

TRAVELS THROUGH TIME

Charles Spencer: *The White Ship* (1120)

Hello and welcome to *Travels Through Time*, the podcast made in partnership with Jordan Lloyd and ColorGraph.

[Intro music]

Violet Moller: Hello, I'm Violet Moller and today, we're going to travel back to one of the most dramatic and tragic moments in English history.

[Music]

Nine hundred years ago, this November, a ship carrying the heir to the English throne and his companions was wrecked off the coast of Normandy. The young prince and the 'flower of the highest nobility' were lost under the waves, along with King Henry's dearest hopes and dreams. This dramatic and often overlooked episode in English history is vividly recreated by Charles Spencer in his new book, *The White Ship: Conquest, Anarchy and the Wrecking of Henry I's Dream*. He paints a lively picture of the splendour and triumph of the court in the port of Barfleur, celebrating wildly before setting sail on a course of death and destruction. Charles Spencer was a reporter on NBC's *Today* show from 1986 until 1995. He is the author of seven books, including two *Sunday Times*' bestsellers, *Blenheim: Battle for Europe*, which was shortlisted for History Book of the Year at the National Book Awards, and *Killers of the King: The Men Who Dared to Execute Charles I*. I spoke to Charles Spencer early last week.

Violet Moller: So Charles Spencer, I'd like to welcome you to *Travels Through Time*. Thank you for coming on. I'm very excited about our conversation today.

Charles Spencer: Oh, it's a great pleasure. Thank you.

Violet Moller: I think I'd like to start off by asking you what led you to writing history books in the first place? I know that you've written quite a few now. How did you get to doing that? Was that something you'd always wanted to do?

Charles Spencer: Well, not really. I mean after university, I worked for ten years for one of the American TV networks and I really did enjoy the writing part of being a correspondent. I then fell upon the idea of doing a history of my family's house and then a history of my family. They were things I probably had ready to go. I then thought, 'Actually, I quite enjoy this.' Each time I've done a book, I've stumbled across it rather than planned it. Don't worry, I'm not going to take you through them all but the first one...

Violet Moller: [Laughter] Please do.

Charles Spencer: ... [laughter] the Battle of Blenheim - I like to find parts of history that have been hugely important but, in my view, sadly forgotten. Just before the beginning of 2004, I worked out that we were coming up, in that year, for the 300th anniversary of the Battle of Blenheim, which was every bit as important as Waterloo but completely off the charts in terms of history teaching. I put that to a publisher and they said they'd take that but it sounded so monumentally dull that if they bought that book, could they have one on an interesting period. I said, 'What's that?' They said, 'Basically, Henry VIII would do very well or something Stuarts really.' The alternative was the English Civil War. I did that and that sort of led from one to the other. That's how I've done it. There's no great structure here. I like a good story.

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Violet Moller: *[Laughter]* So this book that we're going to talk about today, *The White Ship*, is about a very, very different period of history which is much, much earlier in the 12th century. I wonder how you came upon the idea to write this book.

Charles Spencer: Do you know, I hadn't thought about doing a medieval book and actually, when it occurred to me, I was quite nervous because people are very territorial about their period in history. It would have been bad enough stumbling into the Civil War experts but the medievalists are even more vicious. About five years ago, I was asked to go and give a speech at Leeds Castle. The invitation came from Alison Weir, who is a very prolific and successful historian. I said, 'Okay, who is the audience?' I literally had a couple of hours to prepare the speech and it had to be on the queens of England. I said, 'Okay, I'll do that.' I knew the audience would know an enormous amount about Queen Victoria, Queen Elizabeth and all the obvious candidates, so I thought I'd throw in a woman who should have been queen but cruelly wasn't allowed to be at the last minute. She was called Empress Matilda. She only became a candidate for the throne because of the White Ship. I gave an aside to quite a knowledgeable audience about the White Ship, assuming they'd know about it and then realised that, actually, people didn't. It had slightly dropped off the radar. I'm 56 and I'm one of the last generations who had a very broad, compulsory history education. Whereas the White Ship had been taught to me and had gripped me when I was a boy, it had dropped away.

Violet Moller: The whole idea that, in the medieval period and later, God and religion just imbued every single aspect of life and I think that's one of the things that I struggle with, as a historian, is making that mental leap from a modern society where God is kind of there if you choose to be interested in him to a society where you literally wouldn't have been able to escape.

