

From Towton to Bosworth: the Leicestershire community and the Wars of the Roses 1461-1485

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A medieval battle was the most transient of events, armies converged, confronted one another, fought and either died or departed. Their effects upon the landscape were obliterated within the seasonal cycle though the occasion often lingered on in local folk memory. Bosworth Field was no exception, fought almost by chance on an area of marsh and waste in western Leicestershire 'mete for twoo battales to encountre'¹ lying south of Market Bosworth between the villages of Shenton, Sutton Cheney, Dadlington and Stoke Golding.² Yet the consequences of that fierce engagement were by no means transient for it heralded a period of one hundred and eighteen years of Tudor monarchy. The historical significance of the Battle lies somewhere between these extremes of event and consequence. Its effects upon the local community of Leicestershire are equally difficult to pin down though they encompassed far more than just folk memory. At the heart of the problem lies the death of Richard III, one of the very few kings of England to die in combat upon the battle field, and the consequences of that untoward event upon both the nation and the shire community. With the dubious advantages of hindsight the victory of Henry VII — for there were two kings upon that battlefield, one crowned and other proclaimed — has been regarded by later generations as a watershed in English history marking the transition from Medieval to Modern.

Those living in 1485 might be pardoned for not seeing things quite that way. They looked on events through different eyes and saw not a new dawn but rather the reopening of a dynastic conflict between Lancaster and York which they had thought settled by the bloody conflicts at Barnet and Tewkesbury some fourteen years before. In effect the reopening of the Wars of the Roses seemed to them imminent. Those civil wars had witnessed many battles, how could they have regarded Bosworth as both the first and the last battle of this new outbreak of hostilities? Indeed, in the final stages of that encounter, Richard III was urged by his adherents to flee the field.³ Had he done so, there is every reason to believe that hostilities would have continued far beyond the twenty-two days between Henry Tudor's embarkation and his Leicestershire victory. It was Richard's refusal and his fierce fighting courage in the true traditions of chivalry that led to his death and ended the dire prospect of a further period of internecine war. Even so, the new king still had to defend his crown against imposters if not Plantagenets.

The death of King Richard marked the demise of the short-lived Yorkist royal dynasty. It was to be the shortest in English history since the Conquest, spanning a period of twenty-four years: barely a generation. This made the accession of Henry VII something of a Restoration. The first years of his reign witnessed the restoring of estates, titles, fortunes and favours, forfeited over the entire period of Yorkist rule. There were not only Lancastrian families to be restored to grace and favour but also Yorkist. In particular, those loyal to the right succession of the Yorkist line through Edward V who had fallen victim to the usurpation of Richard III and his attainders following the Buckingham Rebellion.

In addition, that were to be new titles, favours and rewards; new opportunities for those who came to support the Tudor Alliance of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York.

It is against this background that the effects of Bosworth Field upon the community of Leicestershire must be assessed. The landing of Henry Tudor, the Lancastrian pretender, at Milford Haven and his march to Leicestershire not only revived old Lancastrian loyalties, it was also seen by the headstrong and the ambitious as an opportunity to take a political gamble against what seemed to be very long odds. The problem is that few records of such feelings have survived for Leicestershire, though as shall be seen they undoubtedly existed. Fortunately memory is a strong emotion and such recollections were to be recorded during the reign of Henry VIII in the diaries of John Leland. When Leland wrote of his journeys throughout England and Wales in the 1530s the events of the triumphant inception of the new Tudor dynasty were very much in people's minds and memories. Thus throughout his itineraries Leland was able to record references and anecdotes relating to Henry VII's 'victorious journey and field'. One of these concerned the experiences and vicissitudes of a Leicestershire family, the Digbys. As this account is much more than an anecdote, rather an accurate and circumspect vignette of family history between 1461 and the reign of Henry VIII, it represents a microcosm of the effects of the Wars of the Roses upon the landed classes of Leicestershire. He relates that:

At Palmesunday feld Digeby the best of that stok namid Everard, as I remembre, was slayne *civili bello* betwixt Henry and Edward, and the landes of hym was attaintid, but after restorid.

This Dikeby had by heire general as by his wife, as I remembre, a manor and a place at it caullid Stoke by Ludington the Bisshop of Lincolns place in Ruthelandshire, the which afore longgid to one Clerke...

One of the Dikeby, sunne to Dykeby attaintid, was of the bande of the Duke of Clarence, brother to King Edward [the fourth].

At the cumming yn of Henry the 7., vi. brethern al of the Dikeby of Tilton and Stoke cam to King Henry the vii. at Bosworth Feld, and toke his part: whereof 3. wer welle rewardid.

And one of this 3. had attaintid landes given hym in Leircestreshire to the value of a hunderith markes by the yere, and after was Knight Mareschal of the Kinges Mareschallery, but after for escape of certen prisoners he left his office paying much of the forfeet, whereby he was compellid to selle his stokke of the staple in Calays wher he occupied: and then King Henry the vii. offerid hym a great office in the marches of Calays for mony, the wich he forsakid not withoute summe indignation of the King, and Vaulx the riche knight after had it.

This Dikeby had also a peace of the Bellars landes, and bought besides a part or 2. of the same lordship that he was partener yn.

Eche of these 2. houses of the Dikebys hath now almoste equale landes, a 360. markes by the yere.⁴

Thus at least one genteel family was deeply affected by the political events of this era of crisis for the landed classes of the shire. As will be shown, the Digbys were by no means the only family to endure vicissitudes of fortune during the stormy period of Yorkist ascendancy.

