# Historic Royal Palaces Podcast

# Matilda of Flanders

## Show Notes

Matilda of Flanders is the formidable consort of William the Conqueror, yet she is relatively unknown in the story of the 1066 conquest of England.

Chief Historian Tracy Borman makes her pitch for the pivotal role Matilda played as a champion for female sovereignty, and for her contribution to arguably the most successful dynasty in medieval Europe, the Normans.

Read more about [Matilda of Flanders](https://www.hrp.org.uk/tower-of-london/history-and-stories/matilda-of-flanders/), [William the Conqueror](https://www.hrp.org.uk/tower-of-london/history-and-stories/william-the-conqueror/) and the building of the [Tower of London.](https://www.hrp.org.uk/tower-of-london/history-and-stories/the-story-of-the-tower-of-london/)

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## Transcript

### Tracy Borman [00:00:03]

[The podcast opening theme music begins. It is steady and regal. Tracy’s voice comes in on top. She speaks clearly, from the studio, with a measured pace, but sounds excited about the episode about Matilda of Flanders.]

Welcome back to the Historic Royal Palaces podcast, the podcast that tells the history and stories of our six palaces. I'm Tracy Borman. I have the exciting new title of Chief Historian here at the palaces. Now, if you were to think of the foundational figures in the 1066 conquest of England and the building of the Tower of London, I imagine you would think immediately of William the Conqueror, the man whose name looms large over this pivotal time in our history.

But what of the Queen of the Conqueror? The woman who held Normandy so that William could conquer England? The mother of two Norman kings and the matriarch of the Norman dynasty? For today's episode, I'm going to explore the life of Matilda of Flanders, Queen of the Conqueror, and I'll be making my pitch for why I think she deserves to be seen in her own right as a foundational figure of the 1066 Conquest.

[The theme music finishes and fades out. Tracy reads the episode’s content warnings with a serious tone.]

### Tracy Borman [00:01:25]

Please be aware that this episode contains descriptions of sexual violence that some listeners may find distressing.

### Tracy Borman [00:01:35]

Welcome lovely listeners. I am sitting in actually one of my favourite rooms in the Tower of London. This is the Curator's Library and it's a lovely little bolt hole just on the end of the Waterloo Block. You can spend hours in here with nobody finding that you're ***actually*** there at all! So it's very peaceful, it's good for research and the best thing from the perspective of today's subject is that it overlooks the White Tower, built by William the Conqueror in the 1070s – so the perfect place to be discussing his remarkable consort, Matilda.

Now I first became aware of Matilda's story probably about fifteen years ago, when I was researching her biography. Now she's ***not*** the best known woman in history. She's probably overshadowed not just by William, but by the Empress Matilda, who was briefly queen during the civil war, waged with her cousin Stephen.

But Matilda of Flanders was an altogether ***different*** kettle of fish. She was the daughter of Count Baldwin the Magnificent – he was a very powerful figure in European politics in the ten-hundreds. He was Count of Flanders and he was married to Adela, who was from the French royal family. So from the moment of her birth, Matilda was a powerful player in European politics. She might've been a mere girl in an age when, of course, male heirs were what counted, but she was, from the first moment, described as ‘highly born’; this was a young woman who was not just from the ruling family of Flanders but could trace her descent to the kings of France and, ***crucially***, the kings of England. And ***that*** would prove rather handy for her future husband William the Conqueror.

Well, the early medieval period, I have to say, isn't brilliant when it comes to studying women's history, because it's said that history was written by men for men and it was particularly true of the early medieval period. If you take one of the most famous sources of that period, the Bayeux Tapestry, it shows no fewer than 600 different men and three women, and I would say that's about par for the course when it comes to early medieval sources. So, in researching Matilda's story, it was really like piecing together these disparate threads. And by the end of it, I didn't know if it would form a very clear picture of this intriguing woman, but I'm delighted to say it did, and what a remarkable figure she really was.

We don't know much about her early childhood, but we do know she was ***very*** well-educated, certainly more than was usual for a woman at the time. She had a sharp intellect, she was politically astute, and I love the fact she's strong-willed, she's ambitious, she has opinions that she's not afraid to voice.

Well, given that she is, in the words of that contemporary chronicler, ‘highly born’, she is very soon considered a prize on the international marriage market and one of her first suitors was actually an Anglo-Saxon lord named Brihtric. But he had the audacity to reject her and this is a wonderful little insight into the sort of character that Matilda was because clearly she never forgot this insult of being rejected by an Anglo-Saxon Lord and later on, when Queen of England, she had his lands confiscated and threw him into prison where he died. So Matilda was not a woman to be crossed!