Charles Spencer: That's such a good point because we just forget it now. I mean it really is the be-all and end-all every aspect of life. So if something terrible happened to you, like an accident or a great loss, then it had to be that God had decided that you were due that fate. Chance is taken out of it. It's all pre-destined and it's all pretty terrible because the God they believed in, the Christian God, was very much an Old Testament one. There were none of the sorts of happy feelings of the apostles at all. It was brutal, and it was vengeful and it was a very mighty being that was going to strike you down.

Violet Moller: Fear played a huge role, didn't it? Your fear of going to hell or your fear of judgement.

Charles Spencer: Do you know, it's so interesting because actually, the most captivating figure I found in this book was a man who is counter this entire structure and he is a very, very powerful, Norman born (with huge territories in England) baron called Robert de Bellême. Robert didn't believe in God and it's amazing the freedom that gave him to behave unbelievably badly. He just didn't care because he didn't believe in judgement and an afterlife, so imagine if you have that much power and no conscience.

Violet Moller: One of the things which I think a lot of people reading this book will be struck by is the brutality and the punishments. Blinding seems to have been a fairly run-of-the-mill punishment. Do you think that the brutality of society then was, in any way, connected with what you were saying about their God being this kind of Old Testament, terrifying being?

Charles Spencer: Yes, it's interesting. The blinding, castration and having hands and feet cut off is unbelievable brutality to us but interestingly, those were considered a lot better than capital

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punishment. I don't know what you would choose yourself but.. *[laughter]* there was a man, who was a treasurer to Henry I, who was found guilty of plotting his assassination and people were amazed at Henry I's great generosity in only having him castrated and blinded. This was thought to be really quite soft. On the other hand, there was a young, Norman nobleman who was, I would imagine, lots of fun and he used to write naughty ditties.

Violet Moller: Oh yes, yes. What was his name?

Charles Spencer: He is called Luc de la Barre and when he's captured by Henry for writing these crude songs about the King, he is sentenced to blinding and castration. He chooses to kill himself by repeatedly banging his head against the wall of his cell. It's amazing that he did it, to be honest, because you'd have to keep going for some time. I think the real thing is it goes back to what we were talking about earlier with God. The Normans got religion in a very big way from the late 11th century and one of the things the Church was trying to teach was the sacred nature of life. Therefore, capital punishment was considered not really doable, except for the most egregious sins and blinding was seen, obviously, as a way of completely destroying somebody's life without killing them.

Violet Moller: That's fascinating. If you could just give us a bit of background now and tell us which year you would like to travel back to, that would be great.

Charles Spencer: Yes, I'd like to travel back to the year of Henry I's greatest pinnacle of happiness and power which ends in his utter despair and that is the year 1120, exactly nine hundred years ago.

Violet Moller: Wonderful and can you just give us some background about Henry I? He was the youngest son of William the Conqueror. England has just gone through this enormous upheaval of being Normanised and being conquered.

Charles Spencer: Henry I was not meant to get the throne. When William the Conqueror was dying in 1087, he left England to his favourite son, William Rufus, and was persuaded by his barons to leave Normandy to his eldest son, Robert Curthose, who he despised. There had been a civil war between the Conqueror and his eldest son for quite some years. He just left money to Henry, as his youngest son, and Henry was very miffed at this. William, apparently, comforted him from his deathbed and said, 'Well, one day, you'll be greater than both your brothers.' Actually, that did come to pass because after the Conqueror died, Henry I invested his money in some land in western Normandy and set about busying himself, as a younger son who could make something of his life. His two elder brothers were so much more powerful than him and they used him and abused him. They sided with him and against him and eventually, took away his territories from him and put him in prison. He really was just a spare part in the succession really.

Come 1100, he's in a hunting party in the New Forest in early August and William Rufus gets an arrow through his chest and it kills him instantly. Henry, rather than look after his brother's body, just leaves him dead in the wood and gallops off at top speed, first to Winchester to secure the Royal Treasury and then on to Westminster Abbey to become King. He's an immensely successful king and he manages to put down, what the historical cliché would call, the overmighty subjects, these very powerful aristocrats who really underestimated Henry. They just saw him as a complete nonentity. They had not taken notice of his gifts but he had many. He then set about making England a place of peace. After a year, he had to see off an invasion by his eldest brother, Robert Curthose, but after that very early challenge, he managed to secure the

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finances of the realm, first of all by making sure that everyone who had the licence to coin his money adhered to his principles of really high purity, so people could be confident in their transactions. Actually, touching on what we said earlier, there were some minters of coin who decided to try and play fast and loose with the quality and they paid for their massive misjudgement by losing their genitals and right hands. Also, he decided to regularise his finances by bringing in an institution that we still live with today, the Exchequer. Before that, the finances in the various parts of England had been expected and would sometimes come in but now they were demanded. Henry I had each sheriff come to the Exchequer twice a year and have a full reckoning on a chequerboard, which worked rather like a giant abacus, of what was owing and what had been paid. The sheriff was then sent back with a chunk of wood, because they were basically illiterate, with nicks in the side of it showing what was still owing.