One of the most fundamental difficulties for the historian of this period is that of defining a shire community like that of Leicester. In recent years the very concept of a shire community has, quite properly, come under attack.⁵ On *a priori* grounds such an entity is far too eclectic a grouping to survive the natural and empirical relationships imposed by social structure, topography and ties of kinship and marriage. What this debate has illicit

to date, is that there were few 'typical' shire communities. Even within that narrow degree of historical consensus, Leicestershire was far from being typical for two important historical and political reasons. Firstly, because Leicestershire had from Norman times close administrative links with its neighbour Warwickshire; the two possessing the very rare administrative phenomenon of a joint shirevalty, and secondly because of the links with the neighbouring counties of Derby, Stafford, Warwick, Northampton, Rutland and Lincoln created by the private franchise of the Honour of Leicester within the late-medieval Royal Duchy of Lancaster. In the late fifteenth century, the Midland estates and franchises of the Duchy centred upon the Honour of Tutbury and the Honour of Leicester were to create an important and discernable *ultra comitatum* community of economic and social ties.

At the same time, the Duchy of Lancaster by the fifteenth-century can be seen as a Crown rationalisation of the great feudal Honours of former centuries which had decayed as administrative units but still reflected atavistic family links with topographical estates as well as hierarchical traditions and loyal ties. These links with the past were to be re-enforced by the agrarian depression of the Post Plague Period, 1370 to 1530, which had serious effect upon the revenues of the landed classes of England. Such strained economic circumstances made the access to office and patronage axiomatic to genteel survival and re-enforced the quasi-feudal ties between the gentry and their aristocratic or royal patrons. Under such conditions, the patronage offered by the Duchy of Lancaster afforded a particularly strong element of cohesion and unity throughout the Midland Shires. The dynastic politics of the Wars of the Roses that witnessed periods of kaleidoscopic changes of fortune, particularly during the years 1455-61, 1469-71 and 1483-5, determined who would receive and who would be excluded from aristocratic, Duchy and royal patronage. Leland's brief though accurate description of the fortunes of the Digby's already quoted presents a dramatic affirmation of this state of affairs. The experiences of the Digbys were fairly typical of the fortunes of the Midland nobility and gentry during the period 1455 to 1487 most closely associated with dynastic conflict between Lancaster and York. The effects of the so-called Wars of the Roses upon the landed classes of England were far more traumatic than some schools of history would have us believe.

Few battles of the fifteenth century could equal the dramatic effects of the young Edward IV's victory at Towton on Palm Sunday 1461 in the teeth of the serried ranks of the Lancastrian nobility. According to Polydore Vergil looking back upon that dreadful slaughter, it marked the end of England's role as a continental power:

That battaile weakened wonderfully the force of Englande, seing those who were killed had been able, both for number and force, to have enterprised any forreyne warre.⁶

As far as the English Midlands were concerned, the consequences of that battle were to endure through a whole generation and beyond. To some extent those consequences could already have been seen in the oscillations of parliamentary representation for the shire of Leicester in the bewildering changes of fortune for both Lancastrian and Yorkist during the previous decade. In 1453-4 Leicestershire was represented by the Lancastrian retainers of the Viscount Beaumont.⁷ By the parliament of 1455-6 the Yorkist ascendancy secured the representation of the retainers of Richard Duke of York.⁸ Yet at the 'Parliament of Devils' of 1459 the Lancastrian control of the county was once again fully re-established.⁹ Towton, less than two years later, ended the uncertainty by securing almost a decade of Yorkist control.¹⁰

On the eve of the Battle of Towton, as it had been for over two generations of Lancastrian rule, Leicestershire was divided neatly if not equally between a number of powerful royal and aristocratic influences. The dominant power in this region of the Midlands was the

royal Duchy of Lancaster with its access to considerable crown patronage. Outside the Duchy estates and interests, the rest of the county, spilling over into neighbouring shires, was dominated by the current inheritors of the ancient Fees of Warwick or Salisbury, the Winchester Fee, the Somery Fee and the Lordship of Bevoir. The estates of the Warwick Fee like so many others of their kind had become split by divisions and inheritances. The Beauchamp Earls of Warwick themselves held some estates in South Leicestershire but their landed wealth and influence in the Midlands was centred upon Warwickshire and the counties of Staffordshire and Derbyshire to the North. Part of their former Leicestershire holdings, principally, the town and lordship of Ashby-de-la-Zouch, passed through the cadet line of William Beauchamp lord of Abergavenny to James earl of Wiltshire.¹¹ The Mowbray dukes of Norfolk held the Segrave inheritance of estates and lordships in the East of the county.¹² But the remaining regions of Leicestershire were in 1460 controlled by two influential noblemen, Thomas Lord Roos holding estates around his *caput honoris* at Belvoir in the extreme North East of the county¹³ and William, Viscount Beaumont, a figure of national importance who held the manors of Loughborough, Shepshed, Witwick, Donington, Ratby, Beaumanor, Markfield and Hallaton, the remnants of the 13th century Winchester Fee.¹⁴ In addition, because of his close personal links with both Henry VI and his council, Beaumont also controlled the vitally important offices of the Honour of Leicester,¹⁵ giving him and his retainers access to the fees, offices and patronage of this Leicestershire, Warwickshire and Northamptonshire portion of the Duchy of Lancaster. In particular the key offices of Steward of the Honour of Leicester and of Castle Donington were of great importance in this respect making Lord Beaumont the most influential nobleman within the shire, followed at a distance by Lord Roos of Belvoir and yet further back in the power hierarchy of the shire, Sir Edward Grey of Groby. As all three were staunch Lancastrians, it could be convincingly argued that Leicestershire, with the Honour of Leicester was a Lancastrian stronghold. Which was most probably why Henry VI chose Leicester as the centre to array his forces going against the Yorkists in 1459.¹⁶

