

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Karen Espinosa, a postgraduate student in heritage management at Bath Spa University in England, to discuss two women, one abbey and the Magna Carta. So why don't we start with Ela, Countess of Salisbury?

KE: Ela was the third countess of Salisbury. She was born in 1187. She was the only child, and she became the heir of the title. That's why she became Ela, Countess of Salisbury. Her father died when she was about 9 years old, and because she was born into aristocracy, the king became the guardian of the daughters of aristocracy when they lost their parents. So in this case, the king became Ela's custodian. And he decided that when Ela would become a teenager, she will marry the king's half-brother. And that's why she married William Longespée. He was the half-brother of the king. He didn't have any money. He didn't have any land. But the king was very concerned that, at one point he will become part of the revolutionized world against the king. So in a way to have him on his side, he choose a good bride for him, who had money, and who had a title. So when Ela became a teenager, she got married, and that's how William became the heir of Salisbury. Also, what is very interesting about Ela, she was very devoted. She got along very well with her husband, even though there was a very good age gap between the two of them. But she had five children. And when her husband was away, in those days, many of the men went on tours or Crusades. So the woman was the one who was in charge of taking care of the house or estate. So because all the estate, it was inherited from Ela's father, she grew up learning to manage all the money and the estate and the title, and how to deal with aristocracy and the politics all around. Also, Ela became the high sheriff of Wiltshire once her husband died. So because she was the official, the title came from her father, it didn't come from her husband. So when her husband died, she took the title on her. And she became the sheriff of Wiltshire. And that is how she became the custodian of the Magna Carta, because her husband was one of the witnesses when King John got together with the barons in 1225 and decided to redo the Magna Carta. So her husband was one of the witnesses. And because he was the sheriff of Wiltshire, that's why he became the custodian of one of the four copies of the Magna Carta. And when he died, Ella became the sheriff and the custodian of the Magna Carta.

AT: And just for context, for anyone who is not familiar with the Magna Carta, this was the first document that put into writing the principle that the king and his government were not above the law. So it set a very important precedent, not only in England, but obviously that had ripple effects throughout all of the British Empire further down the road. So the copy that her husband William had that she inherited, this ended up being kept at Lacock Abbey until 1945. So we're talking 1225 to 1945. That's a pretty long time. Can you tell us a bit about Lacock Abbey and Ela's connection?

KE: Well, actually, Ela founded Lacock Abbey with her husband. As I mentioned before, they were very Catholic devotees. So both of them at different times, they put the foundations, the first stones for the construction of Lacock Abbey, as well as for the construction of Salisbury Cathedral. So they were, both of them, they were very devotees. They were very much into into the power of prayer and very Catholic in its own way, the way used to be in those days. So I think when they went and said, "we're going to create this abbey," I don't think Ella was ever thinking that she was going to be living in that abbey for the rest of her life, because she was married in that time. So that was the connection, because also the estate was hers. The land came from the inheritance she got from her father. So yeah, that's the first connection she had with the abbey.

AT: Well, it's also interesting that as we've established, Ela was financially independent. She didn't need a husband. I would argue she didn't necessarily need the first husband, but at least it turned out well. And she actually used a clause from the Magna Carta to retain that freedom because it actually says that no widow shall be "distrained to marry" - so I guess, forced to marry - "while she wishes to live without a husband." So this gave her the freedom to stay single and still have the authority that she inherited, or what she actually chose, was to become a nun.

