Leicester Chronicler

Tempus omnia revelat
Time reveals all

Listening to the historic heartbeat of the City of Leicester and its environs in the English East Midlands

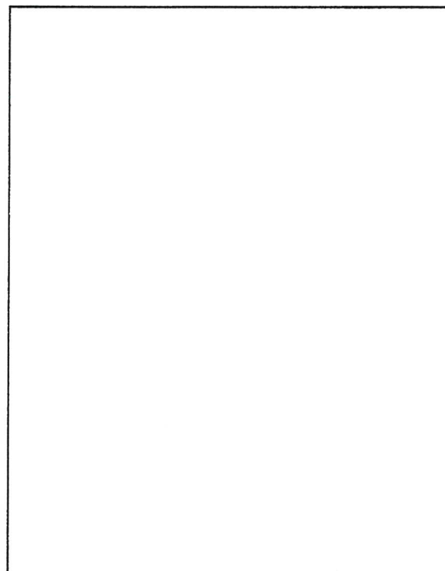
A reflection of past and present thoughts and aspirations

Where is Richard III now?

Richard, crowned King of England on 6 July 1483, is seen by many as one of England's most maligned kings. His historical profile is certainly due in no small part to Shakespeare's portrayal of him as an evil, conniving hunchback. However, debate and controversy still surround the claim that Richard killed the Princes in the Tower, and certainly, he was not a hunchback.

It is known that Richard visited Leicester at least twice. In October 1483 he spent several days at the Castle, and he returned in 1485 on his fateful march to Bosworth.

The following article, which outlines some current lines of research, has been offered to Leicester Chronicler by the Richard III Foundation.



Regal Honours Wait a King's Remains?

A Ricardian friend of mine recently observed that August is "a rotten month". It is not just that the story of the final outcome at Bosworth cannot be rewritten, it's knowing that, despite having spent his last summer watchful for the Tudor invasion, Richard III was forced into a military confrontation that should never have come to be in the first place.

In some respects, the reports of what happened at Bosworth vary widely, but there is at least consistency in their acknowledgement of Richard's courage in the field. I don't propose to delve into the surviving records of the battle here. What I would like to do is to gather the various and often conflicting clues as to what happened to the slain king once he was taken back to Leicester after the battle. The accounts can be divided into several distinct strands, where Richard was publicly displayed, where he was buried and what, eventually, happened to his coffin, memorial and earthly remains.

Leicester has a long-standing tradition of acknowledging King Richard III that continues into the present day. Streets and roads bear his name, and several plaques and memorials are sited around the town. A memorial stone for Richard was dedicated in 1982 and laid in the chancel of Leicester Cathedral. The cathedral is the former St Martin's Church that was consecrated as a cathedral in 1927.

From the outset, there are contradictions between the surviving accounts. It is thought Richard's burial took place after his naked body had been on public view for at least two days. Where he was subjected to this public gaze is seemingly the start of the confusion. One recent Leicester tourist guide book informs its readers the body was displayed at the Church of St Mary de Cato, adjacent to the Friary. An alternative and plausible secondary source claims the body was displayed at the Collegiate Church of St Mary's in the Newarke. Local legend also has it Richard was dumped out in the open in a horse trough.

The location of the grave itself has also exercised numerous commentators.

The French commentator Jean Molinet said Richard *"without royal solemnity was buried at the entrance to a village church"*. The Spanish diplomat Diego de Valera reported to his masters, Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile that Tudor had *"ordered the dead king to be placed in a little hermitage near the place of battle"*. The Neville retainer, John Rous, already on hand in the Midlands, noted more specifically, that the late king was buried *"in the choir of the Friars Minor at Leicester"*.