Even so, there was at least a nucleus of Yorkist support within the shire on the eve of Edward IV's singular victory at Towton. There were the Mowbray lands to the east and some Warwick lordships to the South West,¹⁷ but of greater consequence, Richard duke of York had pockets of loyal supporters centred upon the Hastings family of Kirby Muxloe. Leonard Hastings was the younger brother of Sir Richard Hastings who died in 1436.¹⁸ In the tradition of younger sons of this period, Leonard sought his fortune as a soldier in the French Wars. He was in the retinue of the Earl of March at the battle of Agincourt in 1415 and transferred to the service of Richard duke of York, in Normandy during the 1440s.¹⁹ This military alliance between two distinguished soldiers of somewhat different backgrounds was sealed by an indenture of retinue. In his 1455 will the now Sir Leonard Hastings described his superior as 'the right hie and myghti prince my gracious and special lorde, Richard duke of York'.²⁰ It is also clear that by that date, Leonard had become an extensive land owner within the shire through the profits of war and the patronage of a royal duke. He held the manors of Wistow, Fleckney and Newtown Harcourt and other lands in the shires of Leicester, Warwick, Northampton and York.²¹ In 1455, he also served as M.P. for the shire during the Yorkist ascendancy following the First Battle of Northampton, dying suddenly during the recess of that parliament on the 21st October.²²

The key role of the Hastings family in the Yorkist plans to control the Midland shires in no way diminished. Sir Leonard's faithful and important service to Richard, duke of York was to be continued and enhanced by his four sons, particularly his eldest son and heir, William Hastings. William had already been appointed ranger of Were forest and sheriff for the counties of Warwickshire and Leicestershire for the year 1455-56.²³ The ties

of association, service and retinue between the Duke of York and the heir of his trusted former retainer were sealed shortly afterwards in an indenture drawn up at Fotheringhay Castle 23rd April 1456 when the duke's 'faithful servant' William Hastings esquire was granted an annuity of £10 'to the end that he should serve him [the duke] before all others and attend him at all times, saving only his allegiance to the king'.²⁴

The next five years were a difficult period in the fortunes of the House of York, yet there is every reason to suggest that despite strong Lancastrian pressures to the contrary, William Hastings remained in all things loyal to Richard of York, even to the evasion of his allegiance to Henry VI.²⁵ This loyalty was to be rewarded during the Yorkist year of victories, 1461. He was knighted at Towton and in June 1461 immediately after the coronation, appointed Master of the Mints and other offices culminating in his appointment as Chamberlain of the King's Household and elevation to the peerage as Lord Hastings of Hastings.²⁶

In addition to these appointments, William Hastings, gradually over a period of fifteen years and as a consequence of a number of *de facto* events as well as of deliberate Yorkist policy, acquired an almost unique dominance of the Midland Shires, centred upon the great Midlands Fees of the Duchy of Lancaster radiating from his *caput honoris* at Ashby-de-la-Zouch.

There is evidence to suggest that the beginnings of William Hastings' control of the Midlands predates the Battle of Towton, thus supporting the hypothesis that the Yorkist council entertained pre-conceived policies for regional control which it implemented throughout the subsequent reigns of the Yorkist kings. Though some caution is necessary in putting forward such an eclectic and oversimplified hypothesis; there was as much opportunism as policy involved.

In a grant made in '*hospito nostro Londoniensis*' the first year of the reign of Edward IV, John Mowbray, duke of Norfolk appointed William Hastings esquire, Steward of his Leicestershire estates of Melton Mowbray and Segrave, for life.²⁷ As the duke and Hastings were present in London between the last week in February and the first two weeks (almost) of March²⁸ (before Towton) and as William described in the grant as esquire was knighted at that battle, his appointment as Steward may have predated the Yorkist victory.

At all events, the consequences of the Yorkist victory on Palm Sunday 1461, were to constitute a watershed in the history of aristocratic dominance of the Midland Shires, including Leicestershire. A watershed that marks in earnest the beginning of the Hastings' ascendancy within Leicestershire which was to continue largely unbroken from the Wars of the Roses to the English Civil War and beyond. The dominance of the Lancastrian *ancien regime* which, as has been shown, controlled the estates and patronage of the Central Midlands, was shattered by the deaths, attainders and forfeitures that followed the Battle of Towton. James Ormond, earl of Wiltshire, William viscount Beaumont, and Thomas, lord Roos were attainted at the November Parliament of 1461 and the deaths of the latter two sealed the forfeiture of their titles and estates.²⁹ As the Duchy of Lancaster fees by this untoward victory also fell into the hands of the new Yorkist royal dynasty, all the major fees of Leicestershire, the Honour of Leicester, the lordship of Roos, the Winchester Fee and the Ormond inheritance centred on Ashby reverted to the new royal dynasty.³⁰ The chief recipients of this Midland windfall were to be the king's brother George duke of Clarence, Richard earl of Warwick and William, lord Hastings.³¹ As John Mowbray, duke of Norfolk was to die at the end of 1461, before his claims could be considered, and as both Warwick and Clarence, through their own treason, were to meet their deaths and forfeiture during the next sixteen years, the loyal survivor of this Yorkist triumvirate which controlled the Midland Shires after 1461, William Hastings, came to exercise an

unchallenged ascendancy and dominance by the mid 1470s.

