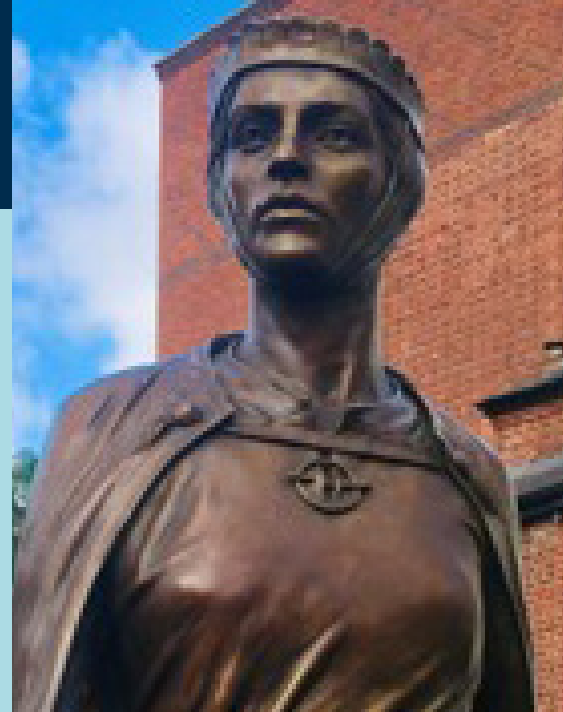


History Topic of the Month

The forgotten story of Licoricia of Winchester: a remarkable medieval Jewish woman

For the first time in over 700 years Licoricia of Winchester has reappeared in the city of Winchester. A new statue of Licoricia was unveiled in 2022, celebrated by a visit from Prince Charles just months before he became King Charles. Many historians now see her as an important person in medieval England, but until recently history had forgotten her. She had fame and influence despite being a woman and a Jew. This was remarkable as she lived at a time when power was mainly held by Christian men and Jews suffered from racist anti-Jewish persecution called antisemitism.

Find out about Licoricia's dramatic story, what she achieved and the dangers she faced. Why should Licoricia's story be remembered?



Contributor: © S. Herrity

Photograph of Licoricia of Winchester.
Sculpture by Ian Rank-Broadley.

What do historians know about Licoricia's life?

There is much we don't know about the life of Licoricia. In particular, her early life is largely a mystery. We don't know where she was born, when she first married or how old she was when she had her children. It is likely she married young like most medieval women. Rebecca Abrams, the author of the latest book on Licoricia, *Licoricia of Winchester: Power and prejudice in medieval England* (2022), points out that Licoricia's king, Henry III married his wife Eleanor of Provence when she was only 12 years old!

Historians trying to find out more about her face a lack of evidence. There are no written accounts or pictures of her from the medieval period. However, her name was unusual, coming from the French word for Licorice, like the sweet we eat today. This meant her name stood out in records of Jewish financial business deals. These records were kept for the king in large locked chests called an *archa*. He wanted to see how much money Jews had so that he could charge them special taxes called tallages. It is these documents that provide the evidence of her later life.

Licoricia's name is first seen in records from 1234 when she was a widow running her own business as a **financier** in Winchester. She is named as 'the wife of Abraham of Kent'. Winchester was one of the most important and wealthy cities in medieval England, with an impressive castle where Henry III spent much of his time. Records show that there were Jewish female financiers working within family businesses in Winchester who travelled to



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other towns and cities on business. Historian Suzanne Bartlet, in her book *Licoricia of Winchester* (2015), explains 'most Jewish women dealing on the money market learnt their trade from their families and husbands'.

Before they were married, female Jewish money lenders usually used their father's name on documents. There is one such document found in an *archa* chest belonging to 'Licoricia daughter of Isaac'. We cannot be sure this is the same Licoricia, although Bartlet points out that no other Licoricia appears in any records. Being from a Jewish family, Licoricia may also have been taught to read and write. Perhaps her education and experience in business were the secrets to her success?



Contributor: © S. Herrity

Photograph of Jewish token

A financier – before banks existed, Christian and Jewish financiers provided a service in lending and exchanging money. Jewish financiers developed new agreements like mortgages to help people borrow more to buy property.

