



IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF
THE BATTLE OF SLUYS
24 JUNE 1340

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The Battle of Sluys took place in what is now the Zwin Nature Reserve. The Zwin consists of the entrance area of the former tidal inlet that during the Middle Ages connected the North Sea with the ports of Sluis (Sluys) and Bruges inland. Its tidal channel reached some 15 km inland and was connected, via another channel, to the mouth of the Scheldt further northeast. The Zwin offered access to the North Sea to the inland city of Bruges, which consequently rose to become one of the foremost medieval port cities of Europe. In 1340 the Zwin estuary and harbour at Sluys was on the border between Zeeland and West Flanders. From the late 13th century onwards, the channel was affected by progressive silting that ultimately caused the waterway to become unusable and cut off the harbours of Bruges and Sluys from the sea.

[Background to the battle](#)

When Charles IV the Fair, King of France, died in 1328 he did not leave behind a male heir, having had only daughters. The principle denying women succession to the French throne had been established in 1316 and as such Charles' daughters could not inherit the throne, which left the French throne vacant.

The closest living male relative of Charles IV was King Edward III of England. The fifteen-year-old Edward's claim was through his mother Isabella of France, Charles IV's sister, and Isabella claimed the vacant French throne for her son. The assemblies of the French barons, French prelates and the University of Paris debated this matter and resolved

that males who derive their right to inheritance through their mother should also be excluded. Over the following century the French adopted a clause from the 6th century Pactus Legis Salicae, aka Salic Law, which asserted that no female or her descendants could inherit the French throne as a governing rule for the French succession.

The closest living male relative to Charles IV in the male line was Philip, Count of Valois who was Charles' first cousin. The French nobility chose Philip to succeed Charles IV as the King of France and he was crowned as King Philip VI. The Plantagenet kings of England had become dukes of Aquitaine when Henry II of England had married Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1152 and from that point onwards the lands in Aquitaine were held in vassalage to the French crown. Edward III did not see himself as subordinate to Philip and refused to acknowledge Philip as his suzerain. Philip also clashed with Edward over Philip's interference in the King of England's war against Scotland.



King Edward III.



King Philip VI.

For nine years, it appeared that Edward had accepted Philip VI's ascendancy to the French throne, but in 1337 Philip confiscated Edward's lands in Aquitaine, on the grounds that Edward had breached his obligation as vassal. It was this, combined with Philip VI's interference in his war against Scotland, that prompted Edward III to reassert his claim to the French throne and in 1340 Edward formally assumed the title "King of France" and combined the French Royal Arms with the three lions of England.

King Edward certainly saw his counterclaim as an opportunity to stir up trouble for Philip VI by encouraging French malcontents to recognise him as king. He may also have seen it as a powerful weapon in negotiation, by offering to renounce his claim in return for large territorial concessions, such as the return and independence of Aquitaine or even the cession of Normandy and Anjou, the other former French lands of the Plantagenet kings, on the same terms.

The Opposing Forces

Initially the French had the superior fleet, their galleys were ideal for swift passage across the Channel under sail or oars, could penetrate shallow harbours and were highly manoeuvrable and ideal for raiding or ship-to-ship combat. The huge French fleet was supplemented by galleys from Genoa, and they were able to disrupt English commercial shipping, particularly that of the Gascon wine and the Flemish wool trades, as well as raiding the south and eastern coasts of England at will.

There was no English Royal Navy in the 14th Century and the English did not have a purpose-built navy. The principal type of English merchant vessel was the Cog, which was clinker-built, fitted with a single mast and a square-rigged single sail, and had a deep draught and round hull. They ranged from about 15 to 25 meters (49 to 82 feet) in length, had a beam of 5 to 8 meters (16 to 26 feet) and the largest could carry up to about 200 tons. Edward requisitioned a number of these ships from the merchant fleet and converted them into warships by adding wooden "castles" at the bow and stern, and a crow's nest platform at the masthead, from which archers could use bows or drop stones on to enemy craft alongside. The high freeboard of the Cog made it superior in close combat to the French galley allowing the English to look down on their French adversaries.