KE: Well, actually during those days, women from aristocracy who had money, they were expected to get married. And when the husband died, you had to get married again. And in those days, a couple years before her husband officially died, her husband went on a Crusade. And everybody thought that he died. And she had men coming in and saying, "I want to marry you. And she was like, "no, I know my husband is alive. And until I know that he's not, I'm not gonna marry anyone." And they couldn't force her to get married again, because nothing was certain that her husband was dead. But he came back - he was sick, he got better. But then the Magna Carta was signed, as you mentioned, this clause was clause number 8, because when women became a widow, they were supposed to get married again, they didn't have the freedom to say, "no, I'm not gonna marry." But she used clause number eight from the Magna Carta, like you mentioned. So she decided, "I'm not gonna get married." She did not become a nun right away, because the eldest son was 16 years of age. And even though she had this freedom of not having to get married, but because she was thinking of becoming a nun and going into the into Lacock Abbey, which is the place she created, actually, she needed the permission of her son, but her son had to be 18 for him to give permission for his mother to go into the convent. So when her son turned 18, she asked for permission. And of course, the son said, "yes, that's that's what you feel. That's your choice. Go ahead and become a nun." And that's what she did. And in this process, for whatever reason, she took the Magna Carta with her, because she was the custodian. She was the sheriff and she had the Magna Carta. So she took the Magna Carta with her and took it with her into the abbey And nobody really questioned, nobody knew, nobody even remember about the Magna Carta, I guess. And that's why it stayed eight almost for 800 years in in Lacock Abbey.

AT: And we will get to the 1940s soon, but can you give us a bit of a sense of what was happening with the Abbey, because 800 years is a long time, not least because you had the religious Reformation where, suffice it to say the Catholic Church was not allowed to keep all of those lovely buildings that had been Catholic before the Reformation. So can you tell us a bit about the history of the abbey over those centuries before we get to the 1940s?

KE: Well, Lacock Abbey, every place that's called an abbey, it's because it had a monastery or convent next to the church. That's why it's called the abbey. So when the religious Reformation came with Henry VIII, he said that all these places had to be destroyed. And they were looted and things were sold and places were taken down. However, I don't think this happened here, because Ela was from the aristocracy. So she was connected to the monarchs, to the king. So I think probably the king of that time, even though she was not alive anymore, but there was a connection there. So he sold the place with the condition, that in this case, William Sharrington buy the place. And he was also close to the king on that time. And the only condition he put was for the church to be destroyed. So the church itself was demolished, but the convent was not. So the convent became the country house of William Sharrington's family. That's probably why it was kept for all these 800 years later, it's still there.

AT: And so then we get into the 1900s, where Matilda Talbot was actually the last owner of Lacock Abbey. So can you tell us about her?

KE: Matilda Talbot actually came down from the family of the first owner, from William Sharrington. So that's another interesting fact about Lacock Abbey, actually only had three owners in 800 years. First was Ela, the founder and the nunnery, then it was William Sharrington, and the house stayed within his family until Matilda Talbot, which that was 700 years later. Having a place for your family for 700 years, that's quite amazing. And the third owner nowadays is the National Trust. And another interesting fact about Lacock Abbey is that it was never destroyed during any of the wars, not even the wars inside England in those times, or the World Wars, not even World War I, World War II, Lacock always was there. It was never bombed, never destroyed - of course, all the maintenance and whatever those everyday kind of things, but not really outside circumstances

that destroyed the place. So for me, I think that's a very special thing. And I think it has to do a lot with the power of prayer, for 300 years, that was a place of prayer. It doesn't matter what kind of religion, but if you have for 300 years, people praying in one place. So we have Lacock Abbey and the estate village, still there.

AT: And the fact that Matilda inherited it is interesting because when her unmarried uncle died in 1916. So if he had gotten married and had kids, she probably wouldn't have inherited, but she also had an older brother named William. And usually if a woman in 1916 has an older brother, the older brother is probably going to be the one inheriting it. So even the fact that it came into her possession was relatively unusual for the time. So it's interesting that we've got these bookends of two independent women as the caretakers of Lacock Abbey.

KE: Yes, I think that's fascinating for me. There's a lot of feminine power in there, a lot of creativity and a lot of strength in that place. And yes, it just started with a woman and ended with a woman. So I think that's also fascinating. And in those times, even Matilda was very surprised because, as you mentioned, in those days, the male son was the one who's going to inherit the property. So she asked her brother, "do you want to take care of the abbey? Do you want it?" And William said, "no, it's yours. It was given to you. You can keep it, I can help you if I can in whatever way. But that's yours. It was given to you." So that's also quite an interesting attitude for the times. And I think Matilda did a very good job in managing the place by herself in those days.