The process was relatively slow and *de facto*, even capricious, consequential upon the fall or the demise of these other more powerful aristocratic figures. The only discernible positive elements were the loyalty, the administrative ability, the standing within the Yorkist council and of course the ambition, of Lord Hastings. His immediate influence after Towton was generally confined to the area of Leicestershire and the Honour of Leicester within the Duchy of Lancaster extending into the adjoining counties of Nottinghamshire, Warwickshire and Northamptonshire. In addition to the Stewardship of the Mowbray estates, Hastings took possession of and was within a year granted, a portion of the forfeited lands of the Earl of Wiltshire, the Viscount Beaumont, Lord Roos and a number of lesser Lancastrians, like Everard Digby, Squire.³² These included the manor of Ashby-de-la-Zouch and a large portion of Lord Beaumont's estates within the county, Loughborough, Hallaton, Shepshed, Witwick, Donington le Heath, Markfield, Ratby and Beaumanor.³³ The attainder of Thomas, Lord Roos resulted in the acquisition of the North East Leicestershire manors of Bevoir and others in that locality, extending into West Lincolnshire.³⁴ The administrative records, by their very nature, throw little light upon the traumas and personal bitterness and misfortune that accompanied an upheaval of this magnitude within the county. Once again we are fortunate to have the record of John Leland to fill in some details of how Leicestershire reacted to this change of governance and lordship. He recorded in his journal:

The Lord Roos toke King Henry the vj. parte agayn King Edwarde, wherapon the Lord Roses landes [stode] as confiscate, King Edward pre[vay]ling, and Bellever Castelle [was put] in keping to the Lord Has[tinges], the which cumming thither apon a tyme to peruse the ground, and to lye in the castel, was sodenly repellid by Mr. Harington, a man of poure therabout, and frede to the Lord Rose. Wherapun the Lord Hastings cam thither another tyme with a strong poure, and apon a raging wylle spoilid the castelle, defacing the rofes, and takyng the leades of them, wherwith they were al coverid. The Lord Hastings caryed much of this leade to Ascheby de la Zouche, wher he much buildid. Then felle alle the castelle to ruine, and the tymbre of the rofes onkeverid rottid away, and the soile betwene the waulles at the last grue ful of elders, and no habitation was there tyl that of late dayes the Erle of Rutland hath made it fairer than ever it was.³⁴

Once again a vivid vignette of the human side of these events, giving some insight into this process of revolutionary change. The Roos's had lost their ascendancy, the Hastings now held sway. As a symbol of that change of authority, Belvoir Castle was reduced to a deserted ruin whilst Ashby Castle was rebuilt and refurbished with Belvoir material as the *caput honoris* of the new Yorkist authority exercised by the Hastings faction.

Of equal importance to this process of Leicestershire and Midland dominance, were the offices and appointments granted by Edward IV to Hastings within the Fees of the Duchy of Lancaster. In 1461 he was appointed Steward and Constable of Castle Donington, vacant through the forfeiture of the hitherto Lancastrian North West Leicestershire family, the Stauntons.³⁵ William's younger brother Richard was made Steward, Constable and Keeper of the Lordship of Melbourn Derbyshire in July 1461.³⁶ Earlier that same month, William Hastings was granted most of the other important offices of the Honour of Leicester and of Higham Ferrers and Daventry in Northamptonshire, including the Stewardship of the Honour of Leicester, and Master Forester of the Leicestershire chases of Frith, Baron and Tooley.³⁷ In a consideration of these early grants of estates and offices, a number of salient factors are apparent. The transference of lands and patronage both within the Duchy of Lancaster and without, from the Lancastrian Beaumonts and their retainers like the

Stauntons, the Digbys and the Fieldings to the Yorkists; and that during this early period, William Hastings came to share these windfalls of patronage and wealth with his superiors in the Yorkist hierarchy Richard, earl of Warwick whose interests lay mainly to the North and West of the county of Leicester and George duke of Clarence, the king's brother, for whom an estate was to be carved out of the forfeited lands of the Midland Lancastrians and of the Duchy of Lancaster itself.³⁸ Gradually, over the next decade, Hastings acquired first control of and ultimately title to, these possessions of his grander rivals. It has already been shown how William Hastings was made Steward of the Leicestershire Mowbray estates by John duke of Norfolk. Had it not been for Norfolk's death in late 1461 and the subsequent minority, that senior Yorkist supporter might also have rivalled Hastings' position within the county. The same process was to be repeated with William's other rivals. Although his hold over some of his Leicestershire grants was at times precarious during the next decade, Hastings' position not only survived but was to be enhanced. In April 1468, Richard earl of Warwick, perhaps in an unsuccessful attempt to win Hastings over to his rebellious faction, appointed his 'beloved and dear brother [in-law]' as Steward of his lands within Leicestershire, Rutland and Northamptonshire.³⁹ With the death of Warwick at Barnet and the restoration of Edward IV in 1471, Hastings was to be the principal recipient of Warwick's former appointments and offices within the Midland fees of the Duchy of Lancaster. Again Edward's justifiable suspicion of the treason of his brother Clarence even after the 1471 restoration strengthened the authority and patronage of the loyal Hastings. By a deed dated 20 March 1472, Clarence (probably on the King's instructions) appointed him Chief Steward of the Honour of Tutbury and Steward of the Lordship of High Peak.⁴⁰ By 1474, Lord Hastings had acquired royal endorsement of these titles which had the cumulative effect of extending his already considerable authority into the West Midland shires of Stafford and Derby. Thus creating a vast *de facto* control and governance of the Midland Shires which Hastings was to exercise personally until his quasi-execution in June 1483.