Edward III assembled his fleet in the River Orwell and River Stour near Harwich. He made the Cog Thomas his flagship and set sail on 22 June 1340 and was approaching Sluys by the afternoon of the following day. The English fleet anchored off Blankenberge and that evening King Edward sent Sir Reginald Cobham, Sir John Chandos, and Sir Stephen Lambkin to reconnoitre the French fleet. They found the French fleet anchored at the entrance of the Zwin estuary and ranged in three tightly packed lines that included the great cog Christopher, a captured English prize.



Nicolas Béhuchet, the Constable of France.

The French fleet was under the command of the Breton knight Hugues Quiéret, admiral for the king of France, and Nicolas Béhuchet, the Constable of France. It is believed to have been around 200 ships; Edward in a letter to his son

counts 180 sails and contemporary French documents record the fleet size as 204 vessels. Part of the fleet consisted of Genoese galleys serving as mercenaries under the command of Admiral Pietro Barbavera.

The size of the English fleet is not accurately known as no contemporary records exist. It is believed that the English fleet that set sail from the Orwell consisted of 160 ships and that these were joined by the northern squadron led by Sir Robert Morley. In addition, King Edward's Flemish allies are also reported to have joined the battle and it is thought therefore that the English fleet was somewhere between 120 and 320 ships in total.

The Battle

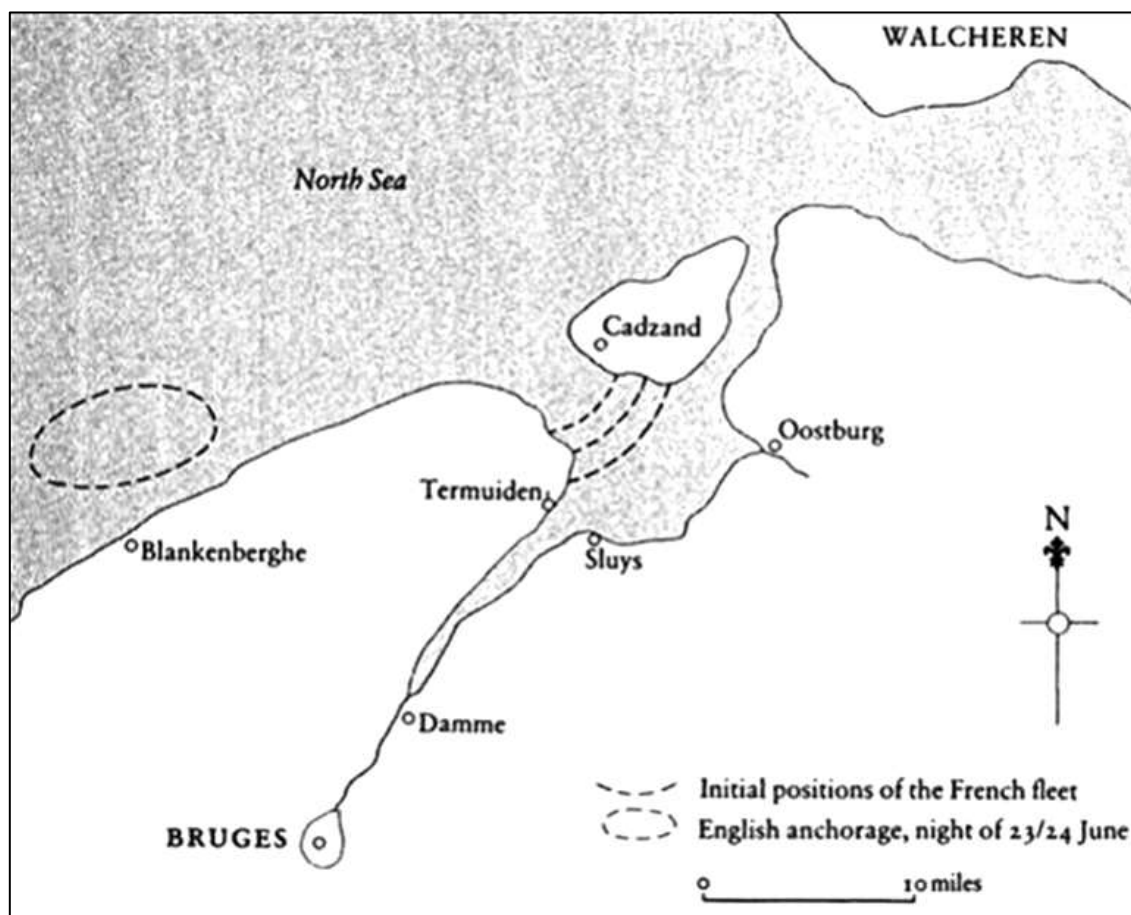
The French dispositions were made in accordance with the tactics for a fleet on the defensive at that time. They were formed into three tightly packed lines chained together, with a few of the largest vessels stationed in front as outposts. Admiral Barbavera was concerned that their lack of manoeuvrability in the anchorage would leave them vulnerable to attack from the ship-based English archers and he advised his French commanders to put to sea.



