



## Longbows

The concept of a bow made of wood, with a string of some kind of natural material and shooting a wooden arrow, is found in almost every culture on earth. Rock paintings from the Neolithic period show bows used for hunting and warfare. Archery featured in war throughout Europe before the Norman conquest of England, but gradually the longbow became especially identified with England because of a unique culture there which promoted the keeping and shooting of bows. Yeoman archers were required by law to keep bows and arrows and to practise with them every Sunday. It was illegal to play games such as tennis, instead of practising archery.

English archers were famous in the victories over French forces such as Agincourt, during the Hundred Years War, and later in battles like Towton (1461) during the Wars of the Roses. King Henry VIII used archers in his armies, and indeed the largest group of late medieval type English longbows which survive was recovered from Henry's flagship *Mary Rose*, which sank in 1545.

By the start of the 17th century increasingly efficient firearms, which could be used by troops with little physical strength or training, eventually brought military archery in England to an end.



Constant training in the longbow from boyhood, the mark of a yeoman archer, was replaced by the bark and smoke of gunpowder weapons.

Yew wood was known from prehistoric times as being the best for bow making, naturally combining a pale sapwood good at resisting stretching with a denser and darker heartwood which resisted compression. This created a superb natural spring, making very effective bows. English yew, however, grows gnarled and twisted, so yew wood for bows had to be imported from areas of Europe with a cold dry climate. To make sure that royal forces could be fully equipped with the bows they needed a form of tax was imposed by successive kings, so that lengths of yew suitable for bows would be imported into England from Europe by merchants wishing to bring in high-value cargoes such as wine.

Arrows were made of wood native to England, such as aspen (white poplar), while the fletchings were made from the flight feathers of farmyard geese, and the iron heads were forged by specialist blacksmiths.



Above: Arrowheads: left to right. A general purpose hunting head; a military 'bodkin'; two 'broad heads'.

The other images are scenes from the films on show in the War Gallery.