He spread his power wider still and in 1106, having had a go for a couple of years at prodding the weak defences of Normandy where his eldest brother was making a disastrous hand of being the Duke of Normandy, he took on his brother in battle and he becomes Duke of Normandy and King of England. That unleashes an enormous hostility around what we now consider France. The King of France, Louis VI, known by the nickname of Louis the Fat because of his substantial size, saw the Normans as a pestilence at his side; these descendants of the Vikings who were always causing trouble. After William the Conqueror had England too, this was an existential crisis really for the King of France because the wealth of England was so considerable and it meant that the Duke of Normandy was a really powerful figure. Whereas the King of France only ruled, in an effective way, the Île-de-France around Paris, he still could call up alliances with the Angevins in Anjou, the Count of Maine and the Count of Flanders. There were all sorts of satellite areas that he, nominally, was the feudal lord of. He managed to pull together various alliances over the next 14 years up to 1120, basically trying to unhinge the twin realms of England and Normandy.

That was really Henry's battle because one of the first things he did as King was to try and establish his dynasty and he married a princess of Scotland, who had a lot of English blood in her, to try and attach the old England of Alfred the Great to the Norman Conquest. This marriage produced a daughter, who became Empress Matilda and who I briefly mentioned before, and then one legitimate son, William Ætheling. Ætheling, basically means what we would consider Prince of Wales today. It means the expected heir. This all culminates in this war between 1116 and 1119 between England and the King of France and his allies. In the summer of 1119, Henry I wins this dramatic battle with several of his sons present. I say 'several of his sons' having said he only had one son. He had many illegitimate children - 22 we reckon.

Violet Moller: Wow!

Charles Spencer: They won this extraordinary battle at Brémule in 1119 and it looked as though everything had come together. Henry had beaten his greatest enemy, brought peace to both his lands and was delivering up a dynasty to his one, true son. That was all he'd ever hoped to pass on.

Violet Moller: I think that takes us quite neatly to your first scene. Can you tell us where we are? What's happening? Who's there?

Charles Spencer: I want to take you to Kenilworth in Warwickshire. We have this brilliant strategy of Henry I to wear down the power of the overmighty barons who are up against him or want to rebel against him. One of Henry's great enemies was the Earl of Warwick, Roger de Beaumont.

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Violet Moller: Can I just quickly ask was he a Norman? Were all the barons Norman or were there any English Anglo-Saxon ones left or had they been all murdered?

Charles Spencer: The Anglo-Saxon aristocracy was basically annihilated after Hastings but there were some still going but the ones who were of great power now, by 1120, were pretty much all Anglo-Norman but they were originally of Norman stock. De Beaumont and was now Earl of Warwick. The last ones who were Anglo-Saxon were up in Northumbria and they eventually rebelled and suffered as a result. There are only about seven or eight earls during this period who were active and de Beaumont is one of them. He's constantly engineering against the King. The King has brought in this tactic, which is very clever, I suppose to promote the middle classes, the very able members of his administration, to a rank where they could not only compete with the aristocracy but, in some ways, leapfrog over them in terms of power. We have this man, Geoffrey de Clinton, who was a Norman and he came from western Normandy. He probably knew Henry from when he was just a count of a small part of western Normandy and when they were young men. Henry brought an enormous number of these people over with him when he became King. He gave de Clinton the rank of Sheriff of Warwickshire and told him to build a very large castle. This was a message from the King to de Beaumont, Earl of Warwick. He promoted de Clinton to His Royal Treasurer and Chamberlain and taking the place of a man who had that position before but who had been found guilty of trying to assassinate him. That was the man I mentioned earlier who was deprived of different parts of him. This was a very strong message to de Beaumont that this was a man with the King's entire confidence who was in his patch of Warwickshire but was just down the road. Henry actually gave him the land to build the castle on and, in fact, founded a priory as well because these were men of God, as we mentioned. It was a way of establishing, in the provinces, very direct roots to royal power because before that, the kings of England had had to rely on their earls to be like viceroys and to report back to them and administer justice.

Violet Moller: And to be loyal, which was always a problem, wasn't it?