Remarkable – worth talking about, unusual, extraordinary, significant.

Persecution – cruel treatment because of someone's religion or race.

Resilience – being able to recover after difficulties, being tough.

Interest – money paid for borrowing money or delaying paying it back

Why were Jews living in medieval England?

Licoricia was part of a community of Jewish people living in towns and cities all over England. Jewish families had migrated to England for around 150 years before Licoricia was born, some to escape persecution across Europe. William the Conqueror encouraged Jewish merchants in France willing to lend him money to come to London after 1066. This is the first record of Jews living in England. William needed money to pay his soldiers and to build castles and cathedrals. This was good business for Jewish merchants. The idea of Christians lending to other Christians and charging money to borrow it, called interest, was seen as wrong by the Church. Church leaders called it the sin of usury.

Over the next 200 years, the Jewish population grew to roughly 5,000 out of a population of around 5 million people (about 2% of the population). The king encouraged Jews into money services, but most Jews were not money lenders like Licoricia and most money lenders were Christian.



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Most Jews could not afford to be financiers. They worked in other trades such as merchants, tradesmen, scribes, doctors, midwives, and metal workers. Laws banned some Jews from some jobs and they could not join guilds. Guilds were organisations of traders that set rules such as who could trade and what prices to charge for goods. This also meant some trades were not open to Jews.

Some Jewish families came from Spain, Italy and Germany to live in England as the king gave them 'special status' as the 'property of the king'. This came with the king's protection. However, they were not protected from the king himself. He demanded huge special Jewish taxes (tallages) and introduced new laws against Jews which made Licoricia's life difficult. These forced most Jews into poverty, some to the point of starvation. In 1244 Henry III took one-third of everything Jews owned. More crushing taxes were demanded in 1254.

Lives of persecution

Licoricia lived at a time when Jewish families suffered persecution because of their different ethnic and religious background. The medieval Church was a network across Europe with great power and influence. Its leader was the Pope. The Church encouraged anti-Jewish feeling across Europe, especially after the start of the Crusades in 1095. These religious wars against Muslims made people with a different religion seem like the enemy to many Christians. For example, the Pope tried to keep Christians and Jews apart with anti-Jewish rulings from 1179 to 1215. These were accepted by England's church leaders when they met in 1222 at the Oxford synod. This made the lives of Jews more difficult. Jews were made to wear a badge on their clothes. At first, wealthy Jews like Licoricia could pay a fine instead, but after 1250 more people were forced to wear it.



Contributor: © S. Herrity.

Photograph of Winchester Cathedral

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Licoricia of Winchester
(early 13th century–1277)



Challenges from the people and the court

Licoricia's achievements are more remarkable when you look at the difficulties and dangers she faced during her lifetime:

From the Christian population

Jews and Christians often got on well most of the time but when things went wrong like disease, war or crime, Jews were likely to be blamed as suspicious foreigners. Jews were often accused of crimes they did not commit like child murder (known as blood libels). For example, Licoricia's first husband was accused of killing a child along with five other men and he disappeared from records after the trial. It is unclear what happened to him, but Licoricia appears in the records as a 'widow'. This would have been devastating for Licoricia, leaving her to bring up at least three children on her own and run a business.

Jews also often suffered violent attacks. One source of prejudice against them was resentment towards the small number of Jewish financiers. Despite Jews being encouraged to work as financiers, people were unhappy about paying interest on their loans. Attacking Jews at times of unrest was a way of destroying evidence of loans and cancelling any debt.

Licoricia lived through the frightening Baron's War against the king, when many Jews across the country were attacked. Many Jews in Winchester were killed during the war and many of the records from Licoricia's business were destroyed along with records of other Jewish loans. Despite these setbacks Licoricia did not give up, and she persevered to make a success of her business and provide for her family. It must have taken great resilience.

