The Long Bow in the British Army.

Paper read by Canon Beanlands before Victoria Veterans' Association.

In undertaking to write a paper upon the "Long Bow, Its Influence as a Weapon of War in the British Army," I feel that I may be incurring the charge of telling very stale news; because everyone who knows anything knows that the success ofg the British arms in continental warfare during the Middle Ages was invariably attributed to England's archers, that, in fact, the reputation of England at that time was due to that arm of the service as greatly as it has since become due to the power of her fleet. And yet I feel that, like many statements which by reiteration, have become truisms, there is much at the back of this we do no nowadays understand.

The history of the English archers, as I should like to see it, has still to be written. I remember my father, when I was quite a little boy, drawing my attention to the fact that in great collections of arms and armor, not such a thing as a genuine long-bow could be found. He, so he said, had been looking for one in vain all his life. Since then I have done the same. So I may say that in some seventy years of experience two Englishmen on the look-out have never yet found that weapon, about which we have all heard so much, and of which there are literally thousands of copies from the time of the Stuart kings downwards. Now that is a parable of the whole subject, for just as his bow has vanished, so has the man who wielded it, and we really know as little about the one as about the other. What I am offering you to-night is but a small contribution towards the true history of this subject, in hopes that even these few glimpses may arouse in you the desire to know more of what at one time all the world knew so much.

It has often been said that the development of archery in England was due to the introduction of the bow as a weapon of war at the Norman invasion. This is, however, a very partial truth. The Norman bow was as inferior to the English long-bow of the thirteenth century as a Brown Bess to a Lee-Metford. It was a comparatively short weapon, judging from contemporary representations, useful enough against the unclad Saxons in dense masses, but probably not much superior to the average West Coast bow, or, indeed, that of any of the ancient peoples who relied upon shooting from chariots or horseback, and could not possibly have used a long-bow in such a position with effect.

Nevertheless, we were no doubt indebted to the Normans for this instrument for another reason. They made the great forests and chases where none but themselves might sport; and the strict and savage laws, which by punishing as severely the slaughter of a buck as the death of a man, made of the poacher a hero, and of the crime of the outlaw forester the profession of the skilled archer.

It is undoubtedly from the sporting members of the yeoman class, men who could live by woodcraft, and who thought no more harm of shooting a sheriff's officer than killing a deer, men who had friends in every hamlet among their less venturesome neighbors, to warn them of danger, to welcome their victories, and to mourn over their deaths at the hand of the law; that the free archer, terror to European armies, safeguard of the kingdom in her need, the pride of Plantagenets, and the envy of Continental monarchs sprang.

By continual practice, competition for his very life, and that ever ready ingenuity, which is the soul of sporting excellence, he developed both the weapon and the style of sporting to their highest pitch; just as the outrigger, the sliding seat and the style of sculling and rowing transformed the tubs of 1830 into the lapstreaks of to-day, and the jolly young waterman of Dibden into Hanlon or Beech. While the Crusaders were occupying the attention of the noble classes and professional soldiers of Europe, the yeoman of England were devoting themselves to the perfection of the long-bow, so that when the need came, it was found that from the levies of the forest shires could be drawn bands of highly-trained men who could shoot as none else in the world could shoot, and the records of whose prowess we shuld feel disposed to doubt were they not written large on the page of England's greatness.

The glory of the archer extended over about three centuries, the true Middle Ages of our history. During these years there was never an important engagement in which he did not determine the victory, except Bannockburn, where the superior strategy of Bruce enabled the Scotch cavalry to take him in flank.

I think the science of drill, as applied to foot soldiers, had not been at that time paid much attention to. The feudal system was against it, and these yeoman volunteers, as they practically were, were probably not very good material for barrack room discipline. The long-bow required plenty of room to manipulate it efficiently, and if the mounted knights could only deliver an effective charge in flank, there was an end of its usefulness.