Charles Spencer: That is so true. How do you know? Edward the Confessor, the last truly Anglo-Saxon king before Harold, had endless problems with his earls. They were always rebelling and, in fact, Harold and his family were the worst offenders. You couldn't rely on them. These people were so powerful. You had to hope, by rewarding them enough, that they would stay loyal to you and do your bidding.

Violet Moller: It's interesting though because this is normally something we associate with the Tudor period and with Henry VII and Henry VIII, with Thomas Cromwell being the ultimate example. It's about finding men who are intelligent and promoting them on their own merit but then also being able to rely on their loyalty because everything they have, they owe to you as opposed to these nobles who are already born into great wealth and power.

Charles Spencer: Yes. Kings have always promoted people of exceptional ability but what I think is new is that Henry I brought in what is clearly a system and he was going to do this because he needed people he could rely on. I think part of it was because he had been a bit of an outlier from royal power as a young man and he had seen the problems that had been caused to his two brothers in England and in Normandy by having people with enormous power working against them. I think it was a sort of useful apprenticeship to be the third son who was just jostling along with the others. He took that experience and made the most of it. The most dramatic example, actually, was a man called Roger of Salisbury. Roger of Salisbury was a very simple priest who was barely literate, if literate at all to start with. Henry came across him when

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he was hunting and he had to stop to go to mass. He went to a little chapel in Normandy and he loved how fast the mass was dealt with by Roger of Salisbury *[laughter]*. Being a very busy man, who still wanted to do what was right by God, he signed him up as his chaplain and then realised that Roger of Salisbury was really good at controlling expenses and keeping an eye on all the details of administration. At that time, he hadn't got much to spend but Roger of Salisbury was good at expenditure and budgeting, etc. You end up with Roger of Salisbury becoming the second most powerful man in the land after the King. It's a clear, conscious decision to go down the route of merit.

[Short instrumental]

Artemis Irvine: Hello, it's Artemis, one of the presenters on this podcast. You'll know that we've been working with the visual historian Jordan Lloyd and ColorGraph over the last few months to bring moments from our episodes to life, whether it's shots of The Beatles in 1964 or Oscar Wilde in 1882. Well, these wonderful colourised historical images and many more are available for purchase as museum-grade, archive quality art prints at ColorGraph.co. They make unusual, compelling and just really cool Christmas presents for that history fan in your life and what's more, a selection of some of the very best prints are now available in a smaller size and for a smaller price. So for just £23.00 or \$30.00, you can get a fascinating image of the Titanic or Mark Twain, Fidel Castro or Abraham Lincoln. Check out the full range at ColorGraph.co and remember, if you add the code TTT at the checkout, you get an extra 10% off.

[Short instrumental]

Violet Moller: Okay, so now we're going to go to your second scene which requires us to hop over the Channel.

Charles Spencer: We're in the same year, of course, of 1120 and I want to take you and your listeners to the port of Barfleur which is east of Cherbourg in the top corner of Normandy. I'm sure some people will have seen Barfleur. It's one of the most picturesque villages in France and it looks like a very pretty fishing port. You have to jump from what you see now to how it was 900 years ago where it was the port of northern France for going to England. It was the stopping off point, particularly, to Southampton. That was the big route if you were going to take the journey between England and Normandy. You have to remember how often that was the case because whether it was William the Rufus being troublesome in Normandy or Henry trying to hold on to both his realms, they were shuttling backwards and forwards on at least an annual basis. Anyway, Henry is coming here at the absolute peak of his triumph, having, in the previous summer, defeated Louis VI of France and having triumphed again in diplomacy because the King of France appealed to the Pope and the Pope had found that Henry I's cause was just. There was then the really big one. Louis VI had acknowledged that Henry's eldest son, William Ætheling was going to be the next Duke of Normandy. It really was job done.

It's taken three and a half years of fighting to do this. When Henry arrives in the port of Barfleur, he's followed by the triumphant army, enormous numbers of courtiers and very important men and women of his Anglo-Norman elite and a man steps forward in the harbour of Barfleur and announces himself to be the son of the man who, in his own time, had been the captain of William the Conqueror's flagship in 1066. This man says surely it's his honour to take the King back in such great triumph to England. I rather like Henry I. There are bits that are very hard to digest but he was not one for flattery and he was not one for changing his plans and he said, 'No, I already have my ship ready but tell me about your ship.' The man started to point out all of the joys of his ship - the White Ship; the fact that it had a veteran crew of 50 rowers; the size of it;

