prejudice of the King or of the realm; on pain of forfeiture of the work, and of being punished and amerced, at the discretion of the Mayor and Aldermen, according to the extent of the offence.

'Henry IV: March 1406, Part 1', in *Parliament Rolls of Medieval England*, ed. Chris Given-Wilson, Paul Brand, Seymour Phillips, Mark Ormrod, Geoffrey Martin, Anne Curry and Rosemary Horrox (Woodbridge, 2005)

1406

Arrowsmiths.

Also, the commons pray that because arrowsmiths make numerous defective heads for arrows and quarrels, which is neither good, lawful nor defensible, to the great jeopardy and deception of the people of all the

kingdom; it should be ordained in this present parliament that all the heads of arrows and quarrels which are made henceforth shall be welded, brassed and hardened at the tip with steel; and if any of the said arrowsmiths acts to the contrary, that he shall forfeit all such heads and quarrels to the king, and shall be imprisoned and pay a fine for this at the king's will. And that every arrow or quarrelhead shall be marked with [p. iii-595][col. a] an indication of who made it. And that power shall be given to justices of the peace to enquire into all such deceitful makers of heads and quarrels in each county, and punish them in the aforesaid manner.

Answer.

The king wills it; adding to this that the mayors, sheriffs and bailiffs of the cities and boroughs shall have similar power of enquiry and punishment within the cities and boroughs, in the manner stated in this petition.

HENRY V

Note: There are various sources from Henry V's reign which have been noted in other publications, and I will be expanding the sources for this reign in due course.

Calendar of Close Rolls, Henry V: Volume 1, 1413-1419. Originally published by His Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1929.

1417

Feb. 10.

Westminster. To the sheriff of Kent. Order upon sight etc. by his bailiffs and others whom he shall appoint in singular the towns and other places of Kent, for the king's money to be paid of the issues of that county, to cause six wing feathers to be taken of every goose, except those called 'brodegges,' fittest for new making of arrows for the king's use, and to cause the same to be brought to London before 14 March next; as the king is shortly to sail to France for recovery of his rights and the heritage of the crown, long withheld and wrongfully occupied by the adversary of France, as all men know; and considering how that God of his ineffable goodness and not for the king's merit gave him the victory by his archers among others with their arrows, his will is to make provision for a sufficient store thereof with what speed he may for better furtherance of his present expedition. By K.

Calendar of Close Rolls, Henry V: Volume 2, 1419-1422. Originally published by His Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1932.

1421

July 16.

Westminster. To the sheriff of Southampton. Order upon sight etc., by their bailiffs and other deputies whom they shall appoint, for money arising of the issues of the county to cause 40,000 wing feathers of geese to be taken and purveyed with all speed for new making arrows to the king's use for the present expedition, and to be brought to London before the Assumption next.

HENRY VI

Calendar of Letter-Books of the City of London: K, Henry VI. Originally published by His Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1911.

Ordinaciones de Flechers.

¶Be it remembered that on the 5th June, 10 Henry VI. [A.D. 1432], came good folk of the Mistery of Flecchers before John Welles, the Mayor, and the Aldermen, in the great Chamber of the Guildhall, and exhibited for approval a bill of Articles touching the rule and governance of the said Mistery, to the following effect:-

Whereas (as shown by Richard Otehill and Thomas Scot, Wardens, and all the enfranchised good folk of the Mistery of Flecchers within the City) the servants and workmen of the said Mistery, hired to make good and lawful arrows (settes) and other kind of artillery (fn. 17) (dartelrie) for the good of the King and his people, do oftentimes work by night and in secret and change good stuff (estuffe) and dry wood for green wood and other false stuff, and therefrom make unserviceable arrows and other sort of artillery, to the prejudice and dishonour of the petitioners, they pray therefore:-

First, that no freeman of the Mistery shall thenceforth have a workman elsewhere than in his own house, so that his work can be overlooked, under penalty of a fine of 6s. 8d., one moiety to go to the Chamber and the other to the Mistery.

Secondly, that no one of the Mistery shall work by night.

Their prayer granted.

EDWARD IV

Calendar of Close Rolls, Edward IV: Volume 2, 1468-1476. Originally published by Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1953.

1473-75

To the sheriffs of London and Middlesex. Order to cause proclamation to be made etc. English text follows. Forasmuch as the king prepareth by sufferance of Almighty God to take his journey towards his realm of France, his old inheritance: for recovery there of his right of the same, with his host therefore ordained; considering that among other ordnance, bows and arrows be most specially necessary, therefore our said lord commandeth that no fleccher make any manner of tackle for

shooting, but only sheaf arrows: and that all bowyers make their bowstaves into bows: and that the bowyers and fleccchers and makers of arrow strings and heads of bows every of these as appertaineth to his occupation in all haste possible make and do to be made the same good and sufficient so that no default be found in them upon pain of the king's displeasure, and as they will answer to his highness if any default be found in them in not doing of their occupation: and also our lord has assigned certain persons commissaries to make prestes hereafter and payment on that behalf etc. English. By K.

Conclusion

- English kings cared a lot about the manufacture, supply, storing and transportation of arrows in this period. They were deemed absolutely vital for the aggressive campaigns abroad, as well as the defence of the realm against enemies, and the upkeep of order within the Kingdom.
- Above all other things, the quality of the wood and the hardness of the arrowheads was deemed paramount.
- These qualities, and the supply of arrows, was so important to the Crown, that very harsh punishments were imposed to enforce the King's desires.
- Iron and steel were deemed as separate materials, and for more than a century we see steel being repeatedly enforced in the manufacture of English arrow heads. Various terms were used, such that it is unclear whether the said heads were entirely of steel or fabricated in such a way as to only have steel tips and/or edges.
- There is an implication that the laws regarding military arrows did not apply to civilian (hunting and sport) arrows.
- There is perhaps an implication, from the data available, that after Henry V, the enforcement of arrow quality was treated with less attention.
- It should be remembered that repeated re-issuing of laws indicates that laws were being broken with some regularity, though the seriousness of the punishments suggest that this might have been successfully clamped down on before or during major campaigns or times of threat.
- There is a possible indication that the Wars of the Roses saw a general end to successful centralised crown control of arrow production. This may have resulted in the Crown having access to fewer arrows, or arrows of more variable quality. However, we should not discount that the various magnates involved in those Wars had localised production and may have still held high standards and volumes of production, on a more decentralised basis.
- There seems to be a correlation in the records between arrow production, arrow quality, arrow laws, and campaigns against France specifically.