

Intrigue in the New Forest Leads to a Mystery at Winchester Cathedral

Intro: 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, asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold stories.

Aisha: Hello, and welcome to Hampshire HistBites. My name is Aisha Al-Sadie and I am the learning officer at Winchester Cathedral. My story today is a strange one full of mystery and intrigue. It is about a dead king and a tower, and it will be up to you to decide if it was an accident or a murder.

1100 AD was an odd sort of year for some. King William II had been king for a while, following the death of his father, William the Conqueror. But William II was not a good king. He was a good soldier and was loved and admired by his men who would follow him anywhere. He was good at planning battles and even winning them. But when it came to kindness, generosity and listening, well, that was a different matter.

The truth was William didn't listen to advice. He saw and treated the people of England rather like his own private bank. And every time he needed money to fight another battle or to buy something expensive, he would raise the taxes and make people pay more money to him. As the King grew richer, the people grew poorer and some started to hate the King, but he didn't care.

William liked to spend his spare time hunting deer and wild boar in the New Forest. The New Forest was a Royal hunting ground created by his father as a private hunting area. Only the King and his special friends were allowed to hunt in the forest. Anyone caught hunting, even if it was just for a scrawny rabbit, faced a possible death sentence and the peasants who used to live there were thrown out.

One day, William decided to go hunting. He liked the chase. Riding one of his fastest horses through the trees and across the heather strewn heathland, he loved to pull tight the string of his finest bow and to aim carefully so that the tip of the arrow lined up with the deer. Holding his breath, he tracked the deer, never taking his eyes off the animal. Keeping his arm steady, he could hear his own heart-beating in his head. He then released the arrow, sending it flying through the air.

On this day, he had a large group of friends with him. William liked the company of men and chose friends who supported him and liked his ideas. As a group they rode through the forest, laughing and joking, while stewards rode ahead on the lookout for deer or boar. Suddenly a cry went up, the group fell silent, and they followed the finger of a steward who pointed at a magnificent stag standing amongst the trees, a short way off. The animal stood tall and proud in a clearing, a beautiful pair of antlers on its head. He was alert. His eyes were large and clear. His ears were flicking backwards and forwards. His nostrils flared, trying to catch the scent of danger. The King slowly and silently slid from the back of his horse, taking his bow and arrow with him. His friends did the same. They knew that the King wouldn't mind too

much if one of them fired at the stag too, it was all part of the excitement of the hunt. The group crept forward, never taking their eyes off the stag. The King was at the front. Each man prepared an arrow for firing placing it carefully in a bow. They had done this so many times before they didn't even need to look down.

The stag stamped its foot in warning, realizing that danger was around. The men raised their bows. The stag started to move. The arrows were released and...

What followed would remain burned into the minds of every man present. There was a sickening cry as the arrow glanced off an oak tree and rapidly changed direction. The stag snorted and charged off into the forest as the King collapsed to the ground, the arrow still fixed in his bow. Silence followed, it felt as if time stood still and no one moved, their limbs felt heavy, and their mouths were dry. Everything happened very quickly. A steward rushed to the side of the King. A red patch was starting to spread slowly across his chest and in the centre was an arrow buried deep into his heart.

One man gasped, as he recognized the pattern of feathers on the bow, it was his! Walter Tyrell let out a cry and placed his hands across his eyes. What had he done? Panic set in. The men stumbled to their horses, mounted, and rode off as fast as they could in all directions.

The stewards didn't know what to do, so they ran as fast as they could away from that dreadful scene. The body of the King lay crumpled, bleeding and alone on the floor of the forest. Silence fell.

Now, there's something a bit odd about this whole business. Hunting accidents were not unusual. William's own older brother, Richard had been killed in a hunting accident in the forest when William was a small boy. Richard was gored to death by a stag and lays buried under the Presbytery screen on the south side of the cathedral to this day.

But there was something very odd about this incident. At the time that William was hunting in the forest, his younger brother, Henry was also out hunting. Henry was very ambitious. He wanted power, but all he got when his father died with some gold and silver, he was not happy. Henry heard about his brother's accident, but instead of rushing to William's side, he spurred his horse into a gallop and headed to Winchester to claim the treasure of England and proclaim himself King Henry I. The day wore on, morning passed into afternoon and afternoon into early evening. The body of the King still lay on the forest floor.

Walking through the forest, came a charcoal burner. His name was Purkis and his family had been charcoal burners in the forest for generations. He was a poor man, and it was a hard life collecting fallen wood and burning it to make charcoal to sell. Charcoal burnt hotter than wood and then a good week he could make enough money to feed his family. His horse was old and his cart, even older. It had been a long, hard day and the man's hands, face and clothes were blackened by the smoke of burning wood. He was hungry and ready for his supper. As Purkis was making his way through the forest, he saw the body on the floor and stopped his horse. Robbers sometimes attacked unwary travellers in the forest, so he needed to be careful. He softly clicked his tongue and urged his horse to walk forward so he could get a better look. As he came closer, he recognized the fine clothes and the face of the person. It was the King. Purkis had seen the King hunting in the forest before, it must be him. But why was he here? Then, Purkis saw the dark red stain and the arrow and drew in a

sharp breath. What has happened? This was no place to leave anyone, even the meanest king England had ever known. Darkness was beginning to fall. So Purkis decided that he was going to lift the body of the King into his cart and take him to Winchester. After much arguing and debating, William II was eventually buried in a simple stone tomb in the most holy part of Winchester cathedral.

Many people were not happy about this. He was such a mean man, who seemed to have no time for the Church or God. And he had no business being buried in the cathedral. But he was also the King and other Kings were buried in the cathedral. So it was his right and could not be denied. The people in Winchester talked for a long time about this burial and some predicted that nothing good could come of it.

Seven years later, the Great Norman Tower of the cathedral, holding up the great bells, came crashing down. The stones fell into the choir and into the crypt falling all around the tomb where the King was buried. Some said the tower collapsed because it was God's punishment for burying such a dreadful man in the cathedral. Others said that the Normans were so bad at building towers that this collapse was not unusual.

The bones of the King were removed from the tomb and the tower was eventually rebuilt. His bones are now in the mortuary chests on top of the Presbytery screen, but we don't know which ones belong to him as they were jumbled up a long time ago.

So what do you think of my story? Was King William II killed by accident, or was he murdered on the order of his brother, Henry so that he could become king?

Thank you for listening. I hope you enjoyed it. And the next time you visit Winchester cathedral, think of my story as you look at the tower.

Outro: We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you would like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, www.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.