

AS SOON AS I HEARD THE news, I rushed up to the city of Leicester in the English Midlands, and found myself standing in a long queue that wrapped around the block, patiently waiting my turn to enter the car park. At the front of the line, marshals wearing luminous jackets ushered the next group through, as if funneling the crowd at a pop concert. Yet this was no ordinary car park, and the celebrity of sorts had been dead for more than 500 years.

Just a few weeks earlier, a team of archaeologists from the University of Leicester made an announcement that hit the headlines globally. Beneath a council car park, they had discovered the bones of a man believed to be Richard III, maligned in William Shakespeare's eponymous play. All signs pointed to the body being Richard. It had been unearthed in the nave of the buried ruins of Greyfriars Church, destroyed during the Dissolution of the Monasteries, where Richard had been buried in a pauper's grave after his death at the Battle of Bosworth in August 1485.

More importantly, the skeleton itself gave clues to wounds suffered in battle, its skull having suffered some kind of massive trauma. Perhaps the most alluring clue as to the identity of the body came from news that the skeleton had a noticeable curvature of the spine. Were these really the long-lost remains of one of the most reviled kings in English history, the crook-backed Richard III?

The news of this remarkable discovery broke just as I was putting the finishing touches to a book on the Battle of Bosworth, which felt at times like covering a breaking news story. The book was to chart the rise of the Tudors, focusing on Henry Tudor's phoenix-like ascent from the ashes of forced exile at the unripe age of 14. However, I began to realize that Bosworth was not so much a story of how Henry Tudor won the battle, but more about how Richard III lost his kingdom.

In fact, Henry Tudor's success owed all to the downfall of Richard, right down to the final moments of the battle when Richard found himself deserted by his supporters and chose to throw all caution to the wind and launch a suicidal attack

upon the young upstart pretender to his throne.

Delving deeper into the original sources and contemporary records, it also became clear that Richard was never the evil monster of legend. For most of his life, he had been regarded as a paragon of virtue, a brilliant military general who had been lauded for his successes in the battle of Tewkesbury and in military campaigns on the Scottish border. During his early years, Richard had worked loyally for his brother Edward IV, earning praise for his straight living (unlike Edward, whose debauchery was unrivaled) and concern for the plight of the common man, especially his devotion to his put-upon northern followers. It seemed that Richard's meteoric rise was indeed well-founded on hard work and sensible judgments.

A BLOODY DEED DISPATCH'D

Where, then, did it all go wrong, and why is Richard regarded as one of the most maligned monarchs in English history?

There can be little doubt that the seeds of Richard's downfall were sown in his decision to usurp the throne from his →

THE ONLY WAY IS UP

England's King Richard III may have been an early victim of the "dark arts" of political spin, says historian and Member of Parliament **CHRIS SKIDMORE**



12-year-old nephew Edward V, whom he was charged with protecting, followed by the suspicious disappearance of Edward and his nine-year-old brother, Richard, Duke of York, from the Tower of London.

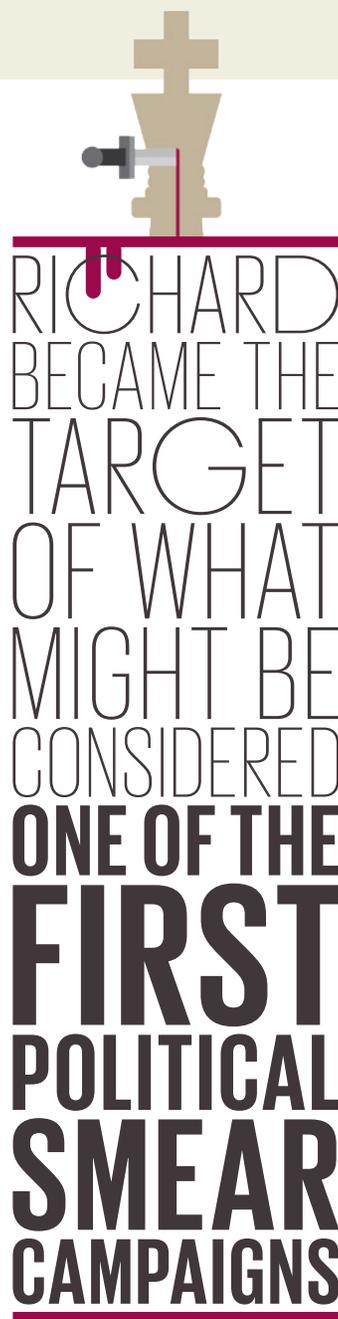
An Italian visitor to England, Dominic Mancini, who left a detailed eyewitness report of the events of 1483, wrote how after Richard had managed to seize power, Edward V and his brother “were withdrawn into the inner apartments of the Tower” and “day by day began to be seen more and more rarely behind the bars and windows, till at length they ceased to appear altogether.”

