

Praise for *Normal Women: Making History For 900 Years*

'Bravo, Philippa Gregory. This book is redemption for the unsung female heroes lost through time. Prepared to feel aghast, proud and inspired. Philippa Gregory is more than an author, she is warrior for the 'normal', the ordinary, a disruptor who refuses to be silenced, with her pen in hand she has "slayed" once again.'

– GERI HALLIWELL

'Impressively researched, by turns inspiring and chilling, the history of the uphill struggle for women to achieve anything remotely resembling equality over 900 years is brilliantly told for young readers in this book. And older readers. This 58 year old learnt for the first time that a housewife was not entitled to her share of the family money in a divorce until as late as 1996, or that rape within marriage did not become a crime until 1992, and that right here and now in the UK a woman is killed every three days by a man. And what this clear account of the last 900 years of history for 50 percent of the population tells me is that nothing should be taken for granted, and that much more still needs to be fought for.'

– CRESSIDA COWELL

'We all know the quote "he who owns the narrative controls the story". So much of our history has been led and told by men.

Gregory rewrites 900 years of history and reveals a path women can be proud of, and build from. What could be more uplifting and empowering?'

– EDWINA DUNN, THE FEMALE LEAD



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PHILIPPA
GREGORY

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Content warnings: *sex, violence, nudity,*
sexual violence, slavery, death

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INTRODUCTION

Hello!

I bet you didn't know that the first 'History of England' was written in the year 731? Written by a man, a priest, who had lived, since he was seven years old, in a men-only monastery?

In the centuries after him, other men wrote history books, but history was not taught as a subject at universities until 1872, with men historians teaching only men students – no women students were allowed to graduate from the university of Oxford until 1920, and Cambridge until 1948.

When women finally got to study history, they discovered . . .

THERE ARE NO WOMEN IN HISTORY!

In the books and the papers they found in the university libraries, there were hardly any women at all. No artists, composers, scientists, soldiers, heroines, mathematicians, sailors.

In one huge history book (Winston Churchill's *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*) – starting in 55BCE and ending in 1902 – there are 1,413 named men, and just 98 named women!

Winston Churchill went to an all-boys school from the age of seven and then into the men-only army – I think there's a pattern here!

And most of them are the mothers of famous men

Even today, you can find books called *10 Inspiring Women* or *20 Women at War* but you won't find one called *Millions and Millions of Women*. When it became clear there were very few women in the history books, men set about explaining why.

That's what
I should
have called
this book!

They wrote biology books explaining that women were not physically strong and unlikely to do anything DANGEROUS. They said that women did not have scientific or technical brains, so they couldn't do maths or design. Men wrote music histories explaining that women were not musical; they wrote art books saying women could not paint.

Today, when we think of English women of the past, we mostly think of the women of the 1800s and 1900s: big dresses and stage coaches, bonnets and balls. These two centuries were when women's lives were the MOST limited, women were the MOST inactive and – since they had to give all their wealth to husbands on marriage – the POOREST. It was the start of the modern world – and women had no place in it.

They were
supposed to
stay at home
and do
NOTHING

But there is much more to history than those 200 years – and women were powerful, active and effective in ALL of it. Finding these women takes some detective work – because the writers of their time (mostly men) don't describe them. I had to read the laws to see what they were banned from doing. I had to look at land records to find out what women owned, and at business records to see women squeezed out of work. I looked at criminal records to see what women were doing in their ordinary lives when they were arrested.

The only records that are easy to find are those made when writers (mostly rich men) wanted to stop women doing something, or when they saw women doing something outstandingly brilliant or outstandingly bad.

Women don't get into the records – and from the records into the history books – until the middle of the 1900s when historians of

At last!

every gender, race, belief and sexuality start to look for people like themselves – and their brilliant books are the basis of this history.

So this book is a new sort of History – a book about Normal Women, stretching over nine centuries from 1066. I read the 'great histories' written from the 1060s to the 1960s, gathered up all the tiny mentions I could find of women – whoever they were and whatever they were doing – and found millions of women living their lives and doing things that we do not think of as typical of women.