Although the acquisition of this governance was a long drawn-out process, William Hastings' influence and his personal standing, assiduously cultivated and based upon the late medieval practice of retaining, was already considerable during the 1460s. Proof of this is to be found in the crucial role of his Midland retinue during the restoration of Edward IV in 1471. As recorded by the author of the *History of the Arrival of King Edward IV*:

At Leicester came to the King right-a-fair fellowship of folks to the number of three thousand men well habyled [fitted] for the wars, such as were verily to be trusted, as those that would utterly inparte [take part] with him at best and worst in his quarrel, with all their force and might, to do him their true service. And in substance they were such as were towards the Lord Hastings, the King's Chamberlain, and, for that intent above said, came to him, stirred by his messages sent unto them, and by his servants, friends, and lovers, such as were in the country.⁴¹

It might be useful at this point to determine who these 'servants, friends and lovers' were. A close analysis of the evidence for William Hastings' early retainers suggests that initially he was to rely upon the support of his immediate kinsmen and a small group of Leicestershire gentry who had been as neighbours, kinsmen or retainers associated with his father Sir Leonard Hastings of Kirby, which included Sir William Trussell of Elmesthorpe, Robert Moton of Peckleton and William Villiers of Brooksby.⁴² To these were added lawyers, like Thomas Palmer of Holt, Thomas Kebell of Rearsby, Henry Sotehill of Stockerston and others from outside the county.

As William Hastings' authority and responsibility grew between 1461 and 1476, so did his retinue as the surviving list of retainers, now in the Huntington Library, shows.⁴³

William's policy over those years, like that of his lord Edward IV, was to reinforce Yorkist authority by reconciliation. Through the personal qualities, great political influence and regional power of Lord Hastings, a large group of former Lancastrian gentry from within his extensive and extending *ultra comitatum* sphere of influence in the Midlands and elsewhere, were to be drawn to William's allegiance and retinue. Within the Duchy these were to include the Stauntons, the Shirleys, of Staunton Harold, the Chatsworths of Medbourne, the Fieldings of Lutterworth and the Erdingtons of Barrow on Soar.⁴⁴

The Northamptonshire Catesby's were also to change their allegiance from Lancaster to York by joining the clientage and administration of William Hastings. Because of the geographical position of their estates, centred on the confluence of the three counties of Warwick, Northampton and Leicester within confines of three bailiwicks of the Honour of Leicester, such a reconciliation was essential. William Catesby esquire, the son of Sir William of Ashby St Legers was to benefit considerably from the move.⁴⁵ Not only was this astute and well connected young lawyer able to rise to a subordinate position of great authority within Leicestershire, but Hastings's patronage within the Duchy of Lancaster was to be used to enhance Catesby's legal career. There is a good deal of truth in Thomas More's comment that:

there was no man to him [Lord Hastings] so much beholden as was thys Catesby.⁴⁶

Yet this process of reconciliation with and absorption of the more important knightly/gentry families of Leicestershire and the Midlands of former Lancastrian sympathies, as in other aspects of the extension of Hastings' influence, took place over a long period of time covering several political vicissitudes. As Leland's account of the Digbys during this period shows, not all the lesser nobility and Leicestershire and the Midland shires were to make the ultimately fortunate choice of accepting the good lordship of William Hastings. Others like the Digbys became the retainers of George, duke of Clarence and suffered the consequences. In addition to the Digbys, at least two other important families with Leicestershire connections were to suffer from the fall of Clarence. John Harcourt, of Staunton Harcourt Oxfordshire, lord of the manor of Market Bosworth and Kibworth Harcourt who became Receiver of the Duke of Clarence's lands in the South West, fell from grace and patronage after the execution of his lord in 1478.⁴⁷ The family did not return to royal favour till after the Battle of Bosworth, having been attainted by Richard III for complicity in the Buckingham Revolt of 1483.⁴⁸ Thomas Burdet esquire, of Loseby was executed and attainted for high treason in 1477 because of his complicity in the so-called plot to kill Edward IV by witchcraft, leading to Clarence's own fall a year later.⁴⁹ His heir, John Burdet, tried to retrieve his lost fortunes by becoming a retainer of William Lord Hastings in January 1483. Unfortunately for him he had left it too late, the execution of Hastings that summer meant that Burdet was not restored to his inheritance until the second year of the reign of Henry VII.⁵⁰

Despite these dramatic exceptions, the long period of Yorkist rule in Leicestershire under the strong but benign rule of William Hastings must be seen within that county as elsewhere as a period of relative prosperity and stability. It has been suggested that during the last decade of Edward IV's reign, Lord Hastings had a powerful rival within the shire, Thomas Grey, Marquis Dorset the son of Queen Elizabeth Woodville by her previous marriage to Sir John Grey of Groby.⁵¹ It is true that William Hastings and Thomas Grey were rivals as court but not within Leicestershire. The Grey/Ferrers estates were throughout this period held as a life interest by the Marquis's grandmother, Elizabeth, Lady Ferrers of Groby who lived until January 1483.⁵² As Dorset did not receive seisin of these Leicestershire manors until 29th January 1483, and as he himself was to fall foul of Richard III and incur attainder for his complicity in the Buckingham Rebellion, he could

not have figured greatly in Leicestershire affairs until after his restoration in November 1485.⁵³

