

Warfare in Winchester: Empress Matilda's Last Stand

Intro: Hello and welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts and enthusiasts and asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold tales.

Catherine Capel is a PhD student at the University of Winchester and her research interests are on forgotten women in history, particularly on the presence of women in warfare and examining how and why they participated. In today's episode, Catherine gives us an insight into the importance Winchester played as a medieval city during the 12th century, when the Empress Matilda found herself most reliant on it.

Background

Catherine: So I just want to lay out some background to make it easier for listeners who maybe don't know so much about the period as there is a lot going on during this time. There are a lot of individuals who play very key parts, some of whom also have the same name, so I will be trying to use titles where I can.

There's a lot of background to the Anglo-Angevin civil war but I'm going to try and make a very long story somewhat shorter. Henry I, who reigned 1100-1135, thought he had the succession all wrapped up with his son, William, whilst his eldest daughter, Matilda, was the Holy Roman Empress married to Henry V. But, in 1120 there was a disaster when the ship William was travelling on from Normandy to England, named the White Ship, sunk, killing almost everyone on board including Henry's heir. Henry's first wife, Edith-Matilda, had passed away in 1118 and with the death of his son and his daughter reigning as Empress, he would now have to remarry in order to secure succession once again. His second wife was Adeliza of Louvain, who was probably around eighteen when they wed, and she spent much of her first years as Queen of England travelling with Henry, most likely to increase their chances of conceiving. Now if we skip a few years ahead to 1125, Henry and Adeliza were yet to have any children, but the untimely death of Henry V, the Empress's first husband, in the same year created an opportunity for the king. It's also important to note here that at this time, Stephen of Blois, Henry's nephew through his younger sister Adela who would go on to become king of England, married Matilda of Boulogne.

This Matilda was Countess of Boulogne in her own right and she held lands in England alongside the Honour of Boulogne which was made up of Essex, Kent and Surrey. This marriage then made Stephen a significant landholder, not only in Europe in his own right, but also in his uncle's kingdom. Now, the Empress at this time was still young, only about 23, so she was still a marriageable age and still at an age where she could have children. This meant that she would be able to have heirs of her own and make a strong marriage. So when Matilda returned to England, Henry set into motion steps to confirm her as his heir. The first step he took was to have all the leading men of the kingdom, both secular and religious, to swear an oath to Matilda accepting her as his heir lest Adeliza have a child. I should also point out that Stephen was one of the first to swear the oath to the Empress. There would be debates over the validity of these oaths conveniently when Stephen took the throne in 1135, but in 1126 they were considered binding. The next step Henry took to secure Matilda as his heir was

making an advantageous marriage which would serve to increase her social standing and potentially help to limit any concerns magnates may have about female rule.

Henry chose to wed his daughter to Geoffrey of Anjou, who would become Count of Anjou in 1129 after his father Fulk passed on the title to his son so that he could marry Melisende of Jerusalem and become her king consort. Geoffrey was a risky choice for Henry to decide on – there had been tensions between England and Anjou, he was of a lesser status than Empress's first husband and he was much younger than Matilda. Their relationship was rocky for the first four years with Matilda choosing to separate from him soon after their marriage and they did not reconcile until 1131. Tensions were also rising in their marriage because there was a dispute over Matilda's inheritance to castles in Normandy. However, their marriage found a rhythm and they had their first of three children in 1133, the future Henry II. Their second son Geoffrey would be born in 1134, but complications with his birth would leave Matilda close to death, to the point where arrangements for her burial were being drawn up. But she recovered and Henry then had two healthy grandsons. The birth of her two sons should have served to strengthen her position as heir to the English throne because she herself had now secured her own continuing line. They also potentially presented Henry with the chance to install Matilda's eldest son as his heir with Matilda as regent. There is no specific evidence to support this however, but that is not to say that Henry might not have potentially considered it.

