

King Richard's Grave in Leicester

by *David Baldwin*

Unlike his brother and predecessor, King Edward IV, and his immediate successor, King Henry VII, whose magnificent sepulchres may still be seen in St George's Chapel, Windsor, and Westminster Abbey respectively, King Richard III is unique among later medieval English monarchs in lying in an unmarked and forgotten grave. Yet in spite of, or perhaps because of, his subsequent notoriety, the possibility of finding a physical link with the last of the Plantagenets has drawn generations of curious visitors to Leicester, the town from which he imperiously marched to Bosworth Field and to which his remains were afterwards ignominiously returned. The stories which surround the fate of the King's body, and of the tomb which enclosed it, are legion; and the quincentenary of the battle affords an opportunity to re-examine the available evidence, perhaps more fully than has been possible to date.

One of Henry's first acts on entering Leicester was to have Richard's body exposed, naked, to the gaze of the populace so that no Yorkist sympathiser could doubt the certainty that the former ruler was slain. The earlier historians of the borough, Throsby, Nichols and Thompson, supposed that the place of exhibition was probably the old Guild Hall in Blue Boar Lane. But Charles Billson, using the evidence of BL Harleian MS. 542 and two well-informed commemorative ballads composed for the Stanley family — 'Bosworth Feilde' and 'Scotish Feilde'¹ — has shown conclusively that the site chosen was in the Newarke, probably within the precincts of the Lancastrian Collegiate foundation of the Annunciation of Our Lady, of which only a fragment (beneath the Hawthorn Building of the Polytechnic) survives today. There could, however, be no permanent resting place for the Yorkist usurper among the Tudor's Lancastrian forebears, and it was apparently the Grey Friars of Leicester who requested, or were charged with, the responsibility of burying his remains. The witness best placed to know the circumstances of the interment, Henry VII's court historian Polydore Vergil (who numbered among his appointments that of rector of Church Langton in Leicestershire) recorded that the deceased monarch was 'buried two days after without any pompe or solemne funerall...in thabbay of monks Franciscanes at Leycester';² and this is confirmed by another contemporary, John Rous, the Warwickshire ecclesiastic, whose identification of the choir as the actual place of burial would suggest (notwithstanding his shortcomings as a historian generally) a particular knowledge of the site of the grave.³

The friars, Lord Bacon tells us, subsequently treated the King's body with less than exemplary reverence:⁴ but King Henry, moved, perhaps, by Richard's reinterment of his Lancastrian predecessor, Henry VI, at Windsor, evinced concern that his own late rival's body should be enclosed by a suitable tomb. In the Public Record Office Early Chancery Proceedings series is a document dated 1 July, 11 Henry VII,⁵ which records that about twelve months previously (i.e. about July 1495) the Royal Commissioners, Sir Reynold Bray and Sir Thomas Lovell, arranged for one Walter Hylton, a Nottingham alabasterman, to build a memorial over the grave. Hylton was to receive £50 for the work payable in two

instalments, £20 initially, and the balance when the 'Tombe were set up and fynysshed in the Church (of Friers) aforeseid'. An eighteenth century transcript of a household account book covering the years 1491-5 notes a payment of £10 1s to a James Keyley for the King's monument in September 1495;⁶ but whether Keyley was working on behalf of Hylton, or whether he was a later 'cut-price' contractor, is unclear.

Unfortunately, there is no strictly contemporary description of the appearance of this sepulchre. Raphael Holinshed, whose 'Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland' were first printed in 1577, tells us that it incorporated 'a picture of alabaster representing his (Richard's) person';⁷ and there is a similar notice in William Burton's 'Description of Leicestershire' to the effect that King Henry 'erected for him a faire Alabaster Monument, with his picture cut out, and made thereon'.⁸ Both writers might have spoken to persons who could remember the memorial, and it is particularly unfortunate that Burton, a unique local authority writing in the first years of the seventeenth century, has not left us a fuller account. His contemporary, Sir George Buck, does add that the structure was 'of mingled colour, marble',⁹ but beyond this nothing is known. It is even uncertain whether the portrayal of the king took the form of a recumbent effigy or was incised on the alabaster tomb.