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the beauty of it; the speed. Henry said to him, essentially, 'I'm not prepared to go in that because I'm going in my ship but it would be fun for my son, William Ætheling, some of my other children (illegitimate), my nephew, my niece and great aristocrats of England and Normandy, like bishops and generals. All these people will travel with you.' On the evening of 25th November 1120, almost exactly 900 years ago, Henry sets off for his, expected to be, 10 or 12-hour journey to Southampton. He leaves his son, and the many hangers-on that this rather glamorous 17-year-old prince has, in Barfleur. There's an element of over flattery here. The crew are so excited to have such an eminent, young man coming on board for their voyage that they flatter him hopelessly and in return, he gives them some of the huge quantities of wine that he and his friends are devouring.

Violet Moller: Yeah, I like the quotation from one of the monks, who wrote the chronicles, who reported that 'too much drinking made them all drunk' [*laughter*].

Charles Spencer: Yes, that's science for you.

Violet Moller: Yeah, exactly. It will do that.

Charles Spencer: They got very, very drunk and it's noted that the people of Barfleur had come to look at these people because, of course, they're hugely glamorous and actually, some of them are coming to say goodbye to loved ones. A little before midnight, they decided to set off but crucially, there was this moment where - we've already talked about how important religion was and I'm sorry to those who are very religious but religion and superstition were very tightly welded together. You have a tradition for great voyages that ships would be blessed but when the monks came to bless the White Ship, the drunken oaves on board chased them away. This was later seen as a key moment in what was to be an incredible night.

Violet Moller: Could that not have been added in later by chroniclers as if to say this is why it happened?

Charles Spencer: I think it's totally possible that that was the case, yes. I do think that's possible.

Violet Moller: Can I ask one more quick question before you carry on? November 25th seems like a very late day in the year to be setting off on a voyage. Maybe this is wrong and correct me if I'm wrong but I thought that seafaring, in general, stopped in the winter months. Is that not the case?

Charles Spencer: You're right. It's very, very late. Basically, after September was thought to be dicey. In fact, that's one of the reasons that the Norman Conquest went ahead as it did because the Anglo-Saxon fleet, at the end of September, went into hibernation. That meant that in October, William the Conqueror was able to steal over. Even early to mid-October was considered late and so you're right that this is very, very late. There was a terror of the sea at this time. Actually, in the book, I've pulled together a chapter where you look at what the sea meant to this medieval mind and although it was a place of great beauty - the poets got that - it was also unbelievably terrifying. Of course, they knew nothing about what was beneath the waves and their imaginations had conjured up all sorts of beasts and bearded sirens that would lure you onto the rocks but sea wolves, sea elephants and sea lions (as in real lions that lived in the sea) and even sea goats, which I find rather hard to find frightening but they did [*laughter*]. Sailors were relying very much on experience. The captain of a ship would be expected to know the currents around the harbours that he was trading in. There was a rudimentary knowledge of the

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sky and the stars but really, that was it and so you can see why they brought God into it to try and give them some helpful way of getting across this expanse of terror.

Anyway, we get to the night of the 25th November, very late as you say, and it's a freezing night but very calm sea. The White Ship starts to set to sea when the cry goes up. Remember, everyone is drunk, the crew and the passengers. Even though the King set off several hours earlier, they must try and beat him back to Southampton and so these 50 veteran oarsmen start to bend their backs. The helmsman is doing a less than brilliant job and it's not helped by the captain ordering the mainsail to be dropped early. Barfleur is an exceptional harbour in terms of being a protected area and a good one for building ships in as well but along the Norman coast, there are a lot of rocks. It would not be normal to drop the sail until you're past those rocks. In the excitement, everyone is going incredibly fast and then there's this crunch. They hit the Quillebœuf Rock, which is still there today, of course, at some pace and then the panic starts. Of course - I say 'of course' but it's not something I realised - nobody can swim. Literally, almost nobody at this time can swim. It's not considered a pastime and the only people I can find who know how to swim are people who are directly connected with, say, the retrieval of fishing nets if they're snagged. Everyone else is now in a broken ship which is made even worse by the crew. The drunken crew use their oars to try and push off and they just make the rupture in the side of the boat worse. It goes very wrong very quickly with people being drowned straightaway. I had to look into this for this book because I'm not a scientist at all but you know that feeling you get if you into...

Violet Moller: I was going to say that even if you could swim, the water must have been so cold that you would have entered shock very, very quickly, wouldn't you?