Her next suitor was a rather different character and he certainly didn't reject Matilda. In fact, it was the other way around. He was William of Normandy, ‘the base born Duke’, as Matilda called him. He became Duke of Normandy at the age of probably just seven or eight and he spent most of his childhood on the run from murderous relatives who thought they had a better claim to the Duchy than he did. So this sort of chiseled him into a fearsome warrior and he was at a disadvantage as well as being very young when he first became Duke, he was also illegitimate; his father Duke Robert didn't trouble to marry and so he just kept mistresses and therefore only had ***illegitimate*** offspring. William was his eldest son.

So William was known actually quite widely as ‘William the Bastard’ and he never managed to quite throw off the stain of illegitimacy. He needed to marry ***well***, and who better than the daughter of his neighbour? Flanders and Normandy boarded each other and so this would be a very strategic alliance and with a very sought-after young bride.

Well, Count Baldwin was enthusiastic. William's reputation as a fearsome warrior went before him. Matilda, however, was rather less so. When she first heard that William of Normandy had proposed marriage, she said that she would not lower herself to marry the ‘base born Duke’. Well, according to the Chronicles, when he heard this, William, (whose temper was ***easily*** provoked) rode at breakneck speed from Normandy over the border into Flanders and found Matilda in one of her father's palaces, and he dragged her by her long hair, flung her into the mud and kicked and beat her almost to death.

Well, this is a shocking story, we don't know ***how*** true it is, but several chroniclers write of it. You might imagine what Matilda does. I mean, this is a forthright young woman, she's just been beaten nearly to death by a man who she looks down on as a mere bastard.

And yet, we are told by the chroniclers that shortly afterwards, she declares, she ‘will have none but William, because he must be a man of great daring to beat me in my own father's palace’. Take that perhaps with a pinch of salt, but I think we can be sure that the negotiations proceeded after this rather dubious courtship and the pair were eventually married in ***about*** the year 1050. Matilda then was roughly twenty years old – we don't know exactly when she was born, but it's probably 1030, 1031. So she's either late teens or just in her twenties when she marries William. It had been a turbulent beginning, but it ***actually*** got worse because the Pope barred them from marrying.

They were very, very distantly related. And I think the Pope didn't want this alliance between Flanders and Normandy, so he issued a ban on their marriage, but William was so determined by this stage that he went ahead and married Matilda anyway. So, as the new Duchess of Normandy, Matilda actually proves quite a ***hit***, not least with her husband William. She's very soon pregnant, she gives him that vital son and heir named Robert, and she probably has about ten children ***at least*** in total, including four sons so she really does establish the dynasty in Normandy and it was said to have ‘excited the greatest tender regard’ in her husband who really needed the legitimacy of his wife.

And she was really popular as well, with the people of Normandy, who had missed having a duchess for quite a long time! As I mentioned William's father Robert didn't bother to get married and they really felt the loss of this sort of female presence in the Ducal court.

Matilda was a very welcome arrival in Normandy, and she soon made clear just how ***capable*** she was as Duchess of Normandy. She superintended her children's upbringing, their education. I loved the fact that she paid as much attention to the education of her daughters as she did to that of her sons, but she also started to get involved in the political arena.

Now, Matilda's bloodline would soon become even more helpful to William because across the channel in England, King Edward the Confessor was without an heir. He had no children from his marriage to Edith of Wessex. Quite why? We don't know – there have been rumours that he'd taken a vow of celibacy. But either way, it was clear there was going to be something of a ***succession*** crisis across in England. Well, according to William, Edward had promised the English throne to ***him***.

Whether he did or not is dubious to say the least. The Bayeux Tapestry certainly depicts that moment, but it was really little more than Norman propaganda, which was made after the Norman conquest of England in 1066. William's main rival for the English throne was Harold Godwinson, a very powerful Saxon Lord. Now, he had the most support in England, he was a homegrown candidate. But fate played into William's hands when in 1064, his rival, Harold, was shipwrecked off the coast of Normandy. What on earth was he doing anywhere near the coast of Normandy? There is a theory he was on a fishing trip off the coast of Sussex that got blown off course. [Tracy laughs] I'm not sure if that really was the case, but either way, he's now in William's hands, effectively.

Now, Harold was invited to the ducal court as an honoured guest, but it's very, very clear he's not going to be allowed to leave until he has relinquished his own claim to the English throne and recognised William's.