Similarly, we have no precise knowledge of what became of the monument, although it seems unlikely that it can have long survived the suppression of the friary in November 1538. Leland, who visited Leicester at a date before 1543, probably saw the church shortly after the dissolution, and his terse comment that 'there *was* byried King Richard 3 and a knight caullid Mutton, sumtyme Mayre of Leyrcester'¹⁰ does not preclude the possibility that the tomb had even then been demolished and the pieces sold. The popular legend is, of course, that the King's body was rudely removed from its coffin, carried jeeringly through the streets of the city, and finally cast into the river or roughly buried under the end of Bow Bridge; but it is perhaps not without significance that the first recorded mention of this incident does not occur until some seventy years after the event. There is nothing to suggest that the citizens of Leicester evinced such animosity towards their former ruler (the change of dynasty had by no means proved universally popular); and our best authority, Christopher Wren, the future Dean of Windsor and father of the famous architect, appears to have had no knowledge of the matter in 1612. Wren was at this time tutor to the son of Sir William Herrick of Beaumanor whose brother, Robert, a former Mayor of Leicester, had earlier acquired the ruined friary and constructed a large house and garden on the eastern part of the site. One day, as Wren walked with Robert Herrick in the garden, the alderman showed him 'a handsome Stone Pillar, three Foot high' which he had caused to be erected, on which was inscribed the legend 'Here lies the Body of Richard III. some Time King of England'.¹¹ There can be no doubt that much, if not all, of the superstructure of the original tomb had by this time vanished, but it seems likely that its former position was still known. John Speed, writing a year or two earlier had described it as being 'overgrown with weeds and nettles...very obscure and not to be found';¹² but Herrick would probably have had little difficulty in finding someone with local knowledge who could have shown him the place. But unfortunately this monument, like its predecessor, has disappeared with the passing of the centuries, and we have no indication of how many of the succeeding owners of the property even recognised the significance of the stone.

There was, however, one piece of Richard's tomb which was widely believed to have survived the desecration, and this was the stone coffin in which his body had supposedly lain. The story that it had been converted into a drinking-trough for horses at a 'common inn' in Leicester was known to Speed in 1611;¹³ and in mid-century John Evelyn, the

diarist, described the city as 'famous' for this receptacle 'which is now converted to a Cistern at which (I think) catell drink'.¹⁴ Another visitor, Celia Fiennes, noted that it was 'cut out in exact form for his (Richard's) body to lye in',¹⁵ and identified the inn as the 'Greyhound', meaning, perhaps, (since no 'Greyhound' is known to have existed at this period) the 'Talbot' in Talbot Lane. But by the time Miss Fiennes saw the coffin in about 1700 it was already broken; and this may explain how it was that twenty years later the Rev. Samuel Carte, vicar of St Martin's Leicester, could remark a fragment bearing the same tradition 'in which one may observe some appearance of the hollow, fitted for retaining the head and the shoulders'¹⁶ preserved at another tavern, the 'White Horse'. Throsby claimed that in his boyhood (i.e. in the 1740s) the 'end of it that then remained' stood as part of a heap of rubbish in the same inn-yard; but his words suggest that by the time he wrote his history in about 1790 this was no longer the case.¹⁷ Indeed when William Hutton made a journey to Leicester in 1758 in order to see 'this trough which had been the repository of one of the most singular bodies that ever existed' he found that nothing then remained. 'The best intelligence I could obtain,' he informs us, 'was that it was destroyed about the latter end of the reign of George the First, and some of the pieces placed as steps in a cellar, at the same inn where it had served as a trough'.¹⁸ Cruttwell wrote in 1806 as though the upper fragment was still preserved at the tavern: but his description follows that of Carte so closely as to seriously question whether he had actually seen it for himself.¹⁹

These reports are, apparently, compatible insofar that they do not specifically contradict one another, and reflect a progressive deterioration in the fabric of the coffin consistent with exposure and use. But by the same token, there is nothing to prove conclusively that all the witnesses either saw or were referring to the same tomb. It is likely, indeed near-certain, that a number of stone coffins would be unearthed at intervals as the old buildings of the friary were demolished and new foundations laid: and there would seem to be no reason why an enterprising innkeeper who recognised the commercial potential of such relics should not have acquired a suitable piece. But by far the most telling objection is that these repositories are characteristic of a period earlier than the late fifteenth century: and excepting the slight possibility that a discarded stone coffin was utilised in the hurried aftermath of Bosworth, it can never have formed part of King Richard's tomb.

