



Anglo-French relations

2015 is the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Agincourt and the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo. We take a long-term look at the closely intertwined histories of Britain and France

Dynastic competition

In the medieval and early modern periods, political power in France and England was dynastic in nature. Powerful ruling families sought to expand their territorial possessions through war and marriage. When King Edward of England died in 1066, a war broke out between two claimants to the throne, Harold Godwinson, Earl of Wessex, and Duke William in Normandy. The **Battle of Hastings** that year saw the victory of William and the Normans. Nearly a century later, when one of William's heirs, Henry II, married Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1154, the two brought together lands stretching from England and eastern Ireland to the Pyrenees.

When the ruling French Capetian family line ran out in the early fourteenth century, the Valois family assumed the French throne. However, Edward III of England, a member of the Plantagenet family, believed himself to be the rightful heir through his mother's line. The Salic Law in France, however, denied royal succession through the line of women. The result was the start of what would become the **Hundred Years War**. Despite early victories, by 1453 the Plantagenets had lost all their French territory, aside from the northern port city of Calais, which was finally lost in 1558.

Religious strife

Both realms underwent internal religious strife in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. England occasionally supported the French Protestants known as **Huguenots**. Meanwhile, the Bourbons, who had replaced the Valois, often supported English Catholics in Elizabeth I's Protestant England. Nevertheless, the first four Stuart monarchs who reigned after Elizabeth (James I, Charles I, Charles II and James II) sought to consolidate their Catholic commitments by marrying Catholic princesses from the continent and making peace with France.

The **Glorious Revolution** in England in 1688 saw the ousting of James II, who fled to France. War between France and the Grande Alliance, which included the England of William and Mary of Orange, immediately broke out. For the next half-century, France supported **Jacobites** (English Catholics) in the hopes of restoring James II and his descendants to the throne.

Imperial and economic competition

Religious tensions became less acute in the eighteenth century, and people increasingly saw themselves as belonging to a 'nation'. The rise of national consciousness and public opinion made kings vulnerable to criticism.

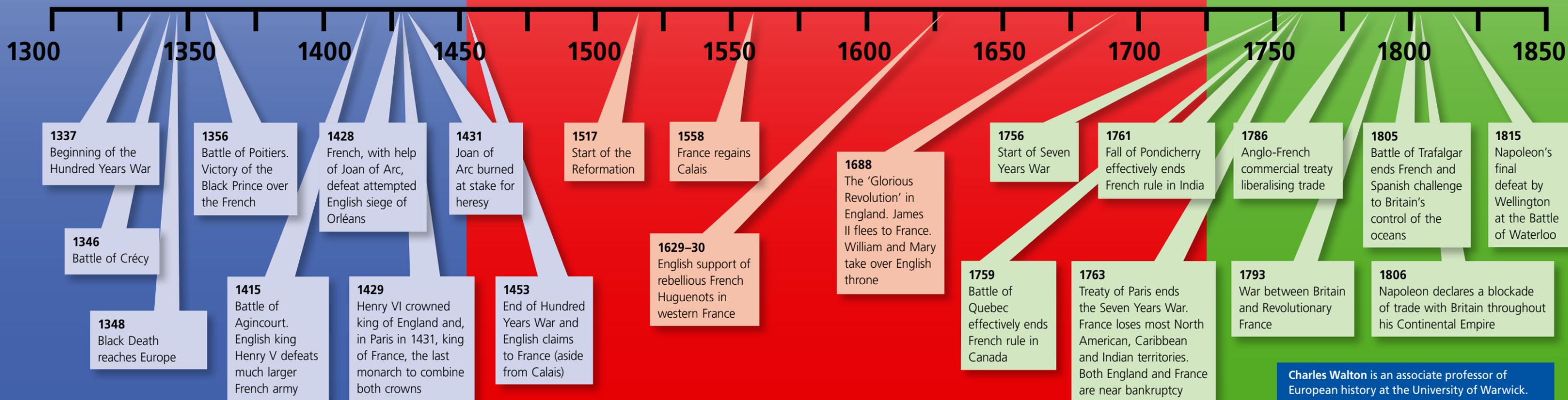
In this context, wars between the two powers were concerned less with religion and more with imperial and commercial competition. The **Seven Years War** (1756–63) pitted the two nations against each other over territorial claims in North America, the Caribbean and south Asia. Britain won that war but, due to France's generous support of North American rebels, lost its American colonies in the American War of Independence (1775–83).

These wars drove both nations deep into debt. In 1786 the French regime pressed Britain to sign a **commercial treaty** liberalising trade between the two nations. However, the arrival of cheap British imports soon struck at France's fledgling manufacturing industries, adding to the economic crisis and popular discontent in the years leading up to the French Revolution.

Prime minister William Pitt the Younger initially adopted a neutral stance with regard to the Revolution. But as the situation in France radicalised, British opinion shifted and Britain and France went to **war in early 1793**. France's army attained unprecedented size as soldier citizens fought with patriotic zeal. In 1806, Britain blockaded France's coasts, prompting Napoleon to declare a **halt to all trade with Britain** in his now immense Continental Empire.

Relative peace

After the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, relations between France and Britain took a peaceful turn. Aside from periodic tensions over imperial claims, notably in Egypt (1840s) and Africa (1870s and 1880s), the situation remained peaceful for the next two centuries. France and Britain were allies in the Crimean War (1854–56) and both world wars. Economic and political cooperation grew stronger in the late twentieth century in the context of the European Union.



Charles Walton is an associate professor of European history at the University of Warwick.