

Medieval Soldier project

Soldier profile – Robert de Fishlake - from humble archer to esquire

Creating career profiles of archers who fought for the English Crown during the Hundred Years War is far more difficult than reconstructing the careers of men-at-arms. As such men were socially more obscure than knights and esquires, they tend to be far more difficult to trace in the public records. Moreover, archers were rarely commemorated in effigies and brasses, they did not possess coats of arms, and chronicles were seldom interested in glorifying their exploits.

Robert de Fishlake appears to have been a highly competent soldier, whose repeated service as an archer during the late 1370s and 1380s enabled him, by the early stages of the reign of Henry IV, to gain promotion.

Analysis of muster rolls and the records of the Court of Chivalry allow us to ascertain a considerable amount about his career - he served on John of Gaunt's expedition to St Malo in 1378; in the ill-fated fleet commanded by Sir John d'Arundel in 1379, when the ships had been scattered by a violent storm and on the duke of Buckingham's expedition to Brittany in 1380. Following the expedition of 1380 he went on to serve in Scotland and the Latin East, and by the reign of Henry IV had become sufficiently respected to testify at the Court of Chivalry. This shows that the geographical and social horizons of archers during the Hundred Years War could be just as wide as those of the men-at-arms.

We have also learned many additional details about Fishlake's age, background and military career. He lived in Elsing, Norfolk, for eight years. He may have moved there in order to be nearer to his patrons – the Hastings family. His age at the time of the Court of Chivalry deposition is recorded as forty-six. This would have made him around sixteen years old at the time of his first spell of service in 1378, and this accords with what we know about the ages of many first-time warriors during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The range of his military activities, as recorded in his Court of Chivalry deposition, suggest that his connections to the Hastings family had served him rather well. Indeed, he testified to having served with Sir Hugh Hastings III 'in the Eastern Mediterranean, to Jerusalem and elsewhere';

In 1404, following a sixteen-year gap in his service record due to the truce between the realms of England and France during the 1390s, Fishlake appears on a muster roll, as Robert de 'Fischelake', in the retinue of Sir William de Etchingham. On this occasion he is described not as an archer but as a scutifer: a man-at-arms of the secondary order, roughly equivalent to an esquire. Presuming that this was the same Robert de Fishlake as the man who had served during the 1380s (and again there seems little reason to doubt this), he had finally managed to gain promotion, almost two decades

after his military debut, to the rank of man-at-arms. Such an ascent was not unheard of during this period.

His progress from archer to man-at-arms shows that social mobility was possible. His testimony at the Court of Chivalry Case in 1408 - 1410 must have been one of the proudest moments of his life, as he looked back over what had been a very busy but rewarding military career.

Sir Thomas Gray of Heton recalls, in his contemporary *Scalacronica*, that many English soldiers in France began their careers in arms, as youths, as archers, before later becoming knights and sometimes captains. Famous examples of such social climbers among the English soldiery include Sir Hugh Browe, Sir Nicholas Colfox and Sir Robert Knolles. The career of Robert de Fishlake provides a less famous and less astonishing instance of an archer who rose in rank, but one that is probably more representative of the common experience.

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