I found women who are loud, sworn to silence, fighting, timid, sporty, ill, labourers and artists. Some are spiritual and dedicate their lives to God; some love reading; some are scientists; some are criminals; some love a good time and some enjoy having sex. They are the complete opposite of the ladies of the nineteenth century with their big dresses and bonnets. Turns out that there are millions of ways that women behaved in the past – there are millions of ways to be a woman.

What is 'normal' for boys and men also changes over time. Once we drop the idea that men are the opposite of women, then men too can be anything they like! They can be fearful and quiet if they want. Not every story has to start with a prince riding out to the rescue.

Actually the story starts with an invasion of men.

And the women who fought back . . .



DOOMSDAY

1066-1348

NORMAL WOMEN OWN NOTHING





This is the Bayeux Tapestry -
a picture of the invasion

Woman escaping fire

There are more penises than women in the Bayeux
Tapestry: 88 on the horses, five on the men

14 OCTOBER 1066

On this day a massive army of 7,000 soldiers sailed across the English Channel, landed near Hastings on the south coast of England, fought a battle under the command of William, Duke of Normandy, killed the English king, Harold, and defeated the English army.

It was a bad day for English people. *It was a DISASTER for English women!*

The Bayeux Tapestry - a picture of the Norman victory commissioned by the winners and stitched by the losers, English craftswomen - shows 632 armed men, nearly 200 horses, 55 dogs, 500 other animals and birds - but only five women. And all of the women are being threatened.

NORMAL WOMEN ARE LANDLORDS

... UNTIL THE DAY OF DOOM

William of Normandy ordered a massive survey of his new kingdom called the Domesday (or Doomsday) Book. He found castles, manors and farms owned by independent women: one in seven landowners was a woman. English women could marry or divorce as they liked, rule their own lands, and even leave their fortunes to their daughters.

One of the richest was Wynflæd, grandmother of King Edgar. This is what she left her daughter, Æthelflæd:

'Her engraved bracelet and her brooch, and the estate at Ebbesborn and the title deed as a perpetual inheritance to dispose of as she pleases; and she grants to her the men and the stock and all that is on the estate.'

Just ignore the strange names all the way through!

Some women were richer than any man. Gytha Thorkildsdottir, mother of the dead King Harold, owned massive estates in southern England, stretching over 11 modern counties. Edith Swan Neck, Harold's wife, owned vast lands. Widow Leofgeat owned 400 acres in Knook, in Wiltshire, probably a gift from the Anglo-Saxon royal court where she made the gold fringe to trim royal robes. A royal cook also had lands in her own name, so did Adelina, a jester and musician–poet, who owned lands in Hampshire. Ælfgyd was a skilled sempstress (a tailor). She was paid in land at Oakley, in Buckinghamshire, for teaching the sheriff's daughter to embroider with gold thread.

NEW LORDS OF THE LAND

But now, the invader, William of Normandy, owned everything. He gave a quarter of England's agricultural land to the Roman Catholic Church – so that the pope in Rome would allow the invasion – and everything else was his. He kept castles, palaces, and huge hunting areas called 'royal forests' for himself, and gave his top commanders – only 15 men – huge properties and lands, and in turn, they gave land to their loyal soldiers. Only two women got lands: William's wife, Matilda, who ruled the country as his deputy when he was away, and his niece, Judith. But when Judith refused to marry the man William chose for her second husband, he took her lands back.

He had
executed the
first one!

In only a few years, all the Anglo-Saxon landowners (men and women) were replaced by Norman lords. They were so afraid of English people that they built 535 castles in just 30 years to protect themselves. Even today, most of England's richest families are their descendants. The Grosvenor family – the richest in England after the king – still owns more than 220 square miles of Britain, including the best properties in Monopoly: the dark blue ones,

Park Lane and Mayfair. The Grosvenors descend from William of Normandy's master huntsman, Hugh le Grand Veneur: 'Hugh the Great Huntsman'.

Or did the
Anglo-Saxons
call him
'Gros Veneur'
– 'Fat
Huntsman'?

William invented new laws for his 'royal forests'. Now, taking deer or rabbits for food, or even gathering firewood, was illegal. This was especially hard for women, who made a living and fed their families by hunting, gathering and farming the empty lands.

