

PRESS RELEASE

The Wily Women of Oxford Castle

Throughout the centuries there have been many well documented escapes and violent episodes by male prisoners, but little has been mentioned about the female prisoners or indeed the women connected to the inmates at Oxford Castle Gaol. However, some of the stories about the wily women attempting daring feats and demonstrating endurance are now revealed at *Oxford Castle - Unlocked*.

One female prisoner, Empress Matilda, was the daughter of William the Conquerors' second son Henry I. In 1142 Matilda was held captive at the Castle with her supporters for three months, besieged by Stephen, William's grandson. In contesting their rights to the throne, the two cousins brought England to a state of civil war.

One night, the situation became critical at the castle and Matilda knew she must either flee or surrender. Her escape on that snowy December night showed cunning and resolve as she climbed out of a window thought to be in the Norman St Georges Tower (now part of the visitor attraction) dressed in white as camouflage against the snow. She and three Knights were able to escape, crossing the frozen River Thames undetected and eventually making their way to Abingdon.

The story of Captain John Lilburne's wife, Elizabeth, is another example of the determination of one woman to obtain justice for her husband. Lilburne was fortunate in having a strong-minded wife and it was due to her persistence and cunning that his life was saved. He had been taken captive while defending Brentford for Parliament and became a prisoner at Oxford Castle. On 13 December 1642 he managed to smuggle a letter out of the castle to his wife, revealing that he was to be tried for high treason the following week - the sentence for which was certain to be death.

His heavily pregnant wife slipped through enemy lines and travelled all the way to London to the House of Commons presenting herself hourly to plead for help. Finally, in reprisal, the House of Commons announced that royalist prisoners would be executed if the sentence on John Lilburne and his associates was carried out. Elizabeth Lilburne now had two days to get to Oxford and deliver the news!

It was a remarkable feat for a lone woman to undertake such a dangerous journey at all, still more one who was so heavily pregnant. Having saved her husband's life, Elizabeth found she still could not be reunited with him. John Lilburne may have been reprieved, but he continued to languish in gaol. He was finally released from Oxford Castle in May 1643.

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Oxford Castle – Unlocked is open daily from 10.00am to 5.30pm (last tour 4.20pm). See www.oxfordcastleunlocked.co.uk or call 01865 260666 to find out more!

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For further media information, images or to arrange a visit, please contact: Keira Relton or Heidi Folland on 01904 527700 or krelton@continuum-group.com / hfolland@continuum-group.com.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

Oxford Castle - Unlocked is open daily from 10.00am to 5.30pm (last tour 4.10pm). Admission prices: Adults £7.50, Children £5.35, Concessions £6.20.

Oxford Castle - Unlocked opened on 2 June 2006 and gives visitors the opportunity to learn about the real people who lived and died throughout site's turbulent past. Visitors are able to walk through the ancient buildings and experience the stories that connect the real people to these extraordinary events.

The guardians of this important historic site, The Oxford Preservation Trust were awarded a £3.8 million grant by the Heritage Lottery Fund to restore the castle and site buildings. The post of Learning and Access Officer is funded by Oxfordshire County Council.

Oxford Castle - Unlocked is operated by Continuum - visitor attraction operators and specialists in the tourism and leisure industry. See www.continuum-group.com