The *Great Chronicle*, somewhat later, records that Richard was *"irreverently buried in a church in Leicester".* Vergil adds this was done *"without any pomp or solemn funeral"*. In more recent times, Alison Weir is unable to make up her mind where he is, telling us Richard's bones are *"either lost or recovered and reburied at Bow Bridge"* ('The Princes in the Tower', p.217). She adds the evidence for this observation *"is conflicting".*

In September of 1495, after a visit to the town, Henry VII commissioned a funeral monument for Richard that was to be erected the following year. A surviving document, BM Add.7099, Folio 129 names James Keyley as having been paid £10.1s. for the project. The antiquarian John Nichols recorded an English translation of the memorial's Latin epitaph:

"I who am laid beneath this marble stone,
Richard the Third, possess'd the British throne.
My country's guardian in my nephew's claim,
By trust betray'd I to the kingdom came.
Two years and sixty days, save two, I reign'd,
And bravely strove in fight, but unsustaine'd.
My English left me in the luckless field,
Where I to Henry's arms was forced to yield.
Yet at his cost my corpse this tomb obtains,
Who piously interr'd me, and ordains
That regal honours wait a King's remains.
Reader, whoe'er thou art, thy prayers bestow
T'atone my crimes and ease my pains below".

There are some obvious problems with this verse. The mealy-mouthed and self-serving content apart, it is not a prose style that was in vogue when Henry VII occupied the throne, and of course the length of the reign is completely wrong. This particular epitaph was certainly known in the 17 Century; and, if these are not the words that Tudor commissioned, then what was the original inscription on the tomb?

It is interesting to note that the commission dates a full decade after Bosworth. Yet, in 1491, John Payntor argued vehemently with William Burton against the latter's slur that Richard had been *"buried in a dyke like a dog".* Was it just in the parlance of the time, 'common fame' that Henry VII ordered Richard to be buried honourably? Or was this tomb of the 1490s *another* monument to be erected in Richard's memory? If so, why? It is not certain whether Henry VII paid the costs of this commission in full. Assuming he did pay up, it is worth remembering that, despite the inevitable comparisons with the extravagance of Edward IV's state funeral in 1483 (£1496), or Henry's own tomb by Pietro Torrigiano (£1700), £10 was not exactly a paltry sum.

Richard once had a grave with a monument of some kind seems beyond question. John Leland, writing before 1543, says *"The Greyfriars of Leicester stood at the end of Wigston's Hospital and there was buried King Richard III and a knight called 'Mutton', a one-time mayor of Leicester*".

According to Holinshed's *Chronicles* of 1577, *"the sepulchre"* incorporated a picture in alabaster, representing Richard's *"person".* William Burton in his 1622 *'Descriptions of Leicester'* mentions *"a faire alabaster monument"* with Richard's *"picture cut out and made thereon".*

The Leicester Grey Friars paid a rent of 24s. per annum to the Crown until February 1536 when Henry VIII sold the Friary. The Dissolution began in 1538 and the surrender document of the Greyfriars property is dated 10 November of that year. The lead from the roof was reserved for the King; the rest was disposed of at public auction. The stones, timber and grave ornaments were sold for re-use. The next owner of the site was Robert Catlyn. He, in turn, sold it to Alderman Robert Herrick, uncle to the poet of the same name, and a one-time Mayor of Leicester. Until the 1870s, Herrick's home, Greyfriars House, stood where the present Grey Friars Street adjoins Friar Lane.

It seems Herrick set to and completely overhauled the site in a very short time. John Speed,

writing in 1611, had described the area as being *"overgrown with weeds and nettles, very obscure"* and Richard's grave site as *"not to be found"*. Yet, only one year later, Sir Christopher Wren's father, who was tutor to Herrick's nephew, is shown a fine memorial to Richard in Herrick's garden. This monument comprised a three foot high stone pillar, inscribed (in English) *"Here lies the Body of Richard III, Some time King of England"*. Given the brevity of this particular inscription, it is logical to assume this particular pillar must post-date any Tudor original, and could well have been a brand new tribute commissioned by Herrick himself.

We know from surviving plans of the town that the Herrick garden extended at the rear along Grey Friars Street to the junction at St Martin's, incorporating land to either side. Richard's original grave site must have stood somewhere within those boundaries. David Baldwin, in his excellent article on Richard's tomb, reminds the reader that Royal personages were *"invariably buried"* in a place of honour. The Greyfriars choir would have been such a place. The choir was probably at the north end of Herrick's garden. This tallies with Charles Billson's assertions in his 1920 *'Mediaeval Leicester'* that Richard probably still lies beneath the northern (St Martins) end of Grey Friars Street, or the buildings on either side. What became of those early memorials?