Of course, the English people hated this new land-grabbing king. *The Rime of King William*, written in 1087, accuses him of taxing the poor and stealing the forests:

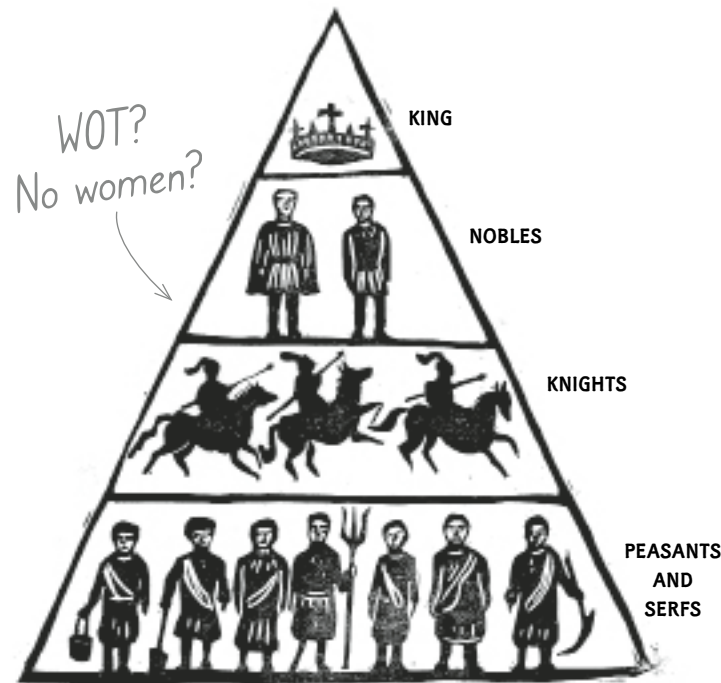
*'He had castles built
and poor men terribly oppressed.
The king was severe
and he took many marks of gold and
hundreds of pounds of silver from his underlings . . .*

*. . . He established many deer preserves
and he set up many laws concerning them
such that whoever killed a hart or a hind
should be blinded . . .*

*His great men complained of it,
and his poor men lamented it;
but he was so severe
that he ignored all their needs.'*

FEUDALISM

The Normans brought in new rules called 'feudalism'. Every man in the country had to serve the man above him. The very lowest were slaves – white men and women – above them were 'serfs',



who belonged, like the cows in the field, to the lord of the manor. Then there were different classes of men and at the very top was the king.

In the eyes of the law, there were no women! Women were not mentioned in the laws of the land. Women could not own anything – they were owned. Every girl belonged to her father and every wife belonged to her husband. If a woman or girl was injured, her husband or father was paid for damage to his ‘property’. Everything a father gave his daughter belonged to her husband on marriage. Everything was inherited by a man’s son. Title, lands and money went from father to son for the next 900 years. Even today, the son of a duke becomes the next duke – his older sister does not!

FEUDALISM HACKS!

It didn’t take long for women to work out how to make feudalism work for them. A woman could run up huge debts and her husband or father had to pay. Since *she* did not exist in law, nobody could take her to court. If she committed a crime, *he* got punished! For the next seven centuries, women believed that since the law did not mention them, they were free to protest and even riot.

Until about the 1700s, lawyers and magistrates agreed – women could riot for cheaper food, or even steal food, without fear of arrest

TOWNS AND CITIES

There were only 18 towns in England in 1066, each a sprawl of unplanned houses with big gardens, drying greens for laundry, grazing greens for animals, orchards, market gardens and parkland for hunting, as well as workshops for craft industries and a tumble of cottages for poor people. Country people brought their produce to sell at daily and weekly markets, driving sheep, cows, pigs and even geese along muddy roads.

Townswomen went out to the countryside taking fleeces for spinning, cloth for tailoring, leather for saddlers and cobblers, and metals for blacksmiths and goldsmiths in the villages, and to do seasonal work like harvesting and haymaking.

