

EDITORS' NOTE

1141 – the Siege of Winchester

Much is known about the damage to Winchester Cathedral in the English Civil Wars of the mid-seventeenth century, but the Cathedral had witnessed another violent conflict 500 years early. In 1141 it was in the centre of the Siege of Winchester which resulted in parts of the walled city being destroyed by fire. There are, however, no contemporary or archaeological reports of damage to the Cathedral itself.

The conflict was between troops and supporters of Bishop Henry of Blois and those of Empress Matilda who was contesting the crown of England with Henry's brother Stephen. She was the daughter of Henry I and should have succeeded him in 1135. She was thwarted by Stephen of Blois, who staged a coup d'état, and took the English crown instead. This period is known as The Anarchy and lasted from 1138 and 1153, when a permanent truce was brokered between King Stephen and his successor, Empress Matilda's son Henry Plantagenet who would become Henry II.

The siege came about in early August 1141 when Empress Matilda and her half-brother and champion Robert of Gloucester returned to Winchester Castle after reports that Bishop Henry of Blois had been reinforcing and provisioning Wolvesey Palace.¹ Earlier in the year the bishop transferred his support to Matilda after his brother King Stephen was defeated and captured at the Battle of Lincoln. Stephen was imprisoned in Bristol Castle, but the bishop soon became disenchanted with Matilda. She, like his imprisoned brother, wanted more control over the affairs of the church and sought to reduce the number of castles that the bishops controlled.

Henry, one of the richest and most politically powerful men in England, controlled more castles and fortified palaces than all other bishops. They included Merden Castle, near Winchester, Bishops Waltham Palace, Downton Castle, south of Salisbury, Farnham Castle and a three-storey keep in Taunton with massive walls. His favourite was probably Wolvesey Castle in Winchester.²

¹ Teresa Cole, *The Anarchy*. Stroud: Amberley, 2019, 189.

² Cole, *Anarchy*, 142.

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Empress Matilda summoned Henry to the castle but he fled to Farnham Castle.³ Both called for support and Winchester became a battleground with the empress's forces attacking Wolvesey Castle and the bishop's men defending it.

Matilda's force started their attack on August 1, 114. The well-provisioned Wolvesey garrison shot lighted brands 'with which they reduced to ashes the greater part of the city.' Contemporary chronicles reported that outcome was widespread devastation including the loss of at least one abbey, that of the nuns of St Mary's (Nunaminster), close to Wolvesey Castle. Hyde Abbey, outside the city walls, was also burnt. It was also claimed that up to 23 churches and many houses were destroyed or damaged. Conflagrations were not uncommon in the early medieval period as houses were constructed of wood with thatched roofs, which enabled the rapid spread of urban fires.

There has been debate as to whether the bishop's troops were based in Wolvesey Castle or the Royal Palace⁴ which is considered to have been to the west of the Cathedral, probably in the area of Great Minster Street and extending to the High Street or close to it. In either place, the Cathedral was very close to the fighting and the subsequent damage to the city.

While Empress Matilda's troops sought to suppress the bishop's troops in the city by a siege, the Empress was outflanked by supporters of King Stephen, led by his wife Queen Mathilde of Boulogne, who surrounded Winchester's walls and controlled much of the central Hampshire countryside. They were able to defeat troops who were coming to assist the Empress, which left her stranded in the western side of the city.

The castle was attacked from inside the city and from outside the walls. There was not enough food in Winchester for Matilda's force and its horses. After six weeks of stalemate, the Empress had three choices – starve, surrender, or try to break out.⁵ She chose to escape through the West Gate on September 14 and head for

³ Catherine Hanley, *Matilda – Empress Queen Warrior*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2019; 162.

⁴ Tom Beaumont James, *Winchester – From Prehistory to the Present*. Stroud: Tempus, 2007; 76.

⁵ Hanley, *Matilda*, 165.

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Stockbridge to cross the River Test in a move towards the comparative safety of the West Country. The withdrawal soon turned into a series of attacks by Queen Matilda's forces, ending in a rearguard action at the Test crossing while the Empress made an ignominious escape to Ludgershall, Devizes and finally Gloucester. She was carried on a horse-borne litter for the final two days.

The actions became known as the Rout of Winchester⁶ and was effectively the end of Empress Matilda's campaign to gain the throne of England. King Stephen was released from Bristol Castle soon after in exchange for Robert of Gloucester who was captured in the rearguard action at the River Test crossing.

The Cathedral had little or no damage. Its sanctified position appears to have been respected by both sides. Other churches and buildings in the city, however, were looted and damaged by the victorious forces of Queen Mathilde.⁷ Recent archaeological evidence indicates that the dramatic story of conflagration engulfing Winchester may have been over-stated. The Winchester survey of 1148 showed 'little evidence of any devastation which may have been caused by the siege'.⁸

By 1153, Winchester must have been rebuilt sufficiently to retain its role as a royal centre of administration, particularly for the treasury. After conflict between Stephen and Empress Matilda's son Henry Plantagenet over succession, an agreement, known as the Treaty of Winchester, was concluded in the Cathedral on November 6 that year. In it, Stephen formally established Henry as his successor and Henry swore to accept him as his liege man and to protect him. Stephen undertook to govern with the advice of his successor. Henry was to be guided by Bishop Henry. The chronicler Henry of Huntingdon wrote, 'what boundless joy, what a day of rejoicing, when the king himself led the illustrious young prince through the streets of Winchester itself'.⁹

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⁶ Nicholas Riall, *Henry of Blois, Bishop of Winchester*, Hampshire Papers 5. Winchester: Hampshire County Council, 1994, 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 168-69.

⁸ Martin Biddle & D. J. Keene, "Winchester in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries", in *Winchester Studies I: Winchester in the Early Middle Ages*, edited by Martin Biddle. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976, 389.

⁹ Cole, *Anarchy*, 256.