

## Women's History Study Day



This virtual conference was a new initiative developed by the national u3a, which offered the chance to individuals or groups to access some high-quality talks from specialist speakers around the broad theme of women in history. There were around 500 individual log-ons and as many of those were likely to be groups, there was probably an audience of at least 1000 for most talks.

As with all new initiatives, it had its bumps along the road, largely technology-linked, which provided moments of inadvertent humour, sometimes as memorable as the talks. Muting and un-muting 500 audience members was quite a challenge, especially when some people seemed able to override the process and on one occasion having to search for the next speaker by calling for her from the screen, '*Speak to us, Tina*' will remain with us for a while. In sympathy with the missing Tina, our projector chose that moment to die but as we were a small group we gathered around the laptop and the talks certainly gave us plenty to chat about. Thanks again to Angela and Graem for booking the room, sorting out the heating after a cold start and providing the technology at our end.

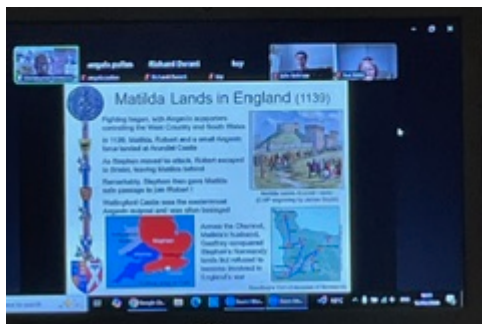
The **Matchgirls strike** in Victorian England was a grim reminder of the working conditions of the time and that the average life expectancy of poor men and women was only around 25 years. Images of women suffering terrible disfigurements and lingering deaths after handling white phosphorus were terrifying, but equally inspirational was the cooperation required to fight for something better when even male trade unions refused to support them. The speaker touched briefly on the work of Annie Besant, who was involved in this cause, along with many others and who had amazing life and impact.

The **Pendle Witch trial** offered a detail account of the procedure of the case, but we were disappointed that it didn't have more to say about the women involved, the role of '*wyse women*' in poorer society, why the persecution of 'witches' was so prevalent and why the case became so notorious.

Despite the speaker making it clear that the case against the women had very little evidence and witnesses were likely manipulated, puzzlingly, some of the questions afterwards indicated that there were members of the audience who continued to take the accounts of wicked, supernatural and malicious behaviour at face value. Clearly, just the use of the term ‘witch’ continues to have powerful, negative connotations even in 2026.



**Katherine Swynford, myth and reality.** Baz’s talk showed an impressive depth of knowledge about Katherine’s life and carefully separated what we know, based on historical evidence, and what is speculation and fantasy. He highlighted the Lincolnshire connections and I’m sure he will have single-handedly increased our tourist numbers.



**Empress Matilda** This was a fascinating talk which touched on many areas, both political and personal. Who knew that even 1,000 years ago some young men given the chance, are prone to reckless behaviour under the influence of alcohol!

Although Matilda was the only surviving child of Henry 1 and was named by her father as his heir, she was not accepted by the English barons because she was a woman and married to a Frenchman, Geoffrey of Anjou. However, after many convoluted events, and much determined action on her part, including the battle of Lincoln, her son, Henry, inherited the English throne and became the first Plantagenet king. It would be over 400 years before a woman ruled in her own right.