Women also sold home-produced goods at markets and in the streets: dairy-maids with buckets of milk, flower girls with posies,



cheesemakers, buttermakers, music sellers, and pedlars with ribbons, thread, storybooks and all sorts of other little goods. In Coventry in the 1300s, nearly half of all the hawkers (street sellers) were women. Meanwhile, travelling saleswomen carried luxury goods from town to town, from great house to great house. The towns offered countrywomen exciting jobs. Stratford-upon-Avon had 60 different occupations for women and Bristol more than 100, so women flocked to the towns to find their freedom. In the Sussex town of Lewes in 1378, there were more women than men!

LONDON

In 1100, London was home to about 15,000 people; by 1300, about 80,000. Women dominated many London trades: textiles, brewing, retail and domestic service. No trades were closed to women – their hard work made London rich. Girls as well as boys took on apprenticeships, working in skilled and well-paid jobs, and becoming masters of their trade. In 1276, Marion de Lymeseye was apprenticed to Roger Oriel, making rosaries for Roman Catholic prayers. Londoner Emma Hatfield inherited and ran her own chandlery business, making and selling candles. Goda la Gablere was a moneylender to merchants and shippers in the 1200s. Moneylending was a sin if you were a Christian and once Goda confessed to the crime, she lived out the rest of her life as a nun.

NORMAL WOMEN ARE FIGHTERS

English women and men never stopped resisting the Norman invasion. Women defended their fields and forests from the new

owners. They fought the Norman army on the walls of London. Gytha, mother of dead King Harold, organised a revolt at Exeter. There were uprisings by men and women on the Welsh borders from 1067 and, in the north of England, an army of 900 Normans were massacred.

In 1075, 15-year-old Emma de Gauder defied the king and chose her own husband – Ralph, Earl of East Anglia. She persuaded Ralph to join with her and her brother in the ‘Revolt of the Earls’ against William. When the rebellion collapsed, Ralph fled to France, and Emma – now aged only 16 – held Norwich Castle for three long months against the terrifying King William. She won a truce and safe passage to Brittany, where she joined her husband.

NORMAL WOMEN ARE NUNS

Women rushed to the convents to avoid being forced into marriage with the hated invaders. Gunnhildr, daughter of the dead King Harold, hid in a nunnery to avoid marriage to a Norman lord. Seven new nunneries were founded after 1066, and in the next century there were another 100 new religious houses, offering safe places to 3,000 women. It’s difficult to imagine now but convents and abbeys offered women wealth, power and independence. An abbess was as important as a bishop, and did not answer to any man, not even the new king – she reported directly to the pope in Rome.

Great women leaders created abbeys and convents, famous for their wealth and learning, at Wilton, Romsey, Barking, Shaftesbury, St Mary’s Winchester and Wherwell. Senior nuns were business leaders, managing hundreds of workers, farming huge estates and running houses as big as palaces. Women

were accountants, managers and treasurers. Choir mistresses composed church music. Sacrists cared for the precious religious costumes. Almoners took charge of donations – sometimes huge sums. Chamberers looked after the beds and bedding, cellarers supervised the food and ran the home farm. Kitcheners oversaw the kitchens, and in the hospital, nuns worked as surgeons, physicians and nurses. Novice mistresses taught in the school, scholars copied, translated and wrote their own books, and kept huge libraries. All books were written, illustrated and bound by hand, and nuns were authors, artists and publishers.

Joining a religious house was the only way for a single woman to get an education and a career. Queens set up nunneries, and sometimes retired to them. Young Matilda of Scotland (1080–1118), who would grow up to marry Henry I, was a disobedient pupil at Romsey Abbey – she once pulled off her black veil and stamped on it! But when she was crowned queen, it was her convent friends who became her ladies-in-waiting, and when she died, they joined a convent at Kilburn together.

One young woman, Theodora of Huntingdon (1096–1155), avoided the man her parents had ordered her to marry by running away from home. She disguised herself as a man and joined a woman hermit, Alfwen, at Flamstead, Hertfordshire. Theodora changed her name to Christina and began work as an artist in silk, embroidering and weaving holy pictures. The pope himself accepted her gift of silk sandals and a hat! Later, the Archbishop of Canterbury forgave her promise to marry, her bridegroom released her, and Christina finally took her vows and became a hermit.