Rumors of their death began to circulate, while Mancini wrote that he had seen men burst into tears at the mention of the young king’s name, since “already there was a suspicion that he had been done away with.” By September 1483, it was clear to everyone, the contemporary Crowland Chronicler wrote, that “the princes, by some unknown manner of destruction, had met their fate.”

It seems undeniable that while there is no evidence to prove the exact date of the princes’ death, they certainly went missing under their uncle’s watch. Yet if Richard was guilty of killing the princes, then we are faced with the enigma of why he acted so ruthlessly, suddenly turning against his brother’s children, especially after years of loyal service to his brother.

Without condoning infanticide, it is worth considering the dilemma that Richard faced. Edward V was so young and barely knew his uncle, having been brought up surrounded by his mother’s family, whose hostility to Richard was an open secret. Believing that his own position was possibly about to be fatally undermined, Richard may have taken the only option available to him to protect the Yorkist dynasty. The accession of a child ruler was a potentially destabilizing and disastrous development.

Even allowing that Richard did away with the princes, there is evidence that he was a much-loved and popular king.



RICHARD
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During his reign, the Bishop of St David’s, Thomas Langton, wrote that “many a poor man” had been “relieved and helped by him and his commands.” Much later, in 1525, the City of London protested to the powerful Lord Chancellor, Thomas Wolsey, that in contrast to Henry VIII, Richard had made “good acts” of parliament, concerned with achieving justice for ordinary citizens. Richard understood that in politics, loyalty above all else mattered. His motto was “loyalty binds me.” He remembered men who had fought and died by his side at the battles of Barnet and Tewkesbury in the 1470s, and surrounded himself with a loyal group

of men from his inherited homeland in North Yorkshire. Such devotion earned him a strong following in the north.

HE DOTH DENY TO COME

As Henry Tudor grew ever stronger, Richard knew that confrontation was inevitable. He should never have lost the battle. His force of 15,000 men was twice the size of Henry’s army. Yet on the day, half of Richard’s army refused to fight. In particular, it was the decision of the Stanleys that led to defeat – Thomas Lord Stanley was married to Henry Tudor’s mother. When Richard saw the treachery unfolding around him, he was urged to flee but, according to a Spaniard who was present on Richard’s side, the king flatly refused. “God forbid I yield one step,” he is reported to have stated. “This day I will die as a king or win.”

Having spied his rival and charged, Richard came within touching distance of Henry Tudor when Sir William Stanley, who had sat out the battle, charged against him and swept Richard into a marsh where he was hacked down and killed, the last English king to be killed on a battlefield, reportedly by a Welshman who beat Richard’s helmet into his brains. His final words were apparently “Treason! Treason!”

ORATORS OF MISERIES

The first description of Richard as being physically deformed comes from an account by the Warwickshire chronicler John Rous, who might be considered the first author of Richard’s “black legend.”

While Richard was still alive, Rous had praised the king as being “a mighty prince and especial good lord.” It was only after Richard’s death that his account was dramatically altered. Rous pulled no punches, declaring – somewhat implausibly – that Richard had been “retained within his mother’s womb for two years, emerging with teeth and hair to his shoulders.” For Rous, Richard had died “like the Antichrist

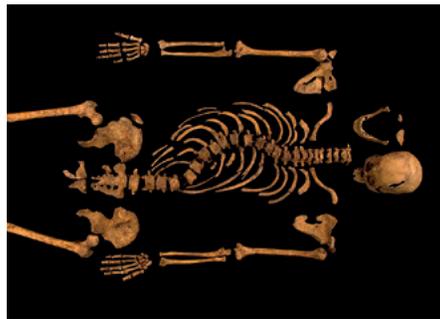
to come ... confounded at his moment of greatest pride.”