Charles Spencer: There you are. It's called cold water shock which is an actual scientific thing. It's not just, 'Wow, this is cold.' It gives your body a strange reaction and you start to gasp in and you will gasp in water. Lucky for them, in a way, but I think a lot of them died very, very quickly. Most of them would have been drowned and others will have had hypothermia. We do know though that the prince, William, was bundled into a rowing boat. There was one rowing boat on the White Ship that we know of and he was bundled into that by bodyguards. Apparently, he was getting away to the shore, which was only a mile away, when he heard one of his half-sisters, Margaret la Perche, screaming abuse at him for being a coward and rowing away and pleading for her life. He decides to go back for her and orders his crew to turn around. That is when people who were drowning saw the little rowing boat, tried to clamber on board and took it down.

Violet Moller: Oh, it must have been terrifying as they all tried to climb. I mean it's just the most horrific image you get in your head, isn't it?

Charles Spencer: That's the image that's always stuck in my mind since childhood of the White Ship. That's it for me. It's this young boy trying to do the right thing by going to retrieve his sister and they all drown. That's the most tragic aspect of the story, I think. Anyway, we know all this because there was one survivor. Originally, there were two or three survivors. The main one, who actually does survive all the way, was called Berold. It's a rather wonderful side to this story that possibly the most humble of all the passengers is the only one who makes it through the night, Berold the butcher. I've looked into this and my theory on this is it's because he was wearing the offcuts of his trade. He was wearing a sheepskin or goatskin tunic and if, like he had done, you've managed to clamber out of the sea on a bit of broken mast, even if that wool is wet, it will still give you some heat. The aristocrats on board were wearing silk and fur which is no good at all.

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Violet Moller: Is it also not possible that he wasn't drunk because he was just a butcher? Tell why he was there. I found that fascinating. Explain why he was on the boat in the first place.

Charles Spencer: Berold was there because all these people were disappearing back to England, he thought he may never see them again and some of them owed him money and he was determined to have his debts paid. Berold is rescued the following morning by three fishermen from Barfleur and he has this astonishing tale to tell. That would probably take me to scene three if we want to go there.

Violet Moller: Yes, let's carry straight on to scene three.

Charles Spencer: I think scene three is really just terrible. The King gets to the other side to Southampton. Southampton is very busy with other soldiers, courtiers and their wives coming back from the campaign in France and he decides to go hunting. Hunting is the extraordinary passion of William the Conqueror, his children and grandchildren. By the way, the casualty rate is incredible if I'm allowed to spin off for a moment.

Violet Moller: Yes, of course.

Charles Spencer: It's not just William Rufus. Another one of William the Conqueror's four sons, Richard of Normandy, was also killed in the New Forest hunting and then one of William the Conqueror's illegitimate grandsons is killed the same summer as William Rufus, again, hunting in the New Forest. I think it wasn't just a sport. It was a preparation for war. They really did go for it with the firing of arrows and the thundering around on the back of horses. I think it was a very, very dramatic thing. Anyway, they loved it. The New Forest had been settled by William the Conqueror as this huge haven for hunting. Henry is waiting there for his son and the others to catch up with him and then the news comes across from Normandy and nobody wants to tell the King. Also, the grief in court is terrible because nearly everybody of importance has lost either a relative or a close friend.

Violet Moller: And quite often, a child because a lot of the people on the boat were very young, weren't they? They were the younger generation.

Charles Spencer: That's exactly right. It was the young and groovy ones who were friends of the prince who were on board. They're trying to not show they're crying, actually. After a couple of days, it comes to this point where one of the King's nephews decides that the terrible news has to be given to the King. He decides he's not going to give it and he persuades a pageboy to transmit the news. The pageboy comes in to the King and just blurts it out. There's then this awful moment where the King, Henry I, just bellows in agonised disbelief and then falls to the floor. It's this combination because, of course, he now knows that he's lost not just several of his illegitimate children, as he's concerned, a nephew and a niece and all these great people on board but also his one legitimate heir; the one person who he had done everything for. He's been on the throne for 20 years and it's all basically disappeared overnight on that one voyage. He was carried away in grief and he went to bed for several days until one of his old, old retainers came in and told him, 'Stop wailing like a woman. Your enemies would love to see you in this sort of state. You've got a job to do and you'd better get on with it.' One of the things that he told Henry to do was to get married because Henry was a widower by this stage. Interestingly, all his illegitimate children (and he had some really very, very able illegitimate sons) were all ineligible. As I touched upon earlier, the Church had got a bit of a grip on the Normans and, through them, the English and so things like illegitimacy really mattered now. That was quite a change. William the Conqueror had become Duke of Normandy even though he was illegitimate but

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now that was not an option. We have Henry I dealing with paternal grief but, at the same time, the dynastic dire need of producing an heir. So within two months, he's produced this very beautiful bride who is called 'The Fair Maid of Brabant', Adeliza of Louvain. He marries her two months after the loss of the White Ship. The chroniclers say, in a rather coy way, that she stayed by the King's side for many months and then it became years but no child was produced. Of course, they were complete misogynists at this time and so they thought she must be barren.