Most hermits – people living a holy life alone – were women. One of the most famous was Julian of Norwich, whose beautiful prayers are famous today. Other women lived as nuns when their husbands died; some women even separated from their husbands

and lived as nuns in their own homes.

Euphemia (died 1257), a brilliant architect, builder and gardener, was chosen by her fellow nuns to lead the abbey at Wherwell in Hampshire. She doubled its size from 40 to 80 nuns, built a mill, a hall, two manor houses, a homestead, a landscape garden with meditation area, a hospital, a dormitory and even toilets with proper drains. When the old abbey bell tower collapsed, she designed a new one, and planned and built a new sanctuary with 12-foot-deep foundations. All this without any training – and before the profession of architecture was even invented!

NORMAL WOMEN RUN AWAY

Not all women were holy! Some girls, given to the Church by their families, ran away. Agnes Sheen, of Godstow Nunnery, staged her own kidnap and ran off with her boyfriend in 1290. Agnes de Flixthorpe ran away from her religious house at Stamford to hide out in Nottingham, 40 miles away. She was dressed as a man when she was recaptured in 1309. The nunnery put her in chains and punished her for five years, but as soon as they released her, she ran away again – and this time they did not get her back.

Another nun, Joan of Leeds, faked her own death, getting her friends to bury a dummy body in a coffin. The Archbishop of York wrote to the dean of Beverley, where Joan was in hiding, in 1318, telling him to:

‘warn Joan that she should return to her house . . . Having broken her vows . . . she now wanders at large to the notorious peril to her soul and to the scandal of all her order.’

But he didn't order the dean to send Joan back to her convent – maybe he thought it easier to let her go!

NORMAL WOMEN TAKE POWER

Landowners were often called away, leaving their great estates to be managed by their wives, so it was the ladies of the manor who organised the workers, collected taxes, sat as judges in their own courts, and even led their own fighting forces.

Lady Isabel Berkeley was so used to running everything that she told her husband not to do anything while she was away. She wrote:

'Keep well all about you till I come home, and treat not without me, and then all things shall be well.'

In 1257, Angareta de Beauchamp sat as judge in her own court and sentenced criminals to be hanged on her own gallows. Ela, Countess of Salisbury, was appointed by the king to be the sheriff of Wiltshire in 1231 – collecting taxes and keeping the peace. One bold lady, Isabella, Countess of Arundel, even scolded the king for breaking his word and taking the nobles' money. With a dignity 'more than that of a woman', she told Henry II:

'You govern neither us nor yourself well.'

Poor women were leaders in their communities and villages. They enforced food and ale laws and often led the 'hue and cry', chasing criminals through the streets. They investigated women's crimes, such as the deaths of unborn or newborn babies. They named the fathers of babies born outside marriage. They enforced unwritten social rules: giving insulting gifts to nagging or unfaithful wives, or calling up neighbours to make 'rough music', clattering pans or singing outside the houses of drunk or violent husbands.

NICHOLA DE LA HAYE

Nichola de la Haye was castellan (governor) of Lincoln Castle, and was there alone when her husband's enemy, William de Longchamp, attacked in 1191. She and her troops held out for more than a month before a truce was called. Nichola offered to retire as castellan when she was an old lady in her sixties, but King John refused to let such a powerful and loyal woman leave the castle. Instead he appointed her sheriff of Lincolnshire. The French raided England in 1217 and 67-year-old Nichola held her castle through a three-month siege, bombarded by cannons, until rescue came.

Ungrateful King John gave Nichola's castle and the city of Lincoln to another nobleman, so Nichola got on her horse and rode 150 miles to the new king – Henry III – to get her castle back. Restored as the castellan, she died in 1230, aged about 80, leaving her private fortune to her granddaughter.

NORMAL WOMEN ARE BULLIED

From 1216, every parish was ordered to set up a 'cucking stool'. A woman was tied onto the seat and raised in the air – rather like being stuck at the top of a seesaw. Some women were held for so long that they pooped themselves. Later versions of the seats dropped women into water and were called 'ducking stools'. In 1330, local law in Glamorgan said:



This isn't a fair law as it is not punishment for a crime – it's a punishment for women only. So it's a way to make violence against women legal

'If any woman be found guilty by six men of scolding or railing any townsman or his wife, or any of their neighbours, then she is to be brought at the first fault to the Cucking Stool there to sit one hour, at the second fault two hours. And at the third fault to let slip . . .'