But to a front attack, it proved a terrible impediment. The deeds of single archers, like William Cloudesley, savor of myth; but when every allowance has been made for generous enlargement, the solid fact remains, that good average bowmen in bodies, say of 1,500 men, could deliver fatal vollies of arrows at approaching troops from 200 yards to point blank, that they could fire six times while the harquebuss was being once discharged, that they practically never shot without taking aim; which was a reality: much the same process as shooting a bird on the wing, the hand and eye working together with subtle accuracy, and that a cloud of arrows is a much more horrid thing for man or beast to face than a storm of bullets.

Many an arrow, no doubt, bounded back from the iron-clad horsemen of the fifteenth century; but it was difficult, even in the later period of plate armor, to devise complete covering for the horses, and the enormous weight of the trappings made it necessary to have such heavy-bred animals that their movements were relatively slow, and gave more time to their adversaries in which to deliver flight after flight of arrows. Then the horsemen once brought to the ground became poor opponents of lightly clad foot soldiers, billmen, whose heavy axes could fell even where they did not cleave. Thus the chivalry of France at Crecy, Poictiers and Agincourt were rendered hors de combat and made prisoners by the score, and thus it was that many a man of yeoman estate came back to delight his neighbors with tales of the field, and to buy fat acres for his children from the ransome and loot of war.

You have only to read of the wonderful fortune in lands and jewels, gold and silver left by an old warrior like Sir John Fastolf, whose golden images were weighed by the pound, and whose castle of caister was coveted by dukes of the blood royal, to realize that many smaller men were making relatively as large fortunes; and that for a lusty youth with a stout heart and a steady hand the profession of arms, even in the ranks, afforded greater chances of wealth and distinction than any he could find at home.

During these years the archers' pay was generally estimated at 6d. a day; if, as some were, horsed on his own beast, 9d. to 1 shilling. Now, day labor was paid at 1d. to 2d., so that your skilled yeoman was worth six times, or rather seven times, for Sunday was counted in, his brother who followed the plough. Compared with modern prices, it would represent a sum of $2 to $2.50 per diem, a fancy price for a soldier; and then, look at the chance of loot! Still the English archers were never a very large body of men, and they were chiefly drawn from a few counties, the hardy dalesmen of the north contributing by far the greater number.

These paid archers were, in fact, the pick of a nation's good shots, for in every locality it was made the chief pastime, when once its value became recognized by authority; and the enactions in later days to prevent any other kind of sport, from gambling to football, being indulged in, would seem ridiculous were it not remembered how greatly England's prestige depended upon her archery.

And in this fact lay at once the peculiarity of the British archers and their wonderful efficiency. The whole nation was devoted to the sport of the bow, while for the most part, only those who excelled became professional archers. I think there is no other instance in the history of warfare of this kind of selection of the fittest. It stands to reason that a few thousand men, drawn from a much more numerous body, a body in fact including all the able youth of the country, by the simple process of paying them six or seven times what they could earn at home would mean something very different from the ragged mercenaries of the continent or the average feudal levy of an oppressed peasantry.

It is stated by contemporary writers that the French and German nobility dared not encourage among their vassals the use of the long-bow, lest they should be arming them with a weapon they might employ against their masters. Yet in England, at the very time when we are accustomed to regard the condition of the people as most nearly approaching to that of foreign serfs, such a suggestion never seems to have been entertained. And here comes in the sociological aspect of this interesting subject. Fortescue, the chief justice of England, a man of sound judgment, who wrote in the fifteenth century his review of the English commonwealth, called "The gouvernance of England," discusses in one chapter the absence of poverty among the common people. He says that foreign writers have censured the English Crown for allowing the masses to be so well-to-do: They ought to have been ground down by taxation, so as to be kept in proper subjection. Among other wise statemanlike reflections upon this fallacious argument, Fortescue points out that archery would decay, were the people to become poor, for that it was an expensive pursuit, in which a poor peasantry could not indulge.