It has been shown that in the region of Staffordshire and Derbyshire, the Duchy of Lancaster fee of the Honour of Tutbury, William Hastings' interests were not territorial or dynastic but financial and short term, exploiting to the full a 'temporary supervisory appointment'.⁵⁴ Whatever the merits of this hypothesis, for Hastings was still collecting his fees from the duchy at the very end of the reign of Edward IV (1482-3),⁵⁵ the same cannot be said for Leicestershire and the Honour of Leicester extending to the neighbouring counties of Nottingham and particularly Warwick and Northampton. As the later history of the Hastings family in these regions shows, William was throughout this period assiduously building up a patrimony of dynastic lands which was to endure until the early years of this present century. His building activities at both Ashby and Kirby Castles show⁵⁶ that he was to devote a large proportion of his very considerable financial resources to the construction of not only secure strongholds but also buildings in the new vogue of great aristocratic show pieces to record in stone, bricks and mortar the dominance of the Hastings family in the Yorkist Midlands. Perhaps also to appear in the eyes of his lord Edward IV, worthy of an elevation to a Midlands Earldom, that in the event was not to materialise.

Even so, William Lord Hastings, Chamberlain of the House Hold and Captain of Calais, boon companion of King Edward, was a considerable font of wealth, influence and patronage for Leicestershire, his native and favoured county. Nationally, Lord Hastings was a figure of considerable popularity as Thomas More's description reveals:

A man of distinguished position among his fellows in the order of knights, born of an old and famous family; to the glory which he received from his ancestors he added the renown which he himself achieved both in war and at home. His morals were a little too lax, but he was beloved by the people for his friendliness and was especially dear to the king because of his trustworthiness. He was vulnerable to the schemes and plots of wicked men because of a certain noble simplicity in his soul, which tended to make him overconfident and utterly unable to connive. Because of his temperamental rashness, he was an easy prey for those who plotted his ruin.

We do not have to accept this writer's comments concerning Hastings' vulnerability, but the rest is supported by other more contemporary sources.⁵⁸

Much of his vast income — his fees and wages from his offices within the Duchy of Lancaster alone for 1482-3 came to £91-15-10d per annum quite apart from the revenues of his extensive estates and of other offices held under the crown and a large pension from the King of France⁵⁹ — was channelled back into the shire. It has been reliably calculated that in the 1480s the building work at Kirby Muxloe upon his brick built and moated show piece cost something in the region of £1000.⁶⁰

The patronage at his disposal from his Leicestershire estates, the Duchy of Lancaster and from his position upon the Royal Council was judiciously bestowed upon his retainers, servants and supporters within the shire. It would be facile to regard those named upon the surviving lists of his retainers as the sole recipients of his patronage and largesse. The generosity of his good lordship extended over a much greater spectrum of the Leicestershire community.

Wealth apart, the support of William's influence in legal, administrative or political disputes was both considerable and at times effective. In the words of one of the Paston Letters 'yf ye myght have my Lord Chamberleyns good favour and lordship, it wére ryght expedyent'.⁶¹

Because of the regional, national and international nature of Hastings' political influence,

surprising that so few of Hastings' former retainers gave their support to the new regime both within the county of Leicester and beyond it. The exceptions being, William Catesby and his lawyer friend and colleague, Thomas Kebell, the former Lancastrian Everard Fielding, the Nottinghamshire knight Gervase Clyfton and Sir Thomas Burgh from Lincolnshire.⁷⁸

This feeling of hostility and resentment within Leicestershire was to be aggravated by the further *ad hoc* policies that Richard III was forced to adopt following the fall of Henry Stafford, duke of Buckingham. Although, with the exception of John Harcourt, few Leicestershire gentry supported the Buckingham Revolt, there is little evidence of local support for Richard's successful efforts to put down that insurrection of the Southern and Western counties. It was his Northern supporters whom Richard ordered to muster at Leicester on 21st October 1483, not local men.⁷⁹ Indeed almost all the Leicestershire gentry named in Richard's Commission of Array of December 1484, were to either remain neutral or go over to the Tudor side in August 1485.

Following the execution of Henry duke of Buckingham and the suppression of the revolt associated with him, Leicestershire like other parts of England was to feel the heavy hand of Richard's Northern retainers and others of his diminishing circle of supporters. Buckingham's offices within the Duchy were to be given to the Northerner Sir Marmaduke Constable. Another Northerner, Sir Robert Harrington was to be brought into the shire to strengthen Richard's weak position there.⁸⁰

Other names were to appear on the Leicestershire Roll of Commissions of the Peace following the fall of Buckingham. John Russell, Bishop of Lincoln, Richard's chancellor, John Howard, duke of Norfolk and Edward Grey, Viscount Lisle, Sir Richard Ratcliff and William Catesby, all new Justices of the Peace within the Shire and staunch supporters of Richard III. They were also to be the main recipients of his largesse within the shire. Sir Marmaduke Constable was to be granted the forfeited estates of Market Bosworth and Braunstone 'for his good service against the rebels' in September 1484.⁸¹ His Bosworth tenants refused to accept their new Northern master.⁸² Edward Grey, created Viscount Lisle in June 1483 by the new king was a year later granted manors in Leicestershire and Warwickshire as was Richard's Chief Justice, Sir William Husse.⁸³