In 1135, this is the year when it all REALLY started with the Anglo-Angevin civil war, and Matilda and Geoffrey were still arguing with Henry over her inheritance to the Norman castles. There was a rebellion in the duchy, with Matilda and Geoffrey supporting the rebels, and during this conflict Henry unexpectedly took ill and died. There are mixed stories about what the king decided on his deathbed – some authors recount that he reaffirmed his desire for Matilda to be his heir and others claimed that he freed the magnates from their oaths. Whatever the true account was, Matilda was not installed as the new Queen of England. Instead her cousin Stephen seized the throne. At the time of Henry's death, Stephen was in Boulogne which placed him in a better strategic position than Matilda for travelling to England, as she was still in southern Normandy reclaiming castles. Furthermore, Matilda would have been unable to travel such a distance as she was once again pregnant with her third child and after the complications caused by her second childbirth it is likely that she would have been erring on the side of caution not take any risks. So instead Stephen took the throne and was crowned in December 1135.

Skipping ahead again to 1139, we see that Matilda was ready to make her move towards claiming her inheritance that her cousin Stephen had usurped from her. I believe that this is the move which arguably marked the beginning of the civil war because it is the first time that the Empress made a move against Stephen in England and she began to solidify her powerbase within the kingdom. Although her movement in Normandy served as her declaration towards Stephen, that she would be coming to claim the rest of her inheritance, her landing at Arundel was also the first indication that there could be a diplomatic or physical altercation between these two factions of power. Now, the move that the Empress made was to land at Arundel where her stepmother Adeliza lived with her new husband, William d'Albini. One of the issues with this was that William was a staunch supporter of Stephen which could potentially lead to Matilda being ousted before she had managed to establish her foothold. However, her landing was successful with her troops and her biggest ally, her half-brother Robert of Gloucester. Robert was one of Henry I's favourite illegitimate children and he would play a central role in Matilda's campaign during the civil war. There was a real chance here for Stephen to put an end to Matilda's campaign before it even had a chance to begin – she had landed in the territory of one of his allies and she was not as organised as the king – but instead when Stephen

arrived at Arundel he made the decision to grant the Empress safe travel through the country. This decision is widely criticised by contemporary writers of the period as they all note that this was Stephen's opportunity to prevent war from ravaging England. However, instead he escorted Matilda to Bristol which allowed her to then travel on safely to Gloucester, her brother's county, where she established her main powerbase.

At this point we can skip ahead again to a hugely significant event which provides the basis for my podcast today. In 1141, the Battle of Lincoln appeared as though it was going to be the deciding episode of the civil war. It began when two brothers, Ranulf Earl of Chester and William de Roumare, were awarded by Stephen the earldom of Lincoln and military and administrative powers over Lincolnshire and the town and the castle of Derby. The castle of Lincoln, however, was not a part of the negotiations. This was a sore spot for the brothers as it was a part of their mother's inheritance which they were trying to reclaim. The brothers took the castle anyway by force which did not sit well with Stephen. Furthermore, their treatment of the citizens led to an appeal to the king for help on their behalf which he answered by immediately marching to Lincoln. Once he arrived, Stephen besieged the castle, but one of the brothers, Ranulf, managed to escape. He headed for his county of Chester where he raised his troops and secured troops from Wales as well. At this point, he also approached the Empress for support which she agreed to provide in return for his support in her own campaign. This was a stringent move by the Empress because she would not only gain more support in the North, but a victory would also deal a crushing blow to royal forces and hopefully encourage more leading men to defect to her side. The Empress granted her support and sent Robert of Gloucester to aid Ranulf which worked well in their favour because they won the battle which followed and even managed to capture Stephen on the battlefield. After this, Matilda made her way south, stopping at strategic points along the way, and travelled to London where she began to assert herself as the new monarch. However, this did not quite work out as the Empress had hoped. At first, the Empress was welcomed by the city but very quickly relations broke down between her and the citizens. She was demanding that they pay her the same tax as they had paid Stephen, but they refused which infuriated the Empress. There were also attempts by Queen Matilda to establish diplomatic negotiations with the Empress to ransom Stephen, but these fell on deaf ears. And in retaliation the Queen's forces razed areas around London in front of the Empress's men and displayed their military might.