When we consider that undressed, or white bow-staves, cost 1 shilling apiece, while finished or painted ones cost 1s. 6d., and that really fine ones went up to 3s. 4d., beyond which price the makers were not allowed to charge, and that a sheaf of arrows cost 1s. 2d. to 1s. 9d., the cogency of these remarks is evident. No poor laboring man could afford to spend any such sum as this upon his amusement, a sum which might be compared to a Dorsetshire laborer buying a Winchester rifle and cartridges out of 13s.. a week and his harvest money.

The influence of archery then may be said to have tended towards the freedom and elevation of the people, as its inception marked from the first a state of comparative wealth and independence.

There is no more trustworthy picture drawn by Chaucer than that of the yeoman archer attendant upon the gallant old knight.

"And he was clad in coat and hood of green
A sheaf of peacock arrows bright and keen
Under his belt he bare full thriftily
Well could he dress his tackle, yeomanly
His arrowes drooped not with feathers low,
And in his hand he bare a mighty bow.
A nut-head had he with a brown visage
Of wood-craft kenned he well all the usage;
Upon his arm he bare a gay bracer
And by his side a sworde and buckler.
And on the t'other side a gay dagger
Harnessed well, and sharp as point of spear.
A Christopher on his breast of silver shene;
An horne he bare, the baudrick was of grene,
A forster was he soothely, as I gesse."

There, gentlemen, is a contemporary portrait of the common archer of England from whom no doubt many of you are descended. I hope you are proud of your great-grandfather, and that he has as good reason to be proud of you. He has a neat-cropped head, hard to crack, and ready to crack his neighbor's. His tanned skin shows him a dweller under the skies, not in murky towns. He knows all manner of woodcraft and the delicate art of featherine his own shafts. He is tall and straight and proportionately strong, for none but a tall man can wield and none but a strong man can draw a "mighty bow" and archery above all good exercises makes a man go erect. He takes care that his weapons are bright and sharp,

"Ware of entrance to a quarrel, but being in * * that the opposed may beware of him."

"Costly his habit as his purse can buy, He is proud of his station and takes pains that his person shall adorn it: no seedy ruffian or shabby foot-man, but well and warmly clad in Lincoln green, with a handsome handle to his dagger, a studded belt, chased-steel arm-guard, and even a silver jewel of his patron Saint Christopher, to show that he is a free yeoman and no villain. He was no gentleman, but he has left more descendants among the gentlemen of England to-day from his lusty loins than all the profligate gallants of the courts.

The question naturally arises "Why considering the inefficiency of fire-arms, did this fine arm of the service decay and disappear?" For it is ridiculous for anyone acquainted with the relative values of the long bow and the harquebuss to talk like the history books about the one being superseded by the other. Why, gentlemen, nothing but the modern rifle could on its own merits supersede the long bow in the hands of a skilful archer. Even setting aside the wonderful exploits of the great masters of the bow of medieval tradition, exploits that for my part seem to have far more foundation in fact than is generally accredited them, even in our own time, we have had an amateur who has put 253 arrows into the target out of 288 in a double york round with an average score of the blue, or inner, white; that is to say, that a good shot might be expected to hit his man at 100 and 80 yards range, at least about eight times out of ten. This is a very long way below the traditional skill of the archer, which, to believe, the most moderate records could do better at treble the distance, but I fancy it would not discredit any smooth-bore shooting, and certainly be very superior to the records of the clumsy fire-lock and whel-lock guns of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Besides, when a man could easily plant six shots to one of his adversary, he had as tremendous an advantage as a breech-loader over a muzzle-loader.

