

HISTORICAL NOTE

MATILDA, THE MOST FAMOUS ENGLISH QUEEN YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF!

Almost all of the things that happen in our play did actually take place. Matilda was born in the Manor House in Sutton Courtenay in 1102. Matilda's main support was in the West Country and Thames Valley, though there is no record of her ever passing through Sutton Courtenay again, en-route to the real-life events in Lincoln, Winchester and London. She died in 1167 in Rouen in France.

Even in her death, she couldn't escape the Henrys – part of her epitaph read:
“Great by birth, greater by marriage, greatest in her offspring: here lies Matilda, the daughter, wife and mother of Henry”.

Matilda was given a pretty hard time from historians until quite recently, and was widely portrayed as arrogant and proud. This was in part due to many chronicles of the time being written by Stephen's supporters (!), but also due to sexist attitudes over the last couple of hundred years. If she'd been a man, she wouldn't have been criticised for those things! More recently, her story and legacy are being interpreted in a more sympathetic manner.

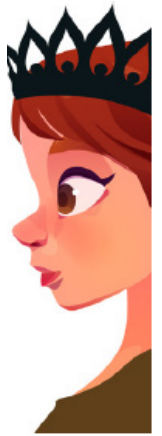
Sir Renaud de Courtenay (a French noble whose name was anglicised to Reginald) was indeed given the demesne of Sutton by his friend, King Henry II, and renamed it Sutton Courtenay. But he only became Henry's friend later in life, after these events, and wasn't given Sutton until 1161. So Reg would not have been present during these events. By all accounts, unlike our two Reg's, he wasn't a very nice person either...

Matilda's son Henry was born in 1133, so would only have been 9 years old when our events take place. Only after Matilda's escape did Henry get more involved in politics, when he was 14. Matilda returned to France in 1148, so when Henry led the army and concluded the Treaty of Wallingford in 1153 to end the war, his mother wasn't with him. By then, 1153, both Sir Robert, Matilda's half-brother (Bob) and her childhood friend Brian FitzCount of Wallingford had both died. As had Stephen's wife Matilda. And Hugh Bigod, Earl of Norfolk had switched sides, from Stephen to Matilda!

There is also no record of Matilda's escape from Oxford being aided by any magical creatures, or member of the audience. Pretty much everything else happened though!



Empress Matilda



THE MUSICAL!

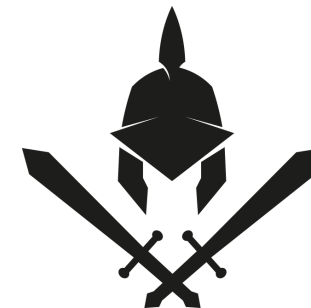
An original play by Bernie Jones

Friday 17 & Saturday 18 March 2023

SYNOPSIS

READ ABOUT:

- >> THE STORYLINE FROM ACTS 1 AND 2 (inside pages)
- >> A HISTORICAL NOTE ABOUT OUR MUSICAL (back page)



ACT I

The year is 1141...

We start in the present-day. The ghost of Sir Reginald the Courtenay returns to Sutton Courtenay and meets local schoolchildren Erin, Lena and Hannah. They have to research a local history project, and Reg suggests the topic of Empress Matilda, and introduces a cast of historical characters from the 12th Century to tell her story....

We meet the Abbot of Abingdon and group of local peasants who tell about their lives, and learn that **Empress Matilda and King Stephen are fighting over the crown of England, in a long and drawn out Civil War which was called “the Anarchy”**.

Matilda arrives in Sutton Courtenay with her son, Harry and his friend Reg (none other than the younger, alive version of Sir Reginald above), other supporters and her army.

She explains to the schoolgirls why she is at war with Stephen: although she was named the heir to the throne by her father Henry I, because she was a woman she was not accepted and her cousin Stephen took the throne with the support of the church. **So Matilda is fighting for her right to rule.** After resting in the village overnight, Matilda and her army depart for the siege of Lincoln, to confront King Stephen’s forces.

Shortly thereafter King Stephen arrives with his wife (another Matilda), his brother Henry the Bishop of Winchester, his supporters and his army. We have a flashback to the Council where the decision was made to make Stephen King instead of Matilda by the church, the nobles and also the powerful merchants of London who Stephen had bribed. After resting in the village, they too depart to Lincoln.

We move to Lincoln for the battle, which ends with Stephen being captured by Matilda’s army. They all return through Sutton Courtenay on their way to Winchester (where the Royal Treasury is), and retell the story of the victory over Stephen. The Bishop of Winchester, who has now switched sides – allegedly – refuses to crown Matilda as Queen, but instead proposes she becomes “Lady of England” instead.

ACT II

In Winchester, Matilda becomes the ruler of England and heads to London, although the Merchants are not at all happy. Then back in Sutton Courtenay the villagers observe Matilda in London, where all is going very badly.

The Londoners don’t like her and she has no money for an army. Stephen’s Queen hatches a cunning plan to make Matilda seem unreasonable, by asking her for several favours, including releasing her husband from prison (which she knows Matilda will have to refuse).

Stephen’s wife has raised an army who attack London, and the Londoners revolt against Matilda. She is forced to flee to Oxford (via Sutton Courtenay). Her enemies have captured the General of her forces, her half brother Robert (Bob), and secure the release of King Stephen in exchange for Robert’s life.

Stephen lays siege to Oxford, trapping Matilda in Oxford Castle. Stephen and Matilda duet, both insisting that the throne is their destiny. Matilda refuses to surrender, and Stephen refuses to lift the siege. After the siege has continued for three months, and conditions are dire, Matilda manages to escape the castle with help from the audience and the mythical creatures of Sutton Courtenay, the Swan, Fish, Dragon and Peacock.

The fighting continues for another 11 years until eventually a truce is agreed with the Treaty of Wallingford. Stephen will continue to be King, but after Stephen the throne will pass to Matilda’s son, who will become King Henry II of England.

Matilda and Stephen reflect on how they will be viewed by future historians, and the circumstances that led them to act as they did as the play draws to a close.