Another new man, brought into the shire by Richard, was the notorious William Viscount Berkeley created Earl of Nottingham by Richard on 28th June 1483. As an additional reward for his support for the usurpation, William Berkeley was granted the Leicestershire Mowbray estates around Melton formerly held by Edward IV's younger son Richard, one of the 'princes in the tower'.⁸⁴ William, as might well have been anticipated, proved to be a dubious ally of the new king. So much so that through a series of transactions between 2nd March and 23rd October 1484, Richard had to bind the new earl by cognisances and by deeds conditional upon them, restoring the Mowbray inheritance to the crown on the death of William's wife Joan.⁸⁵ However, according to this agreement, if Richard himself died without male heirs, the inheritance would revert back to William and his wife.⁸⁶ All this was not to accomplish its desired purpose of securing stability and the allegiance of the earl of Nottingham. On the contrary, it meant that the Leicestershire Mowbray estates, formerly administered by William Lord Hastings as Steward, came under the control of another unsatisfactory newcomer during the short reign of Richard III.

In the hands of so unscrupulous a man as Earl William it is little wonder that this agreement should also serve to undermine his already dubious loyalty during the Tudor invasion of August 1485. According to the chronicler of the Berkeley family:

soe prudent was this Earles cariage between those adverse princes [Richard III and Henry VII] and their adherents (ayding the one wth men, the other with money,

neither of both with his person,) That hee preserved the favour of both, at least lost neither of them.⁸⁷

For his calculated duplicity, Henry VII created William, Earl of Nottingham his Earl Marshall.⁸⁸

This pattern of the desertation of Richard III in August 1485, was to be repeated by other landowners within the shire of Leicester, though for more laudable motives. When Henry Tudor, the proclaimed Lancastrian candidate appeared on the last stages of his 'victorious journey' in mid August 1485, contrary to the comments of the author of the *Victoria County History of Leicestershire*,⁸⁹ a significant number of the landed classes of the shire, like the Digbys, flocked to his banner.

Some, like the Digbys and the Fieldings returning to the Lancastrian loyalties of a previous, pre-Towton, generation; others joined Henry Tudor out of revenge for the execution of their beloved Lord William Hastings and out of their exasperation at the Northern tyranny imposed upon them by Richard III. In the words of the Croyland Chronicler describing the aftermath of the Buckingham Rebellion

What immense estates and patrimonies were collected into this king's treasury... all of which he distributed amongst his northern supporters to the disgrace lasting and loudly proclaimed sadness of all the people of the south, who daily longed more and more for the wished-for return of their ancient rulers, rather than the present tyranny of these people.⁹⁰

As far as these sentiments were concerned, Leicestershire formed part of 'the people of the south' in their resentment of the governance of Richard III's Northern supporters and others, equally hated, like William Catesby and the Earl of Nottingham, who gained their ascendancy through the murder of Lord Hastings on 13th June 1483 and the assumption of the throne by Richard Duke of Gloucester thirteen days later.

Describing the arrival of Henry, earl of Richmond in August 1485, *The Great Chronicle of London*, commented that the invading forces:

at the begynnyng were but of small strength But anoon as his landyng was knowyn to many of the knyghis & Esquyris of this land, The[y] Gaderid much people In the kyngys name and streygh sped theym unto that othyr party.⁹¹

As far as Leicestershire was concerned there is evidence to support the *Great Chronicle's* general observations. Of King Richard's commissions of array of 8th December 1484, at least four most probably took their retainers and musters over to the invading army. John Hardwick of Lindley can be positively identified as a Tudor supporter at Bosworth.⁹² If we take grants made to individuals within the period 22nd August to and including the Act of Resumption of 7th November 1485, as giving an indication of services rendered at Bosworth, then the net widens. In the Act of November, Everard Fielding — another 1484 commissioner of Array — was confirmed in his 'grants by us [Henry VII] by Letters Patent under the seal of the Duchy of Lancaster',⁹³ including the Stewardship of the Honour of Leicester dated 24 September 1485.⁹⁴ An even bigger defector from Richard III was Sir Edward Grey, Viscount Lisle, named appropriately first on the December 1484 commission of Array, who was on 22nd September 1485, appointed Steward of Kenilworth for life, undoubtedly for services rendered, by commission or omission, at Bosworth.⁹⁴ The inclusion of Sir Edward Hastings (Lord Hastings' heir) and the Hastings' ward, the young Earl of Shrewsbury, would suggest that these two young men of military age were at Bosworth, in the case of George, earl of Shrewsbury, confirming a later Tudor tradition.⁹⁵ There are others from the Leicestershire community who can be positively identified in this way. Five of the six Digbys who according to Leland fought at Bosworth can be identified from this source by their rewards from the new and grateful king; Everard, Simon,

Thomas, John and Libens.⁹⁶ Three members of the Staunton family from the region of North West Leicestershire were also confirmed in their possession of any earlier 'gifte or Graunte made by us'⁹⁷ including the Stewardship and Constableness of Castle Donington.⁹⁸ If the Stauntons were at Bosworth, then their kinsmen, the Shirleys may also have been.