Violet Moller: Yeah, of course [*laughter*].

Charles Spencer: She certainly wasn't. In fact, when the King died, she remarried and had six children, so that proves that one wrong. So he's left with this total quandary. It's astonishing to think that one shipwreck can derail the Norman dynasty but it did, essentially. After several years of not producing any more children, Henry decided that the only way he could move ahead was to convince the barons and bishops of England and Normandy that his one legitimate other child, his daughter Matilda, who had been an empress of Central Europe or the equivalent of Holy Roman Empress, could come back and be his successor. Interestingly, this was thought to be okay and in front of this very powerful and aggressive king, everyone readily agreed to this. When, in 1135, he died after famously eating a 'surfeit of lampreys' (a very unpleasant water animal), she didn't have a sniff. In fact, the one man who was on the White Ship of great note, who'd got off it...

Violet Moller: Yes, but explain that. Why did he get off it? It did seem like there were quite a few people, possibly the more sensible, who disembarked just before it set sail.

Charles Spencer: Yes, there were half a dozen or so of them and the most prominent was Stephen of Blois. There are two accounts. One is that he had a bad attack of diarrhoea and didn't want the embarrassment of being closely confined on a glamorous ship with that going on [*laughter*]. The other one is that he got drunk, was feeling ill and thought he'd just take a later ship. Anyway, it is a sliding doors' moment. The King's nephew steps off the White Ship which saves his life. He's one of the sons of William the Conqueror's youngest daughter, Adela of Blois, who's a fantastic woman, I must say. She's really competent, able and a great inspiration and much better at ruining Blois than her absolutely hopeless husband, who disgraced himself on the crusades. Stephen is an old-fashioned, slightly dim, very good at military sort of figure who people like. He has a very ambitious and able wife called Matilda of Boulogne. When he hears that his uncle has died, he races across the Channel and is crowned. I think if Stephen had been a decent king, by which I mean strong and intelligent, then there wouldn't have been a civil war but after three years of him really being very weak and upsetting an enormous of people, it then suited various people, including King David of Scotland, who was Matilda's maternal uncle, her half-brother, who was Robert, Earl of Gloucester (a fantastic figure and Henry's most able son) and Roger of Salisbury - these people all thought that a good way of sidelining King Stephen would be to suddenly remember the oaths they'd given to Henry I in loyalty to Matilda and this caused an unbelievable war. It's up there with the War of the Roses and the English Civil War as a time of utter terror for the average person in England and of bloodshed among the aristocracy. Essentially, it's 19 years that King Stephen's reign goes on and most of it was during a time when the monks said that 'blood descended on the land'.

Violet Moller: So it was that long? I had no idea it went on that long.

Charles Spencer: Yeah, it was really brutal. It's interesting to see because people emigrated from England because it was so lawless.

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Violet Moller: My gosh.

Charles Spencer: They look back with rose-tinted spectacles to the wonderful time when Henry I ruled. They remember this time when a young maiden with a purse full of gold could have walked from one end of the kingdom to the other. Under Stephen, she would have been lucky to get out of her door *[laughter]*. It was unbelievable what they were doing. You have these little communities of tiny hamlets and villages which, basically, became fortified to try and stave off...

Violet Moller: To protect themselves?

Charles Spencer: ...yeah, rape and pillage.

Violet Moller: Wasn't Matilda quite a force to be reckoned with in her own right?

Charles Spencer: Oh, I really like Matilda. She was so interesting. When she had been a young girl and had been a Holy Roman Empress, as it were, she had stood in for her husband when he was off on campaign and done a really good job as a ruler but the Anglo-Normans had no concept of a queen, as in the one we have now, where the queen was the ruler and her husband was a consort. I'm really not apologising for this and I'm trying to explain it. I think it goes back to the simple business of who would be in charge of an army in battle and it was just impossible, to their mind, to see a woman leading them into battle. Matilda was really exceptional. What I really think shows her quality and her metal was how she reacted to really tough times. There was a point in the civil war where she was absolutely done for. She was holed up in Oxford Castle and she had a garrison that was turning against her. She was surrounded in the winter.