After the situation between the Empress and London citizens reached breaking point, they rose up against her and forced her out of the city, welcoming the Queen in her stead. From London, the Empress made her way to Winchester which is where the key feature of our talk begins. And believe it or not, that was the short version of the story so far!

Now, the events which took place in Winchester in 1141 were extremely significant as they marked a renewal in the success of the royal forces and the disintegration of the position that the Empress had managed to establish. The questions I would like to ponder in my talk today focus on why Matilda chose to flee London to Winchester and whether or not this was a good decision on her behalf. It is important to remember here that the Empress was so close to confirming her position as Queen, but she did not have the all-important coronation that was needed to reflect this. Therefore, although she sold herself as 'Lady of the English', which she continued to do so after her escape from London, this was only a moniker to denote the status that she would have had as Queen, but did not achieve.

Why Choose Winchester?

One of the primary things to consider at this point in the civil war was why the Empress choose to make her next power base Winchester? It's worth noting that after fleeing London, the Empress did

first make her way to Oxford to regroup with allies and decided from there that Winchester was the next logical choice. After failing to succeed in securing London, it was vital that she not lose control of Winchester and for that she needed to confirm the support of Bishop Henry of Winchester. Bishop Henry was actually Stephen's younger brother who had defected to the side of the Empress when she had won the battle of Lincoln in early 1141. As bishop, he was the primary figure in the city and held control of one of the wealthiest English sees. In return, confirming his allegiance to the Empress served to confirm her control over the city and the royal finances. Furthermore, as brother to the king, it was possible that the Empress believed the bishop would be instrumental in conducting negotiations with the Queen to restore London to her. Next to London, Winchester was arguably the second most important city in the kingdom and if she could not control London and achieve her goals in the capital then her thought process may have focused on fortifying Winchester as the next best thing.

Winchester was also a vital economic importance to an English monarch because it was the home of the royal treasury. As the Empress had failed to secure her queenship, gaining control of the treasury was vital. This could have been a very important move made by the Empress as it would have been a display of the power she retained within the kingdom and hopefully would have forced factions loyal to Stephen to retreat out of London.

The city as well held as much a symbolic importance as London. It had a long association as a proto-capital of Wessex during the Anglo-Saxon period, playing a central role as Alfred's administrative and cultural hub. The fact that the royal treasury was still housed there also signified the symbolic importance of the city, highlighting that it remained an important administrative centre. It is doubtful that the Empress would attempt to use Winchester as a city to meet the requirements she needed to become queen. It may have been possible for her to stage a coronation in the cathedral, as Henry the Young King would do in 1172 and it's also where Richard I would have his second coronation in 1194. So it may have been possible. However, this would not help bring the Londoners back to her side which was vital if she was to succeed at ruling the kingdom. However, if she was looking for a city from which she could apply ample pressure onto the Queen's forces, in the hopes of drawing them out of London, Winchester was a very good choice.

A Good Choice?

After the disaster of London, setting up a base in Winchester was both a strong administrative and military plan. As I mentioned earlier, the fact that Winchester was the place of the treasury meant that it carried with it important governmental significance and so it would make sense for the Empress to head there. Furthermore, having control of the royal treasury gave her an extended form of power – she was still trying to behave as a monarch even if she had not achieved this status through a coronation. This is linked to the symbolic importance of the city. And having that connection to past royal lineage, especially one such as Alfred, helped to reinforce that she was still a contender to the throne and that she still had a legitimate claim.

With this also came her choice to reinforce her alliance with Bishop Henry. He was a key ally for many reasons as I suggested previously, and it was important that the Empress retain his support. Without it she risked losing a key negotiator, his influence within Winchester and the kingdom as a whole, and overall control of the city. It was more likely that its inhabitants would welcome Matilda if she had the bishop's support. If not, she arguably risked a repeat situation of what happened in London. She could also not risk the bishop defecting back to the side of his brother because it would strengthen their military forces and encourage others to follow suit. The bishop had also been one of the first magnates to condemn Stephen's actions during the first years of his reign after his defeat at

Lincoln, and claimed that he had not lived up to his promises to the church. These promises that Stephen had made were key to his acceptance by religious magnates and the legitimacy of his actions in 1135. The bishop's condemnation of his brother worked well in the Empress's favour as it furthered her narrative as the wronged heir, especially after her capture of the king.