From the King

Jews also faced increasingly harsh treatment from the king. The king saw Jewish people as his property and expected Jews to produce money for him when he demanded it. This was a way the king could get money without asking parliament for it. When the king needed more money, he would charge the whole Jewish community an enormous tax called a tallage. Large numbers of Jews were often imprisoned to make sure the tallage was paid. Licoricia herself survived at least three spells in the Tower of London and her sons also suffered imprisonments.



Contributor: © Alex Segre / Shutterstock

Tower of London, London, UK

When Jews died the king also had the right to demand money from the relatives before they could inherit. Licoricia was held hostage for eight months in the Tower when her second husband suddenly died in 1244.

This left her and her baby boy Asher facing financial disaster. As her husband, David, was a top Jewish financier, the king wanted to claim some of his wealth and Licoricia was forced to pay 5,000 marks (worth £2.5 million today), to inherit his estate. It was an enormous amount, but in return she could keep the business, which she rebuilt with the help of her sons. Licoricia was also able to step into the role of financier to the king that David had held before he died.



What does Licoricia's story tell us about life in medieval England?

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What were Licoricia's achievements?

Licoricia was an ordinary Jewish woman who achieved extraordinary things. At a time when many women could only be wives, mothers or servants, Licoricia used her knowledge and experience to build the small financial business run with her first husband into a very successful business, despite being a widow with three sons to look after.

After inheriting the financial business of her second husband David of Oxford, she became the most successful independent Jewish businesswoman in England. Her clients among the rich and powerful nobility in England included King Henry III and Queen Eleanor. Licoricia was often at Winchester Castle, meeting with the king and his officials at the king's court in the Great Hall. Her older son also enjoyed success. In 1268 Benedict became the only Jew in England allowed to join a guild. This gave him the same rights as non-Jewish traders to own land and property, unlike other Jews.





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Contributor: © Heritage Image Partnership Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

The coronation of King Henry III, 13th century.

Artist: Anonymous

She became an influential figure at a time when it was difficult for women and Jews to have power. There is evidence she even had influence over the king. Henry III wrote to Jewish leaders to allow David of Oxford to divorce his first wife so that he could marry Licoricia. He ordered the Countess of Devonshire to immediately pay money she owed Licoricia when she avoided repayments. He intervened when Licoricia was found guilty of managing land for longer than the law allowed, limiting her punishment to a small fine. Licoricia was known to be impressive in arguing her own cases in court. As a result, she was able to use her influence to speak to the king to help other Jews. This influence helps make Licoricia remarkable.

What happened to her Jewish community?

By the time Edward I became king in 1272, the Jewish community was poor and no longer useful to the king. Edward needed money for castle building and his expensive wars in France. Parliament told him they would organise money for the king if he forced Jews out of the country, cancelling all debts. The king realised he could borrow money from lenders in other countries like Italy instead. Influenced by the ideas of the Church he wanted to get rid of people with a different religion so, in 1290, he ordered Jewish people to convert to Christianity or leave the country. This was the Act of Expulsion.

Jews who refused to convert were given four months to leave England and only allowed to take with them what they could carry. They were supposed to be able to leave safely but some were attacked and robbed. One group was forced off a ship onto sandbanks and left to drown. Most exiled Jews went to France, Germany and Eastern Europe.

Licoricia's son Asher was 47 years old at the time of the expulsion and would have been one of the Jews leaving England, ending 200 years of Jewish life in England.



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How did Licoricia's story end?

Tragically, in 1277 Licoricia suffered a violent death, murdered in her own home. We know that she was famous at the time, as her death was reported as far away as Germany.

Sadly, several members of her family also suffered tragedies. Some of the people of Winchester reacted violently against her son Benedict's election to a guild and attacked Jewish property. Shortly after her death, when attitudes towards Jews became more hostile, Benedict was arrested and executed along with hundreds of other Jews. This new wave of terror and persecution against Jews affected nearly every Jewish family.

In the modern statue of Licoricia she is holding the hand of a small boy. This is her youngest son, Asher, who suffered at the hands of the king. He was imprisoned in 1287 when Edward I locked up all Jews to demand his last tallage before the expulsion of 1290.