Well, he is very royally entertained by William and his consort, Matilda who we know stays up late in the evenings conversing with this Saxon Lord and seems to have embarked on something of a charm offensive and that's one of the first glimpses we have of Matilda's contrasting approach to that of her warrior husband. She's brilliant at PR, she's superb at winning people around and this really does stand them in good stead because eventually Harold is persuaded to recognise the justice of William's claim. But as I say, he didn't really have that much choice in the matter. He sails back to England and then, a little under two years later, Edward the Confessor dies in January 1066. It's the first year of three kings in English history. By the way, there are two more of those. Perhaps we should run a competition asking you to name the other two years when England saw not one but three kings on the throne…

While Edward died, quickest off the mark was Harold who had himself declared king. William was ***furious*** and immediately set about gathering an invasion fleet. Well, Matilda is behind her husband every step of the way. This is when her English royal blood really comes into play. It helps justify his conquest of England and she also manages to persuade the Pope to sanction the invasion, so it's as if God is on their side and she gives one of her daughters, Cecilia, to an abbey that she's founded in Caen, in Normandy, just to give thanks for the fact that, you know, this is a voyage that has God's favour and the Pope's too. She also commissions a magnificent flagship for her husband to sail across the Channel in. It's called the ‘Mora’, and again that is depicted in the Bayeux tapestry.

Well, it’s actually whilst at prayer in a small chapel on the River Seine in October 1066 that Matilda hears the news that her husband has been victorious. A battle has been fought at Hastings - or rather it was actually fought at Battle, close to Hastings, but of course we know it as the Battle of Hastings - in October 1066 and William has vanquished and killed his Saxon rival Harold.

So he is now King of England. He's crowned on Christmas Day 1066, but we tend to see that as the end of the story. That's it! A new Norman dynasty is in place here in England. Well, it's not as simple as that: yes, William had won a decisive battle, but he had years of bitter campaigning ahead before he finally brought England under his control, and a key tactic of William and his Norman regime was to build castles ***everywhere***.

Imagine flat-pack castles – that's essentially what they were. They were brought over, kind of half made from Normandy and put up at dazzling speed, including here where I'm sitting at the Tower of London, where William in the 1070s started building what was then known as the Great Tower. Initially a wooden keep that was then rebuilt in stone. And of course today is known as the White Tower, the ***oldest*** part of the Tower of London and the most ***instantly*** recognisable. And as well as being a fortress, the Tower was also a royal palace and I love the tantalising prospect that Matilda herself probably stayed there when she came over to England.

But in the immediate aftermath of the conquest, she stayed behind in Normandy because she was ***pivotal*** to her husband's success in England. If there had been nobody to trust to hold the reins of power in Normandy, he could never have launched his invasion, but he did trust Matilda and she honoured that faith. She was a ***brilliant*** Duchess of Normandy, a Regent for her husband. But then in 1068, she was able to visit her new kingdom for the first time, she came over that year and she was crowned at Westminster Abbey amidst great festival, we are told, on the 11th of May. Now that's one of the most important dates in the religious calendar. It was Whitsun, so it was all very, very symbolic. It's ***so*** important, this moment, in the history, not just of William and Matilda, but of the English Crown. Because Matilda was the first Queen Consort to be crowned and recognised as queen in her ***own right***. Before that time, consorts had really just been referred to as the wife of the king, but not so Matilda.

The Normans called her ‘la roine’ or ‘la reine’ in modern-day French, meaning of course ‘the queen’ and the Saxons were very suspicious of this at first – they called Matilda ‘the strange woman’ because they didn't like the fact she had all this power, apparently, in her own right – this was a ***male***-dominated society. It shouldn't have worked this way. It's a real testament to Matilda's character and her skill as a queen that she soon won over her reluctant Saxon subjects and I think what Matilda was so brilliant at is what we might call PR. Because while her husband was conquering bodies on the battlefield, she was winning hearts and minds. She brought much needed splendour and magnificence to this new Norman court. Her husband certainly didn't stand on ceremony – he would hold court in ‘the middle of a forest on a carpet’, we are told while on campaign, but Matilda realised that people needed something to be ***impressed*** by. So she made the Norman court this this centre of ***culture*** and ***learning*** and she introduced a rather wonderful ceremony called a ‘crown wearing’ where she and William would appear decked out in their finest robes with glittering crowns on their heads for everybody to worship and this was deeply symbolic, of course, it reinforced the legitimacy of this new Norman regime.

Matilda went to great lengths, really, to help establish Norman rule here in England. She was forever travelling and I don't say that lightly – travel is not easy in the 11th century. It's tortuously slow by road (I mean, they're not really roads, they're more mud tracks) and dangerous and difficult, and yet, shortly after coming over to England Matilda embarked on a 200-mile journey from London to York whilst ***eight months*** pregnant. Now she had a very deliberate purpose: she was determined that this child was going to be born on Yorkshire soil because she knew full well that Yorkshire was the most troublesome part of the Kingdom and with the least loyalty to her husband William. Well she almost made it to York – she got as far as Selby, which is about fourteen miles south of York. And there she gave birth to a son who was called Henry.