AT: So she inherited Lacock in 1916 when her uncle died. And she continued to live there until 1956. But as you mentioned, the property was donated to the National Trust. So she was actually living as a tenant of the National Trust after she sort of handed everything over in 1944. And she also gave the Magna Carta to the British Museum in 1944. So that's how it ended up there. Had people just sort of lost track of the copies? Like, did anyone know it was there and it was rediscovered? What happened there?

KE: That's not true. Probably the family knew the Magna Carta was there, but nobody really talked about it for whatever reasons. And it's interesting because the Magna Carta became one of the foundations for the Human Rights Convention and the Human Rights Treaty we have nowadays that was created in the United Nations. So after World War II. So the Magna Carta just stayed in the family. And I guess it was a document that everybody knew was there, but nobody really paid that much attention to it. And it is said that when World War II was happening, Matilda took the Magna Carta and other documents inside some kind of box. And she buried these box somewhere in the estate because she was afraid that they were going to be bomb and destroyed or something. But that didn't happen. So she took the box out again. And probably that's what she decided, "well, what is it that I'm going to do with this? This sounds important. Let's give it to the country." And that's why she approached the British Museum. And now it's in the British Library.

AT: Not to be classist, but I think that has to be like the most aristocratic thing I've ever heard. "Oh yeah, that's just our family copy of the Magna Carta. We keep it in a box." (laughter)

KE: I think people just forgot about it because the Magna Carta actually was a peace treaty. It was just a document that was not even signed because they didn't sign anything in those times. They put a seal on the document. It was the king's seal. So it was mostly a document that, probably they sealed many, many documents in those days. And the first Magna Carta, it only lasted for about eight weeks because the pope in that time rejected the Magna Carta. However, the son of the king of that time, who became the king, he said, "let's take again the Magna Carta and let's work on it again." And they changed many clauses, this clause of women not having to get married again was kept. So that gave a lot of freedom to women on those days, yes. But many other things were changed. So that's probably why they didn't really pay that much attention to the Magna Carta, because it was changed and only four copies were available and God knows where those four copies went. And they were not written in English. In those days they spoke kind of Latin and French and

English. It was a mixture kind of thing. So it's probably one of those documents that were there. Probably they didn't even understand what it said on the document itself. In the case of Matilda, she was very good with languages. She spoke many languages. She spoke English, Russian, French, probably she knew a little bit of Latin because that's the way women were educated on those days. They didn't go to school, but they got a education in the house. You were supposed to learn many languages. You were supposed to learn to cook. You were supposed to keep house and many other things. So she probably understood the document when she read it or something. And that's she said, "well, it sounds important, you know. Let's keep it in a box."

AT: Now, what was it about this topic that really drew you in?

KE: Well, the fact that it began with a woman and it ended with a woman and actually the the manager of Lacock Abbey at the National Trust nowadays is a woman. So there's a lot of female energy in the place. It's a place that has been there for almost 800 years and it has not been bombed. It has not been destroyed. It was the only abbey that was not destroyed during the religious Reformation. So I think there's a lot of specialness about this place. And having these two women who, they were not social activists as to going out into the street and trying to make a change, they knew their social structure. However, they found the ways, the loopholes within their social structure in order for them to find the way to be independent and to have power and authority. And that's what both women did in their own right. I don't think they were thinking of doing that, but they had a calling inside that they just tried to find a way to do it right. Because apparently all their actions were not only thinking about them, they were thinking about the people and the well-being of their family and the well-being of the people who live in the village, because they also owned Lacock Village, because that was the estate. That was part of the estate. So they were always thinking how to make it better, how to have a win-win situation and try to make it better regardless of the outside circumstances. So I think there's an example of two self-empowered women that didn't have to really go and try to make a change, like battle out in society, but within their own structure, silently but purposefully, they found their way and made a change and make a point. And Lacock Abbey and the village is still there, and it's a beautiful place to visit and to just enjoy the place. So that's what called me.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.