

It was a bright morning, with the freshness of early spring, and the dew sparkled on the grass, but Henry noted this only briefly, reminding himself that the conditions under foot may be slippery. He was here at this time to spy out the land and see if his plan would work. Just down from the path to The Red Lion, the spot that Henry had chosen for the duel, the river curved and on its course had eaten out chunks of the bank here and there. He paced to and fro, assessing the conditions of the field, the space they would need, and where to start. By the time the others arrived, first Edward Stacey then, soon afterwards, Percy FitzSimmonds and Hugh de Launay, he was ready. The greetings, with perfunctory bows, were formal and cold to the point of curtness, and the duel started with very little delay.

Hugh de Launay's eyes widened and he stepped back hastily as he saw how easily Henry deflected his thrust and got within his guard. His manner became much less languid and complacent. But even as he exhorted himself to take this young pup more seriously and put more energy into his swordplay he was unwittingly exaggerating his errors, parrying too wide, too soon, signalling his moves and leaving himself open to a thrust. And he was wasting energy. Henry's sword shimmered in the early morning sun, seldom moving far from a central position as Henry silently calculated the exact angle he needed to break through his opponent's defence with the least possible effort. He regained poise and balance after his parries quickly, feinting, anticipating his opponent's moves, constantly surprising, and advancing. Already he could have drawn blood several times, but he threatened, rather than following through with his lunges, allowing his opponent to retreat. De Launay was already puffing, and moving backwards with embarrassing speed. Just one more step....