Her PR stunt had absolutely worked to a ‘T’ because Henry would be the only one of William and Matilda's ten children and four sons who was really recognised as a legitimate future King of England by the Saxon people. So it was worth that effort of travelling 200 miles, and Matilda's travels didn't end there because she was forever really dispensing royal power, justice, authority on behalf of her husband. Though never formally appointed regent in England, that's effectively what she was and so she was always on the move and if you look at the records that attest to her activities, charters often bore her name and she's always described as Queen Matilda and now it's interesting that the- the Saxons who'd once called her the ‘strange woman’ now called her ‘Matilda Great and Powerful’ so they'd really come to acknowledge and respect her authority.

As well as being powerful, Matilda was immensely wealthy, by far the wealthiest woman in England and we know this thanks to one of the most famous sources for the early medieval period, the ‘*Doomsday Book’*. Now I used to work at the National Archives and that's where ‘*Doomsday Book’* is held and I can tell you it's not just one book, it's several, and it's a ***hugely*** comprehensive survey of William's new kingdom. He wanted to know exactly what every square inch of his land was worth and so it's ‘*Doomsday’* that tells us about land ownership, and it tells us that Matilda owned ***huge swathes*** of the kingdom and of course, with land came wealth. She collected rents and other income from her lands, and as queen, she was also entitled to claim things like ‘Queen Gold’, one tenth of every fine paid to the Crown. Numerous other privileges came her way so suffice to say, she was wealthy and she was powerful.

Well, as the 1070s progressed, Matilda was at last free from this unrelenting cycle of childbirth that she'd been stuck in really since marrying William in 1050. Now she had greater freedom to fulfil her own ambitions. She already has immense power, but clearly that's not enough for Matilda.

One of her main ambitions centres on her beloved son Robert. I think we can say he was Matilda's favourite child, her first-born child. He's nicknamed ‘Kurt Hose’, meaning literally short trousers because I think, like Matilda, he's quite small. I should say, one of the most repeated myths about Matilda is that she was four feet, two inches tall. In fact, that's due to a miscalculation – her skeleton was exhumed and examined in the 1960s, but the measurements were taken wrong. I think she was about five feet tall. So not terribly tall, and apparently her son was very much like her physically. Well, she adored him, William ***despised*** him and the feeling was definitely mutual. Robert really resented William and the fact that he wouldn't give him any power even though William was really quite struggling to keep control of this huge Anglo-Norman empire, he ***didn't*** delegate any authority to Robert, even after he'd come of age.

He could have made him Duke of Normandy, but he refused because he thought Robert was just feckless and unable to wield authority effectively and eventually Robert became so tired of this that he rebelled against his father. Well, Matilda was secretly funding this rebellion every step of the way, and it almost caused the death of her husband: William and Robert came to blows. There was a battle fought between the two sides in Normandy, and father and son were in hand-to-hand combat when Robert had the chance to deal the killer blow, but he didn't and sources vary: one theory is that he didn't realise he was fighting his father (of course, they were both wearing helmets) and then when William lifted his visor, Robert realised with horror what he was about to do, so he fled. I think it's probably likely Robert knew exactly who he'd been fighting, but even so, perhaps some lingering sense of loyalty to his father prevented him from slaying him and he did indeed flee into exile.

Nothing remains a secret in the Royal Court for long and Matilda's treachery is soon discovered by her husband. You can ***imagine*** how ***incandescent*** with rage William is! but also shocked and I think deeply hurt, because there's no doubt that William adored Matilda and now he'd been stabbed in the back, (almost literally) by his nearest and dearest and he upbraids her in front of the whole Court. I'm going to read to you a little excerpt from his speech because it's ***so*** rare to actually have recorded words from this time, and he says, ‘the wife of my bosom, whom I love as my own soul, whom I have set over my whole kingdom and entrusted with all authority and riches. This wife supports the enemies who plot against my life, enriches them with my money, arms and suckers and strengthens them to my grave peril’.

Matilda was now in danger of ***death***. This was a man who did not flinch to put his enemies to the sword, and here was a confirmed traitor to his rule, no matter that it was his own wife and consort. She had to give the speech of her life. And that's exactly what she did.

‘Oh, my Lord, do not wonder that I love my firstborn child with tender affection by the power of the Most High. If my son Robert were dead and buried seven feet deep in the earth, hid from the eyes of the living, and I could bring him back to life with my own blood, I would shed my lifeblood for him and suffer more anguish for his sake than weak woman that I am, I dare to promise’.