'Let slip' means to drop her into the water

A man was allowed to beat his wife or children with a whip or stick – as long as the stick was no wider than his thumb. He could legally have sex with his wife without her consent – and that was not a crime – but forcing a 'maiden' (a virgin) to have sex against her will *was* illegal. The earliest laws said that 'rape' was both sex against a woman's wishes *and* kidnapping her from her family. A rapist had to pay the girl's father for damaging his 'property' – and he had to marry her, and pay for that.

'If anyone carry off a maiden by force, [he is to pay] the owner 50 shillings and afterwards buy from the owner his consent [to the marriage].'

The Laws of Æthelberht, seventh century

But it was almost impossible for a woman to prosecute her rapist. John raped Rose, a virgin of Irchester, in Northamptonshire, but when she tried to raise the hue and cry, he kidnapped her and held her prisoner for two years. She escaped, and brought her rapist-kidnapper to court in 1282. John said that the accusation did not count as Rose could not name the exact time and date of the assault two years earlier. John walked free. Justice was only done when the king himself called John back to court for a second trial. This time he was convicted of rape and fined £10 (over £9,000 in today's money). *Which seems only fair*

But the fine was paid to the king – not to Rose.

Historians have found records of rape from 1208 to 1321 and they show that only 21 per cent of men accused of rape were found guilty.

Shockingly few, right? But in 2022? It was TWO per cent! The medieval courts, with no police and no detectives, were more successful at prosecuting rapists than the police and courts today

NORMAL WOMEN WORK

'A household will survive without the husbandman; but not without the goodwife.'

Medieval people knew that women's work was essential to the survival of the family. Everything that a man did, his wife did alongside him – and she gave birth, and fed, raised and clothed the family as well.

In the gardens outside their cottages, women grew vegetables and fruit, and grazed hens or a pig or a cow. Women went out to work and earned about 3d a day (three old pennies), the same as men – equal pay for equal work in the early 1300s.

EQUAL PAY! In the 1300s! That's more than the 80 to 90 per cent of men's pay that women get now

WOOL

The biggest industry of the Middle Ages was wool and cloth. Women were shepherdesses, managing the flocks, and all-women shearing gangs travelled around the country in early summer – unfinished fleeces were England's biggest export to Europe. Almost every woman spun as she went about her working day, her spindle twisting as she walked; her distaff (the pole holding the wool or flax) stuck in her belt. Women dyed wool – they put their little children in the dye tub to trample it – and wove on looms in their homes. Convents and abbeys had huge textile departments, spinning, dyeing, weaving, finishing and embroidering. Finished fabric went on sale in England and abroad.

SPINNING WOMEN DISAPPEAR!

From the 1300s, a new invention, the spinning wheel, began to replace the little hand-spindle that women had used to spin as they went about their other work. The wheel was large and



heavy – it had to be set up in a woman's house and it kept her at home, working alone. Women spinning as they ran errands, walked to market or to their fields, or herded their animals, disappeared – and their work (and their wages) became invisible. The wheel was so expensive that most women had to rent it and then spin to pay off the debt. Working alone, women did not know how much their friends were charging for their work, and could not bargain with the supplier of the wool or the lender of the money.

SILK

The rich silk trade was mostly owned and run by craftswomen. In 1239, Mabel of Bury St Edmunds was commissioned by Henry III to make an embroidered standard (a type of banner) for Westminster Abbey. In the 1300s, Roesia Burford made a cape with coral for Queen Isabella. English women textile artists were famous the world over.

DIRT AND DANGER

Washing cotton and linen underwear was strictly women-only work. Big houses had women servants in the laundry rooms, and extra women were hired for a monthly or quarterly 'wash day'. In the country, women washed their household linen at a pool, in a stream or river, helping each other with heavy items. It was hard, dirty work – and even dangerous. Laundry women often fell in deep water and drowned.