What, then, became of the King's body? There can be no reasonable doubt that it was buried in the church of the Grey Friars, and that Henry VII afterwards caused a 'faire' — if unaweinspiring — monument to be placed over it, a tomb which, in the event, did not long survive the suppression of the friary in 1538. It is likely that the grave was still remembered when Alderman Herrick erected his pillar at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and there is nothing to substantiate the lurid story that the body had at some point been disinterred.²⁰ But thereafter our sources fail us. Later writers were too preoccupied with the spurious stone coffin to preserve the memory of the place of the King's burial, and modern redevelopment has destroyed any last traces of the outlines of the medieval site. Grey Friars House, once the home of Robert Herrick, stood until the beginning of the 1870s where the street known today as Grey Friars adjoins Friar Lane. The garden extended from the rear of the property, along Grey Friars Street, to the present junction with St Martin's, and incorporated land on either side. Herrick's memorial and, by extension, the friars' church and King Richard's original monument, must have stood somewhere within these approximate boundaries, but it is difficult now to be more precise. Throsby tells us that when New Street (to the west of Grey Friars Street) was laid out in the 1740s, a number of skeletons were revealed by the excavations at the St Martin's end of the site.²¹ We know that it was the friars' custom to bury their deceased brethren

either between the church and the chapter-house or in the cloisters, and that small cemeteries were maintained for suitably privileged laymen, usually between the church and the road. Royal personages were invariably buried in a place of honour: and if the church and its environs lay just to the east of New Street it is entirely plausible that the northern end of Herrick's garden covered the foundations of the long-vanished choir. It is possible (though perhaps now unlikely) that at some time in the twenty-first century an excavator may yet reveal the slight remains of this famous monarch; but in the meantime we can do no more than agree with Charles Billson that the grave most probably lies beneath the northern (St Martin's) end of Grey Friars Street, or the buildings that face it on either side.²²

Notes

1. Charles James Billson, *Mediaeval Leicester*, (Leicester 1920), p.180. BL Harleian MS. 542 has been printed in W. Hutton, *The Battle of Bosworth Field*, second edition with additions by J. Nichols (London 1813), pp.204-219, and the ballads in *Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript. Ballads and Romances*, edited by John W. Hales and Frederick J. Furnivall, Vol.1 (London 1867), pp.199-234 and Vol.3 (London 1868), pp.233-259
2. *Three Books of Polydore Vergil's English History*, edited by Sir Henry Ellis, (London 1844), p.226
3. Alison Hanham, *Richard III and His Early Historians 1483-1535*, (Oxford 1975), pp.123-4
4. Francis Bacon, *The History of the Reign of King Henry the Seventh*, edited by Roger Lockyer, (London 1971), p.37
5. Public Record Office C1/206/69. See Rhoda Edwards, 'King Richard's Tomb at Leicester', *The Ricardian*, Vol.3, No.50, (1975), pp.8-9
6. S. Bentley, *Excerpta Historica*, (London 1831), p.105
7. *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, Vol.3, (London 1808), p.447
8. William Burton, *The Description of Leicester Shire*, (London 1622), p.163
9. Sir George Buck, *The History of King Richard the Third*, edited by Arthur Noel Kincaid, (Gloucester 1979), p.217. Buck also refers to an appropriately moralising epitaph 'whereof I have seen the copy in a recorded manuscript book, chained to a table in a chamber in the Guildhall of London,' but which, apparently, was never affixed to the tomb. (See Hutton, *op. cit.* pp.221-2.)
10. *The Itinerary of John Leland*, edited by Lucy Toulmin Smith, Vol.1, (London 1907), p.15
11. *Parentalia, or Memoirs of the Family of the Wrens*, (London 1750), p.144
12. John Speed, *The Historie of Great Britaine*, (London 1611), p.725
13. *Ibid*
14. *The Diary of John Evelyn*, edited by E.S. de Beer, Vol.3, (Oxford 1955), p.122
15. *The Journeys of Celia Fiennes*, edited by Christopher Morris, (London 1947), p.162
16. John Nichols, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, Vol.1, Part 2, (London 1815), p.298
17. John Throsby, *The History and Antiquities of the Ancient Town of Leicester*, (Leicester 1791), p.291, note b
18. Hutton, *op. cit.*, p.143. Throsby noted in another part of his History that he remembered 'being shown some fragments of it about the year 1760', suggesting, perhaps, that it was then no longer readily identifiable as part of a tomb. Throsby, *op. cit.*, p.64
19. Billson *op. cit.*, p.182. Any last vestiges of the receptacle would have disappeared in the early part of the nineteenth century when the 'White Horse' was demolished to make way for new premises for Mansfield's Bank
20. We must not assume that the profanities perpetrated in some parts of the country were necessarily repeated everywhere, nor that the dismantling of the monument for secular profit inevitably entailed the loss of the remains. Robert Herrick, who was born at about the time of the alleged desecration, clearly believed that the King's body still rested beneath his memorial stone
21. Throsby, *op. cit.*, p.291
22. Billson, *op. cit.*, p.184