There appears to be no official reference to the Tudor tomb after 1496. In 1935, the Honorary Secretary of the Leicester Archaeological Society considered that the Herrick monument may well have been destroyed in the intensive fighting that took place near St Martin's Church during the Civil War.

We now return to that horse trough in which Richard was said to have been so unceremoniously dumped.

The story was not only known to John Speed, who wrote of it being situated at a *'"common inn"*, but, also the diarist John Evelyn also noted the city was famous for the trough *"which is now converted into a Cistern at which (I think), cattle drink"*.

Writing around 1700, the female traveller Celia Fiennes describes a stone receptacle at an inn she recorded as 'The Greyhound'. David Baldwin wonders if she meant The Talbot Inn in Talbot Street, since there was no inn called The Greyhound in the city at that time. A talbot was a breed of dog, not unlike a greyhound.

The receptacle was not in one piece, though presumably Celia actually saw the part that was, in her words, *"cut out in exact form for his body to lye in"*. This description suggests it wasn't a horse trough after all, but an old stone coffin. Baldwin further suggests it could have been a discarded coffin reclaimed by the monks in the hasty aftermath of Tudor's surprise victory, since by the end of the 15th Century coffins of this type were no longer routinely used. York has examples on display in the entrance to the City Park near Lendal Bridge. In 1720, Reverend Samuel Carte, Vicar of St Martin's, mentioned a fragment bearing the imprint of a hollow *"fitted for retaining the head and shoulders"* which could be seen at The White Horse tavern in the town.

John Throsby, writing in 1790, recalls *"the end of it remained"* at the same inn during his boyhood in the 1740s. Throsby also records being shown fragments of it "*about the year 1760"*. However, when he made a specific journey in 1758 to see "*this trough which had been the repository of one of the most singular bodies that ever existed"*, William Hutton found nothing of it remaining.

Hutton went on to say the receptacle was destroyed in the latter part of the reign of George 1 (1714-27), with some pieces used as steps in the cellar of the inn where it had served as a trough. Charles Billson notes the last contemporary reference to the trough dates from 1806 by a man called Cruttwell. Cruttwell claimed the upper fragment was still preserved at the tavern, but, since that account so closely follows Rev. Carte's in content, David Baldwin questions whether Cruttwell actually saw the fragment for himself. The White Horse tavern was demolished in the early 19th Century to make way for bank premises.

So where is Richard now?

The widely held belief, alluded to in Alison Weir's comments earlier, is that Richard's remains were disinterred and thrown in the Soar at the time of the Reformation by an angry mob. Does this have any basis in fact? Let us now examine the evidence.

Leland visited the town before the Dissolution, but wrote up his travels some time afterwards. He doesn't mention any desecration of Richard's grave. Nor does Dean Wren. Speed, writing about the tomb one year earlier, didn't mention it was destroyed at the Reformation. Indeed, the story first crops up some seventy years after the suppression of the monasteries. The rumour still has currency today in some quarters, to the sorrow of some Ricardians, but just a cursory look at the facts reveals very little credible basis for this supposed civic outrage against Richard's remains. What, for instance, had the citizens of Leicester learned about Richard some fifty years after his death that they hadn't already heard about him in his own lifetime and in the lifetime of Richard's successor? This was a town that had remained broadly supportive of Richard when he was alive. Like the City of York, it seems that Leicester didn't immediately welcome the change of dynasty. However, it is certainly the case that in 1425 the reformer (1428) John Wycliffe's remains had met a similar same fate in Lutterworth in Leicestershire; perhaps local legends had become interchangeable over the years. The possibility that the bones may have been those of Richard's son, John of Gloucester, has even been mooted.

Bones were actually found at Bow Bridge in the 19th Century and were reported to be Richard's.

A snippet from the *'Leicester Chronicle'* of 1862 describes the work undertaken on the bridge, and the subsequent recovery of some bones. Another press report mentions that the stream under the bridge ran by the Friary's burial ground. This account repeats the story of Richard being flung into the stream, but, with an additional detail of the bones being reburied by a few pitying bystanders once the mob retired (a nice literary touch, and somewhat reminiscent of Thomas More's reburial antics!).

