

# Evolution of the *Middle-Class*

by Earl P. Holt III

There are several theories that attempt to explain the origins of a "*middle-class*" in feudal Europe during the Middle Ages. This was an entirely new social class, outside of the traditional feudal hierarchy and consisting of neither noble nor serf. Its members swore fealty only to a monarch, but owed little or no such loyalty to other nobility or landed gentry, unless they were tenants on their estates.

One credible theory is that this societal evolution began with the development of the English long-bow as an instrument of war, and the success it brought in the *100 Years War* between England and France. Even at a distance, English long-bows could penetrate an enemy's steel armor, dispatching armored cavalry and dramatically increasing the value and importance of these "*yeomen farmers*" in battle.



English Long-Bow in Battle

With their growing stature and importance, they were accorded greater rights and privileges and were soon recognized as a distinct and autonomous class. They were eventually granted the freedom to own land or practice their trade -- such as farming, stone masonry, tailoring, weaving, pottery-making, or mining -- so long as they remained loyal to the monarch and could be enlisted for battle when needed.



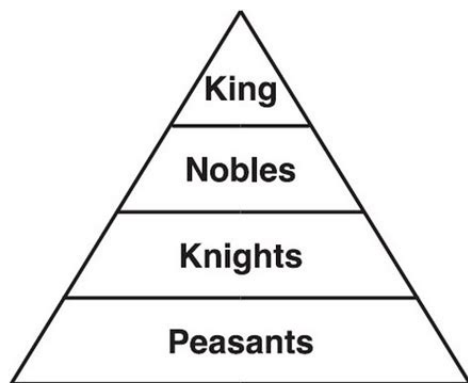
**Freemen (and Women) Harvesting Grain**

A hint of this profound societal evolution appears in Shakespeare's *Henry V*, immortalized in its *Saint Crispin's Day* speech that Henry supposedly gave to his dramatically outnumbered army before the *Battle of Agincourt* on October 25th, 1415. This marked the decisive battle in the *100 Years War* between England and France where, thanks to the English long-bow, Henry's forces devastated a French army that outnumbered them by two or even three to one:

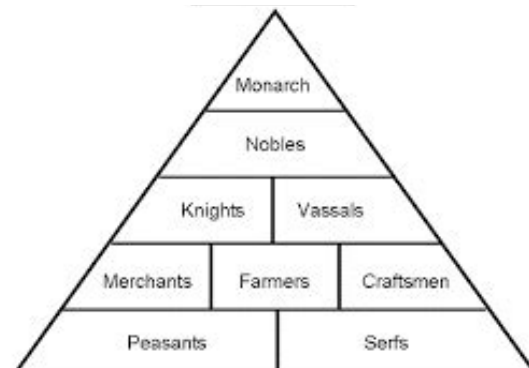
*" We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;  
For he today that sheds his blood with me  
Shall be my brother; be he never so vile,  
this day will gentle his condition..."*

The implications of the promises made by Henry V to his "*band of brothers*" opened vistas of new possibilities, but were delayed by Henry's untimely death in 1421. However, references to this new, middle-class delineation of land-owning commoners began to appear after the year 1429, a mere 14 years after the *Battle of Agincourt*.

In that year, the *Parliament of England* re-organized the *House of Commons* to permit representation based on counties and boroughs, and granted "*freemen*" (small landowners) the right to vote and thereby elect those who were to represent them in the *House of Commons*.



***Before Agincourt***



***After Agincourt***

This unprecedented societal evolution was **both peaceful and revolutionary**, and embodied many early manifestations of the philosophical ideals found later in the Scottish and English

***Enlightenments.*** Similar ideas found their way into the original 13 American Colonies, as religious and political refugees sought greater freedom in the *New World*.

Ironically, the heirs of many expatriate English and Scottish *yeoman farmers* eventually became those citizen-soldiers who fought in the *American Revolutionary War* against Britain.