From a military prospective, Winchester was also a good idea. When the Empress arrived in the city, she headed to the royal castle which was a good strategic move as it provided her with fortification. The castle was situated on top of a hill making it easily defensible against an attack or easy to launch an attack, which she ultimately ended up doing.

Bad Choice?

But was it a bad choice to go to Winchester?

I don't believe that her choice of city was bad, but her actions whilst she was there arguably caused her to lose whatever position she had gained after Lincoln and undermined her opportunity to confirm herself as Queen. Although the Empress had gone to Winchester with the intention of cementing her alliance with the bishop, he actually proved reluctant to answer her summons most likely because he was already in communication with the Queen. As a result of this, she besieged his castle in order to try and force his hand. I believe that this was a bad strategic and military decision. The bishop's castle, Wolvesey Castle, which you can still visit at the bottom of the town centre, was built to be defensible, as most castles were, as the bishop had added a defensible wall between the two original Norman halls. If the bishop was communicating with the Queen, which he actually was, then it's probable that the Queen would arrive with her troops. This would have consisted of the men who had been loyal from the beginning and an added force of Londoners which she had acquired thanks to the Empress. Their position coming up from London allowed them to establish an effective counter-siege, blocking the roads to prevent supplies of men and food from entering Winchester, burning parts of the city to force the Empress's troops into less favourable positions, and launching an attack against the royal castle to divide the Empress's attention. The Empress should have anticipated that the Queen would come to the bishop's aid – she similarly understood just as well how much of an important ally he would be during this time. As I've just mentioned, the Empress's besiegement of the bishop's castle left her own base vulnerable and open to attack which weakened her standing in Winchester to the point where she once again had to flee a city and seek refuge elsewhere. The ensuing consequences also resulted in a battle between imperial and royal troops where Robert of Gloucester was captured, ending the upper hand that Matilda had earned with the capture of the king at Lincoln. In order for her to regain her primary ally and military general, she had to release the king, eradicating all the steps she had taken forward in her campaign to reclaim the crown.

Although the bishop exhibited a great amount of influence within the kingdom, once it became apparent that he was not going to support her, she should have focused on taking control of the city as a whole, including the treasury. This would have given her a new powerbase in a strategic position and allowed her to send for reinforcements so that she might retake London and achieve her ultimate goal.

Final Thoughts

Some final thoughts I want to leave you with at the end of this talk.

The civil war period during the twelfth century is a confusing conflict but it provides us with wonderfully rich examples of queenship and queens leadership. The events which led to Matilda's presence in Winchester in 1141 were turbulent as she went from a place of power to one of almost desperation. Her choice to travel to Winchester was an informed one, but her decision to besiege the bishop put her in a place of disadvantage. This highlights the complex nature of military strategy, but also highlights the knowledge of the Empress in this area, even if it did not work out in her favour. She understood the importance of Winchester next to London for allies, finances and power which she could have used to her advantage. But, she was arguably out strategized by her counterpart Queen Matilda.

This was an important moment for Winchester as well. Most of the city was destroyed because of fires lit by the besieged and it was the only siege to actually befall Wolvesey Castle. Throughout the middle ages, Winchester had been considered primarily as the administrative hub of the kingdom and events of 1141 reinforced how important the city remained in governing. The fight between the Empress and the Queen for control indicated how useful influence with the city could be at this time – in providing key allies, financial support, its links to Alfred and Saxon dynasties, its castle fortresses, its patronage of Bishop Henry. And in terms of modern Winchester and its remembrance of these events, if you visit the Great Hall there are remains of the original Norman royal castle which allows you to see where the Empress established herself in the city and how the layout affected the siege. There is also Wolvesey Castle which is open to the public to walk around which, much like with the royal castle, allows you to see how the city existed around it and impacted the outcome of events.

Outro: We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you'd like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, winchesterheritageopendays.org, click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.

Thank you for listening.