Contributor: © S. Herrity

Sculpture by Ian Rank-Broadley



Contributor: © Angelo Hornak / Alamy Stock Photo

Shrine of Edward the Confessor (died 1066)
behind High Altar of Westminster Abbey,
London England

What was her legacy?

Licoricia had a significant impact on medieval England. The massive payments taken by the king and the business loans to all kinds of people helped the economy grow. Her contribution to important royal building projects in England was also huge. One payment, worth £2.8 million today, was used by the king to build the elaborate and expensive shrine to Edward the Confessor at Westminster Abbey. A shrine was a special place dedicated to a saint. People travelled on pilgrimages to pray to saint Edward for miracles like healing.



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Today Licoricia's statue stands as a reminder of the vibrant Jewish community that was an important part of medieval society. Her story shines a light on the persecution medieval Jewish migrants faced and their perseverance and resilience in the face of adversity. As one of the few statues of a named woman in Britain today, she reminds women of what can be achieved, no matter your background or situation. The statue also helps people understand that throughout history British society has been a diverse one, full of people from many different backgrounds and faiths.

Discussion points

- Why do you think that Licoricia was forgotten for so long?
- Why do you think that some historians consider Licoricia to be historically significant?
- How similar or different is Licoricia compared to other significant women you have learned about from the medieval period. What kind of power did these women have?
- Find out why the Licoricia Charity wanted a statue of Licoricia put up in Winchester.
- There is evidence that Jews and Christians lived and worked together, they drank together in pubs and went to each other's weddings. Why do you think the Church was keen to make sure that Jews and Christians didn't mix socially?
- What can you find out about the Statute of the Jewry in 1275?
- Can you remember any other times in history when Jews have been persecuted?
- Does antisemitism exist today?
- At the base of the statue is written "Love thy neighbour as thyself" from the Jewish Bible (Old Testament) Leviticus ch.19 – a message which is shared by Jews, Christians and Muslims. Why do you think this verse was chosen?
- How does the experience of medieval Jews compare to other groups of migrants in medieval England?

About the author

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Further reading and resources

Podcasts

[Woman's hour](#) Hear Rebecca Abrams, author of *Licoricia of Winchester: Power and Prejudice in Mediaeval England*, on why Licoricia's story is so important. On BBC sounds.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m0014717> – 40 minutes from start.

[The Licoricia of Winchester Appeal – YouTube](#)

Hear two trustees of the Licoricia Charity, Danny Habel and Tony Stoller, join the videoed Podcast Against Antisemitism to discuss the life of Licoricia. March 2022.



Videos

www.licoricia.org

This Licoricia of Winchester charity website hosts videos of the royal visit to the Licoricia statue in Winchester, including videos of speeches and interviews on Licoricia.



Teaching materials

Find teaching resources on the [Hampshire History Centre resources Moodle](#): Through this fully resourced three-lesson enquiry students will discover what the extraordinary life of Licoricia of Winchester reveals about medieval society and how it treated its Jewish community. They will explore how the experience of medieval Jews changed over time and why. Students can also examine how and why Licoricia's perceived significance has changed over time. A second, two-lesson enquiry, explores the medieval history of Winchester to discover what it reveals about the experience of the Jewish minority who lived there. It provides a meaningful context in which to learn about the attitudes, power structures, relationships and events that affected their lives.





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Further reading and resources

Further reading:



Licoricia of Winchester. Power and Prejudice in Medieval England, Rebecca Abrams 2022

Licoricia of Winchester, Suzanne Bartlet, 2009

The Story of the Jews, Simon Schama, 2014

Articles



[Historical Association One Big History Department Blog on A 13thC Jewish woman: Licoricia of Winchester](#), by William Carver

[Prince Charles visits Winchester to see statue of Licoricia](#) – BBC

[BBC Online article of statue unveiling](#) 10.2.22

[Guardian article on statue unveiling](#) 9.2.22

[Jewish Chronicle online](#) article on England's most prominent Jewish woman

[Winchester Cathedral news on Licoricia unveiled](#)

[The Spectator article on Licoricia and the forgotten expulsion of England's Jews](#)

Take a look at [Pearson's Diversity and Inclusion in History](#) webpages for more great content.