Violet Moller: It was snowy, wasn't it? That's the bit, from my history lesson, that I remember the most was her escape. There was a picture in the book of the snow and the tower where she was escaping from.

Charles Spencer: I love that. She didn't tell anyone, apart from her two most trusted knights and they slipped over the walls of Oxford Castle in the night, dressed in white, as you say. They got through the snow, eventually got to Wallingford, which was always loyal to her, and she could perpetuate the civil war. There were so many times where she just showed incredible spirit. On the other side, what was very difficult for the aristocracy of the time was that she was this powerful, independent woman. When she was about to become Queen, she was getting ready in her Palace of Westminster to be crowned, the people of London were whipped up into a frenzy of hatred for her because she was considered too haughty and too arrogant. I can't think of a more arrogant trio than William I, William Rufus and Henry I.

Violet Moller: But they're men. That's still happening now. If you're a woman and you are powerful, then all sorts of accusations are hurled at you. Nothing has changed I'm afraid *[laughter]*.

Charles Spencer: No, I think that's definitely the case. We lost a great queen. It was intolerable for people to have this civil war because it was so destructive and in 1154, you end up with this situation where a compromise is reached. Stephen, who is a vain, old fellow, just wants to hang on to the trappings of kingship and they say, 'Yes, you can carry on until you die but your children can't succeed you and Matilda's eldest son, Henry Plantagenet, will be the next King of England.' If you look at this whole tale in its entirety, you end up with this situation where one shipwreck not only derails all of Henry I's dreams of the future and his dynasty but actually, it's

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the beginning of the very, very immediate end of the Norman dynasty altogether because Stephen of Blois' death results in the Plantagenets coming to power, who are the deadly enemy of the Normans. As the name suggests, they're from Anjou and they're seen as this wild, terrible family, which is allegedly descended from the devil's daughter...

Violet Moller: Wow!

Charles Spencer: ...and the Plantagenets had this record of appalling temper and that was seen to come from the devil. Although, it can be quite comical, actually, because we then end up with Henry II as our first Plantagenet king. There's one story which I love about him. He had such a short fuse that one day, somebody flattered a great rival of his, the King of Scotland, in front of him and Henry II decided to chew on his mattress and started to try and eat it. That is quite some temper. It would have been a terrifying thing in a king but at least, I suppose, he was Henry II's grandson which is, I suppose, a consolation but it was the end of the Norman dynasty.

Violet Moller: Yes, and he was Matilda's son and so she won in the end, I guess you could say. Oh, it's been so interesting talking to you. I now have to ask you the final question which is, of course, if you could have picked something up from one of these three scenes and put it in your pocket or brought it back with you to the present, what would it be?

Charles Spencer: I think it would be the figurehead of the White Ship and also, I like the mystery of it because we don't know what it was like. We know what the figurehead was of the Mora, which was William the Conqueror's flagship. It was of a child pointing forwards. It's such a monumental moment in our history; the loss of this one ship. Shipwrecks were common, it happened, but to lose the greatest figures of English and Norman society, including the one boy who could have held it all together, I'd like a memento of a part of that ship and I think that would be the part.

Violet Moller: Wonderful and do you think it's still down under the sea?

Charles Spencer: I'm diving there two weeks today. I'm going diving off...

Violet Moller: You're not? What? In December?

Charles Spencer: I know. I've got two days reserved in case one is too rough. It's with a proper crew of divers.

Violet Moller: Yeah, I hope so. I hope so [*laughter*], otherwise, I think that would be very, very dangerous. That's very brave. Please let us know if you find anything down there. I think that sounds amazing and very, very brave.

Charles Spencer: It's 900 years and it was a wooden ship, so all we're hoping to find are maybe some nails or something from it.

Violet Moller: Yeah, anything. That would be amazing. Thank you so much, Charles. I've really, really, really enjoyed our journey back to 1120 today. It's been a pleasure.

Charles Spencer: I've really enjoyed it too. Thanks so much.

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Violet Moller: That was me, Violet Moller, talking to Charles Spencer about his new book. It was published in September by William Collins to coincide with the 900th anniversary of this devastating event. *The White Ship* is, of course, available in all good bookshops and if you'd like some more information and to see some of the beautiful manuscript illuminations depicting Henry I, please visit the episode page on our website tttpodcast.com. Thanks so much for listening. Until next time...

[Sound of ticking clock]

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