

Welcome to the first of our blogs under the title 'Henry V Throughout History', where the aim is to reanalyse the many different versions of William Shakespeare's historical play *Henry V*.

"Why the sudden interest in *Henry V*?" you might ask, if you've stumbled across this wonderful website by chance. Well, the facts are hopefully fairly simple to get your head around: 2015 is the 600-year anniversary of the legendary Battle of Agincourt, King Henry V's iconic moment from 1415, which was launched from right here in Hampshire.

If you're unfamiliar with the details of Agincourt, you've come to right place. Our wider 'Road To Agincourt' project is all about re-evaluating the historical events, finding the truth of the matter, and understanding how it affected our local area. You can have a click around this website if you wish to find out about the manifold events we are hosting as part of this project in the coming months.

This blog, 'Henry V Throughout History', will chart Agincourt and King Henry V's cultural legacy. Specifically, we will be investigating William Shakespeare's take on the events of Agincourt as immortalised in his play *Henry V*, by revisiting different productions of the famous historical play on a weekly basis from this point forth.

From the Globe Theatre to the silver screen, via television and radio, Shakespeare's *Henry V* has been restaged and reimagined countless times over the years. Sifting through and reliving these different versions is a project we're very excited about.

This week we'll tell you the basic origins of the *Henry V* play in order to set the stage for our upcoming blog series. The play is believed to have been written in 1599, and is set before and after 1415's Battle of Agincourt, a vital English victory in the Hundred Year's War (a conflict between the rulers of England and France, that actually lasted 116 years – from 1337 – 1453).

*Henry V* is the finale of a tetralogy (meaning: a series in four parts) of historical plays by Shakespeare. Preceding *Henry V* was *Richard II*, *Henry IV Part 1*, and *Henry IV Part 2*. At the time of its original staging, Shakespeare's regular audience would have been familiar with

the lead character, as he had appeared as a young and undisciplined Prince in both *Henry IV* plays.

Little is known of the first staging of *Henry V*, but tradition suggests that *Henry V should* have premiered at the first Globe Theatre in the spring of 1599. The 'wooden O' referenced in the play's prologue implies that this was the case, as it is widely considered a reference to the Globe's iconic circular shape.

However, another theory proposes that *Henry V* was actually first staged by Lord Chamberlain's Men (a company of actors that Shakespeare wrote for during the majority of his career) at The Curtain, a small theatre in Shoreditch that they used before the Globe opened.

As the Globe and *Henry V* are believed to have come into being in the same year, with exact dates proving elusive, it's impossible to confidently determine which theory is true. However, some details are available that allude to the style in which *Henry V* would have been staged during early performances.

As Elizabethan stages did not generally employ the use of scenery, it is believed that a single actor dubbed 'the Chorus' would directly ask the audience to use their 'imaginary forces' to overcome the staging limitations, asking "can this cockpit hold the vasty fields of France?"

Later the Chorus would return and tell the audience "we'll not offend one stomach with our play," alluding comically to the journey over the English Channel that the audience are being encouraged to imagine. He would later ask audience members to "grapple [their] minds to the sternage of this navy," again showing how vital individual imaginations were to the original audience's enjoyment of the play.

Naturally, film/TV versions or modern stage productions may choose to remove this fourth-wall-breaking dialogue. It's interesting to consider, though, that Shakespeare could well have played the role of the Chorus in *Henry V's* earliest performances. Indeed, many believe it was the Bard himself that would take to the stage to guide his audience through the un-stage-

able scenes of his play.

Again, it's impossible to be 100% sure about that theory, but it's a fantastic thought, isn't it?

Next week we will begin discussing the major 20<sup>th</sup> century revivals of *Henry V*, beginning with a hugely popular version from 1900.