The Battle of Sluys. [Jean Froissart's Chronicles].

Nicolas Béhuchet, who as constable exercised general command, refused to leave the anchorage as Barbavera suggested.

King Edward III's intentions were well known, he wanted to sail up the Zwin to Bruges and there land his army to support his invasion plans. Many historians believe that Béhuchet's intention was to bar King Edward's way. King Edward's ships entered the Zwin roadstead at high tide, 11.23 am, on 24 June 1340 and, after manoeuvring to windward, sailed towards the French fleet with the sun behind them.



Map showing the relative positions of the French and English fleets.

King Edward sent his ships against the French in groups of three; two ships were crammed with archers and the third full of men-at-arms. The English ships with the archers would close on a French vessel and the archers would rain arrows down on the enemy's decks. The English archers, with their long bows, could accurately shoot 20 arrows per minute at a range of up to 270 metres (300 yards), whereas the Genoese crossbowmen could only manage two bolts per minute and had a lot shorter range. While the enemy vessel was so engaged, the ship carrying the men-at-arms would come alongside and the men-at-arms would board and seize it. Because of how tightly the French vessels were packed together, the battle became essentially a land battle at sea.

The English managed to board and seize many French vessels after fiercely contested hand-to-hand fighting. The Genoese crossbowmen managed to successfully board and capture two English ships. French sources asserted that Nicolas Béhuchet wounded King Edward III during the fighting, but there was no evidence, other than a legendary

one, that a personal encounter between King Edward and the French commander. It is, however, a fact that the King was indeed wounded during the battle by either an arrow or a crossbow bolt.

Nicolas Béhuchet's tactics proved disastrous for the French, as it allowed the English to attack their left flank while leaving the rest of the fleet paralyzed. In a letter to his son, King Edward said that the enemy made a noble defence "all that day and the night after". By the end of the battle, the French fleet had been broken at the cost of only two English ships captured, and the water was reported to be thick with blood and corpses. The number of English losses is unknown, the French are thought to have lost between 16,000 and 18,000 and virtually all of their vessels were captured.

The Aftermath

After the battle King Edward went on to lay siege to Tournai, a Flemish city that had been loyal to Philip VI of France. Edward and his forces reached Tournai on 23 July 1340 and laid siege trapping, apart from the inhabitants, a sizable French garrison inside. The siege dragged on and Philip VI with a relieving army drew closer, while Edward was running out of funds to keep his army in the field. At the same time, Tournai was running out of food.

King Edward's mother-in-law, Jeanne of Valois who was also Philip's sister, visited King Edward in his tent on 22 September and begged for peace. She had already made the same plea in front of Philip VI and consequently a truce, known as the Truce of Espléchin, was made on 25 September 1340 to bring the siege to an end without anyone losing face.

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