The skeleton had been found *"by navvies"* (workmen). It was almost complete; only the feet and a few small bones were missing. The skeleton was lying face up, knees drawn up towards the head, eighteen inches north of the east pier of the old bridge, extending some three feet at right angles to the bridge, and lying thirty inches below the stream bed in *"black deposit"*. The bones were placed in a basket, taken to the Surveyor's Office and subsequently examined *"minutely"* by a local surgeon, Mr. H. Lankester.

Lankester's report is dated 29 May 1862. He was uncertain of the gender because of *"mutilation"* to the pelvic area. However, the surgeon was of the opinion that the skeleton was of a man much younger than Richard III. Indeed, he avers the skeleton to have been of someone aged *"about 20"*. He deduces that the small size of the bones indicates the subject was *"somewhat below average height"* and of "weak muscular development.

A medical practitioner, Mr J Hunt of Thurnby (sic) also examined the skull at the same time. He concluded it was of *"a man in early or middle life"* (though "not more than 30"), who was *"of short stature and slight frame"*.

By 1955, the whereabouts of the bones recovered from the Soar was unknown to Leicester's then Keeper of Antiquities, although the skull examined by Mr. Hunt eventually passed to the Goddard family of Newton Harcourt Manor in Leicester, in whose safe-keeping it remains.

In 1861, an inscription regarding the bones in the river was erected on a factory wall abutting Bow Bridge by a local master builder, Mr. Benjamin Broadbent, with the permission of Mr. A. Turner, the owner of the estate where the old Bow Bridge was situated. Mr. Broadbent was reported in the press as being *"unwilling that the remains of a King of England should be without a stone to mark the place"*. This memorial plaque apparently replaced a willow tree that had been planted in the King's memory, but which had been cut down in Mr. Broadbent's time.

The medieval bridge was later demolished, although the plaque survives. The present Bow Bridge has several references to Richard incorporated in its iron structure and decorative furniture, including the legend of the old woman who predicted the king's head would hit the same spot on the bridge as his spur had done on the journey to Bosworth.

The Greyfriars site has undergone major transformation since the 19th century. Nowadays, nothing remains of Herrick's magnificent garden. Very little survives of the medieval friary; just an archway in the basement of private property and some stones incorporated into the wall of an open air municipal car park.

One modern secondary source questions the notion that Richard's remains may not have been moved, because of those early and persistent stories circulating about the trough/coffin. However, I'm convinced that Richard still lies where the Greyfriars monks buried him. The trail left by the stone trough, while an interesting contribution to Leicester's rich local history, is not absolute proof that the king's body was moved at the Reformation. Nor can it be proved, on the present evidence available to us, that he was dumped in the Soar. This may well turn out to be nothing more than mistaken identity.

Wherever Richard is now, he has found in death the fundamental peace he was denied in the last weeks of his life. I am aware that many of my Ricardian colleagues want to see him reburied somewhere more appropriate, where 'regal honours await a king's remains'. However, there may be solace in knowing that the available evidence indicates that, after all the humiliation heaped upon his body and his reputation post-Bosworth, he was, at the end, accorded some dignity and buried according to Catholic rites he would have recognised, in a place of quiet contemplation where comfort was offered to the poor and needy.

Notes:

1. Ellis, H., editor, *Three Books of Polydore Vergil's English History.* Vergil says Richard was buried two days after the return to Leicester. He was exposed to the universal gaze for three days, according to de Valera's letter to the monarchs of March 1, 1486.

2. Nichols, J., editor, *History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester (1795-1811)*. Vol 1, part 2, p.298. St. Mary's in the Newarke was a Lancastrian foundation, and therefore likely to have been Henry Tudor's own choice for the displaying of Richard's corpse, and thus reinforcing the rightness of the Lancastrian victory.

3. Desmond Seward, *England's Black Legend*, p.269, refers to Molinet as a mediocre poet and a worse chronicler. However, Molinet's account of Bosworth contains several interesting details not mentioned by the other commentators.

4. Contemporaneous evidence for the bones being reburied at Bow Bridge is non-existent, although there *is* a mention of it in a Victorian press report, see note 20.