I think we can say this was a truly masterful performance. Matilda had managed to betray one of the most feared rulers in Western Europe, a man notorious for his violence and ruthlessness. He could well have had her put to death, but she pleaded the ***strength*** of her maternal feelings. She, of course, seemed to ***conform,*** finally, to that stereotype of a weak woman. In later centuries, my favourite Queen Elizabeth would do exactly the same thing. I wonder if Matilda was her inspiration!

The speech was just enough to save Matilda's life but while he publicly forgave Matilda, William deprived her of power from that day forward. It’s really sad to come to the end of her story in this way because it now becomes obvious that power and authority had been Matilda's lifeblood and without it suddenly her health starts to falter. She is found to be seeking cures for lethargy – this woman who'd been so physically robust, so full of energy that she could travel the length and breadth of England and flit between there and Normandy almost every day of her life! But now it seems that she's physically and emotionally broken. She has really lost everything in her eyes: power and authority and ambition had been what drove her.

In the early hours of the 2nd of November 1083, Matilda left a life marked now by sadness and a real sense of what she had lost. She died back in Normandy and she was buried in the Abbey that she had built in Caen. She was then only about fifty-two years old although that was considered quite a ***ripe old age*** at the time.

A contemporary poet who was the archdeacon of Beauvais wrote an epigram to honour the late Queen and it makes it clear just how deeply Matilda was loved by her people. He said ‘if she could be brought back from death through tears, money, fair or foul means then rest assured there would be an abundance of these things’, and he said ‘let this be the inscription on her tomb: Matilda, Queen of the English, known for her two-fold honour, ruled over the Normans’. So this really makes clear this was a woman of ***power.*** It was so ***rare*** to see such an inscription, such ***praise*** for a woman who had managed to enjoy sovereign power in her own right.

Despite its turbulent nature, William and Matilda's marriage had been one of the most successful partnerships in medieval Europe. Matilda had been completely ***instrumental*** to her husband's success. Arguably, he could ***not*** have conquered England without her. She had been his mainstay for more than thirty years, giving him a dynasty, and I think William himself recognised that, even though he hadn't forgiven her treachery. He was consumed with grief at the death of the woman whom he'd confessed to love ‘as my own soul’. and was said to have wept profusely for many days afterwards. And it was now clear just what a check Matilda had been Sir William's more tyrannical impulses because after her death, things went from bad to worse here in England and the chroniclers all agreed that ‘King William has become a thorough tyrant’.

And now suddenly this Norman dynasty, which had looked so strong while Matilda was queen, now seemed to be teetering on the edge of destruction. Father and son were opposed once more and the future of the Anglo-Norman Empire was now in grave doubt. So Matilda clearly had been instrumental. She'd been the linchpin of William's rule in both England and in Normandy and her story, even though perhaps it ends in tragedy, it's still such an inspiring one for female royal history. She carved out a position of power and influence in a ***male dominated*** arena in both countries and in so doing ***shattered*** the conventional stereotypes of women. Far from being a meek and submissive wife, subject entirely to her husband's will, she wielded authority in her own right for more than three decades.

I love the fact that Matilda just ***broke*** the mold of England's Queen's Consort. She's hardly known today, and yet she's the one who changed everything. Before then Queens Consort really had been confined to the domestic sphere, to producing children. Their ambitions didn't extend far beyond the royal nursery ***but*** Matilda blazed a trail for other powerful women to follow, the likes of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Isabella the ‘She-Wolf’ of France, both of whom supported their sons in rebellion against their own husbands.

Well, finally, Matilda's legacy extends even beyond that: she was the mother of two kings, but her influence over the English monarchy would far outlive the youngest of those, Henry, that one born on Yorkshire soil who died in 1135. In fact, Matilda's bloodline continued for more than a thousand years, and you may not know that ***all*** sovereigns of England and the United Kingdom are directly descended from this remarkable woman, including King Charles III.

So listeners, I have made my pitch: 1066 is arguably the most famous date in English history and it's synonymous with William the Conqueror, but I hope you'll now agree that it's his formidable consort Matilda of Flanders who was really at the heart of it.

[The theme music builds again – it is measured and stately, then becomes more relaxed.]

Thank you so much for listening to this episode on the Historic Royal Palaces podcast. As ever, if you do enjoy this podcast, we would love it if you could follow us. Leave a comment about what you like, maybe even tell us what you want to hear more of. We always appreciate hearing from you. Until next time, thanks for listening to the history of our six palaces.

[Music fades out.]

[End of Episode.]