Motives for this impressive defection from allegiance to Richard III are not hard to find. Many can be identified, like the Digbys as former Lancastrian families of a previous generation. Others, like Sir James Blount, and Everard Fielding who came from former Lancastrian families had been absorbed into the retinue and patronage of William, Lord Hastings, they had a double grievance against the regime of Richard III.⁹⁹

The motives of another Leicestershire supporter of Henry of Richmond at Bosworth are more easy to unravel. Robert Harcourt, sought restoration of his father's attained estates including Market Bosworth, by supporting the August pretender. He achieved his objective and was created Squire of the Body after the battle.¹⁰⁰

At all events and whatever the motives of his Leicestershire supporters, the victory of Henry Tudor resulted in the restoration of the shire to a *status quo* disrupted by the Yorkist accession of Edward IV, restored through the singular efforts and achievements of William, Lord Hastings 'a man of great sense, virtue and authority',¹⁹¹ whose loyalty to the true interests of the right succession of the Yorkist dynasty led to his murder by Richard of Gloucester whose usurpation proved to an unmitigated disaster for that short lived royal dynaster and a further disruption for Leicestershire. This second disruption was to be mercifully short and the appearance and triumph of the last Lancastrian candidate completed the cycle of reconciliation.

The old Lancastrian pre-1461 hierarchy was restored to grace and favour with the reinstatement of William Beaumont as Viscount Beaumont, and Edward Roos as Lord Roos of Belvoir.¹⁰² The spoils of Leicestershire estates and Duchy patronage were to be divided, more or less amicably between the old Lancastrian noble blood of these two dynasties and the new Yorkist noble blood of the Hastings and Grey families.¹⁰³ Some indication of the general satisfactin with this double restoration following Bosworth amongst the landed classes of Leicestershire and indeed former Hastings' retainers from further afield, may be gleamed from their subsequent, unswerving and enthusiastic loyalty to the new Tudor king.

The Digbys prospered for the most part in their service to Henry VII as did the Fieldings.¹⁰⁴ Amongst those rewarded for gallantry at the hard and crucial Battle of Stoke in 1487 in defence of the new dynasty, were the former Hastings' retainers Humphrey Stanley and James Blount, knighted at Bosworth and created Bannerets at Stoke.¹⁰⁵ Four others, Henry Willoughby, Ralph Longford, Maurice Berkeley and Ralph Shirley were also knighted.¹⁰⁶ Henry Vernon of Hatton, Derbyshire was also commended for his 'good and acceptable' service to the new king at Stoke Field.¹⁰⁷ Other Leicestershire men who fought for the Tudors at Stoke Field included Sir Edward Hastings, John and Simon Digby, John Villiers, Edward (Everard) Fielding, Thomas Purfrey and members of other Hastings' retainer families from further afield.¹⁰⁸

From within the county this service was to continue. In 1488, Edward of Hastings knight, Ralph Shirley knight, John Digby knight and Everard? Fielding served as commissioners of array for Leicestershire to summon archers for Henry VII's expedition to Brittany.¹⁰⁹ In 1491 Sir Ralph Shirley was retained to serve the king in his wars beyond the sea as a man-at-arms with his custrell and page accompanied by four demi-lances and forty archers.¹¹⁰ Sir Robert Harcourt was created a Banneret at the Battle of Blackheath in 1497.¹¹¹ There are other examples.¹¹²

Equally to the point, 'The King's Roll of the Lords, Knights, Esquires and gentlemen resyent in the county of Leicester'¹¹³ for the year 1502/3 reveals the ultimate achievement of the stability and harmony within the shire community, partially attained by William Hastings but brought nearer to fruition by the Tudor Peace following Bosworth. With the demise of the Beaumonts and the Roos's probably through mental incapacity as a result of the long periods of exile,¹¹⁴ the resident Leicestershire aristocracy consisted almost exclusively of the new Yorkist families, the Marquis of Dorset and Lord Hastings along with the rehabilitated former supporters of Richard III, Lord Harrington and the Lord Ferrers of Chartley of the next generation.¹¹⁵ The knights and gentry include the Shirleys, the Ashbys and other former Hastings retainers including indispensable lawyers like Thomas Kebell. There are also a variety of 'new men'. Some like Thomas Haselrigge achieving their local status through the traditional method of marriage to an heiress.¹¹⁶ Others like William Turpin and William Wigston through the, for Leicestershire, very new avenues of yeomen farming and urban commerce and trade.¹¹⁷ An indication that dynastic politics, even in the period of the Wars of the Roses, were no longer the sole vehicle for social change and mobility.

Notes

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- 5 Clive Holmes, 'The county community in Stuart historiograph', *Journal of British Studies*, vol.19 (1980)
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- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 *History of Parliament, Biographies, op.cit.*, p.433
- 23 Nichols, *op.cit.*, iii, pt.ii, pp.56-7
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- 29 *Rotuli Parliamentorum* (Record Commission, 1767-1832), V, pp.480-1

- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 *C.P.R.*, 1461-67, pp.198-90 et passim
- 32 *Ibid.*, pp.30, 103-4
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 *Leland's Itinerary, op.cit.*, vol.i, pp.97-8
- 35 Somerville, pp.572-3; *History of Parliament, Biographies, op.cit.*, p.802
- 36 Somerville, p.557
- 37 *Ibid.*, pp.564-68; Nichols, *op.cit.*, p.567
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- 58 *Phillipe de Comynes Memoires*, trans. Michael Jones (1972), p.359
- 59 *Ibid.*, p.251; *Harl.* 433, pp.206-212
- 60 A.H. Thompson, *op.cit.*
- 61 *Paston Letters*, iii, 264; see also pp.53-4, 96-7, 154-6, 157-8
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- 64 *Ibid.*, pp.564, 567
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- 104 See *Materials for...the Reign of Henry VII*, ed. William Campbell (Kraus Reprint, 1965), 2 vols., i, pp.55, 56, 57, 157, 232, 585, 559
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