5. This is an 18th century transcript. The original household account book covering the years 1491-95 is now lost.

6. Sir George Buck, in what reads like an eye-witness statement, noted that the verse was recorded in a *manuscript book, chained to a table in a chamber in the Guildhall in London*. According to William Hutton, writing about Bosworth in 1813, the inscription was never actually affixed to the tomb.

7. Davies, R. editor, *Extracts from the Municipal Records of the City of York during the Reigns of Edward IV, Edward V, and Richard III*, London, 1843.

8. See the plea dated I July 1496 entered by Ralph Hill, grocer, against Alderman Walter Hill, an alabasterman of Nottingham, PRO, Early Chancery Records, C1/206/69. The quarrel between the two details terms of a contract drawn up the previous year. The document is in poor condition and the actual figures are hard to decipher, but it seems Hylton was contracted by Henry VII's Commissioners to make Richard's tomb for a fee of £50. In the plea, Hylton states he was to be paid in two instalments: £20 in the first instance, and the balance when the tomb *were set up and fynysshed in the Church*. James Keyley may have been sub-contracted to do the work. Rhoda Edwards suggests Keyley's fee could have been in payment for a final cut-price job on the tomb instead, *Ricardian Journal*, September 1975, p.8.

9. In the foreword of his pamphlet on Henry VII, Alexander Grant points out that, in the 15th century, £5-10 was a comfortable income. He suggests that monetary values in the Henry VII's reign could be multiplied by *between 1000 and 2000 times* to bring it roughly in line with present values.

10. One of the signatories to the Leicester Greyfriars surrender document is one Ralph Herrick.

11. "King Richard's Grave in Leicester." *Transactions of Leicester Archeological and Historical Society*, Vol. 60, 1986.

12. Correspondence between the Secretary S. H. Skillington and Saxton Barton, founder of the Richard III Society, October 1935.

13. David Baldwin wonders if she meant The Talbot Inn in Talbot Street, since there was no inn called The Greyhound in the city at that time. A talbot was a breed of dog, not unlike a greyhound.

14. Grave slabs sold at the Dissolution were certainly re-used at the nearby St Martin's Church in Leicester, see Audrey Strange's article, "The Grey Friars, Leicester", in the *Ricardian Journal*, September 1975.

15. Smith, L. Toumin, editor, *The Itinerary of John Leland In or About the Years 1535-43*, 1907.

16. Dean Christopher Wren's account appears in *Parentalia, or Memoirs of the Family of the Wrens*, London, 1750, p.144. He was a young man, 23 years of age, when he was shown the Herrick memorial. From other passages in the account it would seem he was not as sympathetic to Richard as was his host on that occasion.

17. David Baldwin, *op cit.* Audrey Strange, *op cit*. states the rumor about Richard's bones being thrown in the Soar had made its way into print in Robert Herrick's time. However, neither author gives a citation for this detail.

18. David Baldwin, *op cit.*

19. Private correspondence from 1955, shown to the author. John of Gloucester drops out of the public record in 1491 after he is referred to as King Richard's bastard son in Perkin Warbeck's confession. How and when he met his death, or where he was interred, is no longer known.

20. Apparently the archway was too narrow for the river passing underneath.

21. *The Illustrated London News*, 9 February 1861.

22. Audrey Strange gives the citation *Transactions of the Leicester Archaeological Society, Vol. 2, 1870* for this. However, closer examination reveals that the Society called a meeting on the morning of the discovery of the bones to discuss the medical findings. The original account must therefore date from sometime in 1862.

23. It was reported by Adam Wakelin in the Leicester Mercury on 8 October 2002 that this skull had been examined by Oxford University and found to be a 9th century Saxon, according to the present owner, Joe Goddard. Additionally, Mr. Goddard reported that his great-great grandfather Henry Goddard had donated a second skull purporting to be Richard's to a local museum. This skull had a gash across the cranium, but, sadly, now appears to be lost. A third skull is presently in private hands. However, the identity of the owners is currently not in the public domain.

24. Document ref: AB. 9/64. However, this same source also mentions that no skeletons have ever been found on the Greyfriars site in clear contradiction of Throsby's 1791 history of Leicester, that detailed the exhumation of several skeletons at what may well have been the site of the Greyfriars choir, it rather undermines this particular premise.

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Return to home

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