Political Background

After the Norman Conquest, the English king remained a feudal lord in France, controlling strategic lands in Normandy. Naturally it became more and more difficult for the English king to retain these lands and the French made steady inroads. When King Phillip of France refused to endorse English rights to the wealthy Duchy of Aquitaine, the last English stronghold, in 1337, Edward III of England declared war on France. Since the warrior class of knights had been trained for such conflicts and hoped to gain glory and prestige on the field of battle, the war began with feudal enthusiasm.

Introduction to the Hundred Years War

The people of Europe during the 1300s had to deal not just with epidemic disease, but also with war. England and France battled with each other on French soil for just over a century.

Upon the death of the French king without a successor, England’s Edward III, as the grandson of Philip IV, claimed the right to the French throne. The war that Edward III launched for that throne continued on and off from 1337 to 1453. It became known as the Hundred Years War. Victory passed back and forth between the two countries. Finally, between 1421 and 1453, the French rallied and drove the English out of France entirely, except for the port city of Calais.

The Hundred Years’ War brought a change in the style of warfare in Europe. At this time some combatants were still operating under medieval ideals of chivalry. They looked with contempt on the common foot soldiers and archers who fought alongside them. This contempt would change as the longbow influenced how battles were fought.
The English introduced the longbow and demonstrated its power in three significant battles: Crécy, Poitiers and Agincourt.

The first and most spectacular battle was the Battle of Crécy on August 26, 1346. The English army, including longbowmen, was outnumbered by a French army three times its size. The French army included knights and archers with crossbows. French knights believed themselves invincible and attacked. English longbowmen let fly thousands of arrows at the oncoming French. The crossbowmen, peppered with English arrows, retreated in panic. The knights trampled their own archers in an effort to cut a path through them. English longbowmen sent volley after volley of deadly arrows. They unhorsed knights who then lay helplessly on the ground in their heavy armour. Then, using long knives, the English foot soldiers attacked, slaughtering the French. At the end of the day, more than a third of the French force lay dead. Among them were some of the most honoured knights. The longbow had won the day. Neither knights nor chivalry had anything to do with the outcome.

The mounted, heavily armoured medieval knight was soon to become extinct. The English repeated their victory ten years later at the Battle of Poitiers.

The third English victory, the Battle of Agincourt, took place in 1415. The success of the longbow in these battles spelled doom for chivalric warfare.

Tasks
1 Find the shaded words in the text for each explanation below:
   a ______________ – unable to be defeated
   b ______________ – killing in a cruel, violent way, using in large numbers
   c ______________ – English archers (refers to their favoured weapon)
   d ______________ – French archers (refers to their favoured weapon)
   e ______________ – a person engaged in fighting, battle, conflict or competition
   f ______________ – a person who takes over a role, in this case that of a monarch
   g ______________ – came together again to continue fighting after a setback
   h ______________ – feeling that a person or thing is worthless or deserves scorn
   i ______________ – widespread occurrence of an infectious disease
   j ______________ – the medieval knight’s (theoretical) religious, moral and social code, namely courage, honour, justice, a readiness to help the weak
   k ______________ – the territory of a duke or duchess
   l ______________ – of long-term benefit or advantage to a particular group

2 What similarities can you identify between the beginning of the Hundred Years War and that of the violent conflicts during the Norman Conquest?

3 State four reasons for the devastating impact of the longbow, both physically and psychologically.

Point for Discussion: The meaning of chivalry and the bitter realities of knightly behaviour