Nor was Rous the only commentator to change his tune. The praise the king had received in life soon turned to condemnation in death, as poets and writers realized how to curry favor with the new regime. The Italian poet and courtier, Pietro Carmeliano, who had come to England in 1480, wrote fondly of Richard the year before Bosworth as being one of the greatest princes in the world. Two years later, with Henry Tudor on the throne, Carmeliano suddenly reversed his opinion, turning his pen against “the murderous tyrant.” Artists of the age joined in. The earliest surviving portrait of Richard shows no sign of a hunchback, but x-rays of later portraits show that a hunch was deliberately added to fit the popular image of the king.

Richard became the target of what might be considered one of the first political smear campaigns, as the new Tudor dynasty sought to tarnish his reputation, condemning him as an evil monster. In his first proclamation, Henry accused Richard of the “shedding of innocents’ blood” – without naming them, surely he meant the Princes in the Tower, but the very fact that Henry refused to name them reveals much about the new king’s own insecurities.

Despite his trumped up assertion to be the true inheritor to the English throne – his was an illegitimate line – Henry knew in reality that his own claim to the throne was extremely fragile. To acknowledge even the names of Edward IV’s male children might jeopardize his legitimacy, especially when there were others still alive with stronger claims, such as Richard, Earl of Warwick (whom Henry eventually had killed in the Tower). Henry’s first decades in power were fraught with danger and insecurity. Plots to overthrow him abounded – even Sir William Stanley, who had placed him on the throne, was executed for treason. How better to

Found beneath a Leicester car park, Richard’s bones had identifying wounds – and a noticeably curved spine



reinforce his kingship than to destroy the reputation of the man he had conquered?

The Tudor version of events was first set down by Henry VII’s official historian, the Italian Polydore Vergil. It was Vergil who, despite not arriving in England until 1502, spoke with members of Henry’s court to write his one-sided history, helping to spin a political narrative blackening Richard’s name. Richard was deliberately portrayed as bad, while Henry could do no wrong.

Around the same time, Thomas More wrote *The History of King Richard III*, a polemical tale of how evil will always have its comeuppance. More presented the image of Richard that is still very much with us today, describing the king as being

THE LOST BOYS

The “Princes in the Tower,” Edward V and Richard, Duke of York, were 12 and nine respectively, when they disappeared from the Tower of London. There is a poignancy about their fate that echoes down the centuries, especially given the many images of innocence we have of them, from Shakespeare’s play to the 19th Century



Millais painting (left). However, their fate has never been settled – were they murdered by their uncle Richard to usurp succession? Edward was set to succeed to the throne on the death of his father, Edward IV. Or, were they spirited away to safety on the European continent, as one of many other theories suggest? It may take another fortuitous archeological find to resolve the mystery.

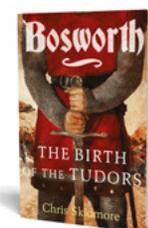
“little of stature, ill-featured of limbs, crook-backed, his left shoulder much higher than his right.”

The Tudors were the first dynasty to fully understand not only that history is written by the winners, but that it can be just as effective as the weapons of war in winning the battle of hearts and minds. In many ways, the campaign was a massive success. The familiar image of Richard III as a bloodthirsty, crook-backed tyrant has been handed down to us by one of the greatest men of the Tudor era, William Shakespeare. He was not interested in portraying the historical truth; rather he essentially bought into the Tudor version of events.

But slowly, as sources are discovered in the archives, and archaeological digs uncover yet more evidence, Richard’s reputation is being restored. The Richard III Society was founded in 1924 “in the belief that many features of the traditional accounts of the character and career of Richard III are neither supported by sufficient evidence nor reasonably tenable.” The society helped fund the dig in the Leicester car park.

Richard reigned for only two years and two months, yet his legacy remains hugely significant for English history. Without him, there would certainly have been no Tudor dynasty, no Henry VIII or Elizabeth I. England would have remained part of the Roman Catholic Church and the very fabric of the nation would have been woven with an entirely different thread.

Richard’s supporters will no doubt hope that when competing legal claims to his remains are settled, and he is granted a final resting place, we can also put to rest the Tudor myth of this monstrous tyrant king. ♦



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