No, the reason was a more curious one than that. It was not the failure of the arrow, but of the class that employed it. It was foreshadowed by Fortescue, and subsequently borne witness to by Bishop Latimer, the martyr. During the Wars of the Roses the carnage caused by English archers on the contending sides was frightful. No such bloody encounters as Tewksbury and Towton are known to history, and the same cause that swept away the chivalry of the land carried off the archers with them "in one red burial pent" as when Sampson immolated himself undes the ruin of the Phillistines. But were there not unfailing supplies whence these had come? Yes, if the conditions had remained. For one generation indeed they did, as the victory of Flodden in 1513 attested, in revenge of Bannockburn 200 years before.

That was the last effort of the English archer. In vain was the sport fostered and participated in by the merry monarch. In vain was it preached up from the pulpit of St. Paul's by Latimer; in vain did Roger Ascham, Queen Elizabeth's tutor extol it as the best exercise, not only for clowns, but for learned men; the yeoman of Chaucer disappeared before the common foot-soldier of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. And the reason was this. With the dissolution of the monastic houses in the reign of Henry VIII came a change in the social conditions of the agricultural classes, the importance of which can hardly be over-estimated, though it is often enough overlooked. An enormous acreage of cultivated land worth £1,000,000 a year rent, was thrown upon the market and was bought up at low prices by any one who had the capital to do so. This capitalist class, made up of merchants' tradesmen, lawyers and the like, as well as the thriftiest of the franklins and yeomen, found themselves then with more land than they wished to cultivate, but which they could rent and live on without personal labor, if instead of the old low feudal charges of the monasteries they demanded the top rents that tenants were willing to pay. It would be too long a story for me to enter upon, how out of this great change sprang the upper, or landlord, and the lower, or laboring agricultural classes of England. But it is scufficiently evident to any who choose to study the conditions of the sixteenth century, that such was the case, and that from that time on the small proprietor of yeoman rank was continually being driven by force of circumstances either up into the country gentleman, or down into the laboring class. The recorded pedigrees of that period abundantly illustrate the fact.

Now if the sons of the gentry went to war they wanted to be something better than common soldiers; they wanted rank as they had at home, and so were the successors of the knights and esquires of an earlier age, as captains and lieutenants. On the other hand the mere laborer, without the spirit of the yeoman proprietor, and without the command of cash that his freehold gave him, neither had time or money for archery, and perforce became "food for powder," like the ragged levies whom Shakespeare brings upon the stage as recruits for Falstaff from the Welsh marches. These were the Elizabethan substitutes for Lancastrian bowmen, and it is indeed greatly to the credit of our country, that she has been able to call forth the modern British army out of such beginnings.

But, at the time, it was death to the science of the Long Bow; you could not teach grown men and such men to shoot while those who knew how, amateurs of the butts, like Henry himself, were court gallants, sporting gentry or prosperous springalds who loved horses and the rapier when it came to fighting, and would not serve for sixpence a day in the ranks. The desperate endeavors made during the Tudor period and extending eve ainto the sixteenth century, to foster archery, tell only too plainly of its natural extinction. No amount of fashionable patronage could make up for the failure of the source whence the archers had been drawn, "the old order had changed, yielding place to new," and the pride and glory of the long bow passed into the dim tradition of the ballad monger to delight a people who could no longer use it.

Robin Hood remains a household name, to testify to the strong attraction which for 670 years has drawn the nation, high and low, towards a chivalrous exponent of freedom, even though unjustified by the law. William of Cloudesby, our national William Tell, who far outshone his Swiss rival in the matter of the apple, and met with a characteristically more English appreciation from his sovereign; Adam Bell and Clym of the Clough, faithful to their friend, as fateful to their foe; Little John and Scarlett, Much the miller's son, and Guy of Grisborne, the luckless antagonist of a better man. Tell me not these are mere creations of fancy, for I will not believe you.

They are Englishmen of the making of England, as much as Sir William Wallace and Douglas and the Bruce; and highland chiefs and border reevers are of the making of Scotland.

The flowers of the forest are indeed "weed awa" but no one shall deprive us of the memory of their perfume, or persuade us that they were only paper or wax.

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