

## **What might have happened to “The Princes in the Tower”.**

(The timetable of events that follows comes mainly from a reading of Annette Carson’s ‘Richard III: The Malignant King’. The speculation, for good or ill, is all mine.)

The children of Edward IV and his queen, Elizabeth, were declared to be illegitimate by the Act *Titulus Regius* passed by Richard III’s Parliament in January 1484 on the grounds their parents’ marriage appeared in canon law to have been bigamous, the King having gone through a form of marriage in 1461–2 with the daughter of the First Earl of Shrewsbury, Eleanor n<sup>è</sup>e Talbot, who was still living at the time of the king’s second, and equally clandestine, marriage to the children’s mother in 1464.

It appears that nothing was known publicly of the first marriage until Robert Stillington, by then Bishop of Bath and Wells, disclosed to Richard, Duke of Gloucester - the Protector - that he had witnessed it. One must always bear in mind the possibility that both the bishop and the Protector fabricated this story with the aim of bastardising the issue of the marriage of Edward IV to Elizabeth Grey, although Edward’s known *modus operandi* in his womanising certainly provides some credibility to the story – he was a serial philanderer and with attractive women who resisted his advances a promise of making ‘an honest woman’ of the lady may well have been his preferred route to seduction. His grandson, in a slightly different form, behaved similarly – a ‘chip off the old block’.

It is probable, but not certain, that at some point well before Stillington’s disclosure, the fact was known covertly to the Earl of Warwick and via him to Clarence and the knowledge, true or false, perhaps fuelled the Queen’s hatred and fear of Clarence. Lord Hastings may also have known about it. Anyone who had knowledge of the fact and who concealed that knowledge, particularly at the time of Edward’s marriage to Elizabeth Grey, was legally an accessory to a crime.

Clear and active opposition to the setting aside of the young king’s right to reign must have been evident from the start. It was a major departure from the way things were done in England and underlines the idea that Gloucester usurped the throne. Apart from senior members of the Woodville family threatened with loss of the power and influence they had exercised over the last twenty years, and their expectations of being able to manipulate the new king who had grown up surrounded by his mother’s family, many of the late king’s household, his friends, and those who held appointments dating from his reign, also saw their positions threatened. And, quite reasonably, many of these may also have felt that setting aside his son and heir was a challenge to their loyalty to their old master.

By early June, there was evidence that plots had been brewing to frustrate the setting aside of the boy's claim. During the weeks following Stillington's disclosure to the Protector, rumours and perhaps even clear evidence of what the bishop had divulged would have been circulating among those supporting the boy king's rights. The leaders of this group, who may have known the facts anyway, would have appreciated the enormity of the challenge to the legitimacy of the late king's second marriage and therefore of the children of it; they would need to act quickly before their cause was irretrievably lost.

On June 9<sup>th</sup> Stillington confirmed, on oath, to a meeting of what would have been seen as a full, or Great, Council, what he had told Gloucester a month earlier. The fact of the earlier marriage was now placed, as we would say today, 'in the public domain'. On the same day, the last writ was issued in Edward V's name.

The following day, June 10<sup>th</sup>, the Protector appears to have had evidence of a serious plot to remove the elder boy into the hands of those who supported his right to reign. By June 13<sup>th</sup>, the supposed leaders of the plot having been summoned to a council meeting in the Tower, the occasion was used to arrest them. Hastings was summarily executed under the powers of the Constable, Gloucester; the others were temporarily imprisoned. Gloucester may have had evidence of Hastings's plotting, and in any case probably regarded him as directly responsible for having hastened the late king's early death through encouraging his excessive eating, drinking, and whoring. He was also aware of the potential size of the armed force at Hastings's disposal; at the time much bigger than his own.

The young king had been lodged in the royal apartments in the Tower in preparation for his coronation since his arrival in London on May 4<sup>th</sup> with his uncle and Buckingham. As soon as the Woodville family knew their plan to escort the new king to London for a swift coronation had been thwarted, and while the royal party was on its way south, his mother, sisters, and younger brother had decamped to Westminster Abbey where they claimed sanctuary. Once the plot to remove him into the hands of his supporters was discovered, his attendants were changed and new and strictly vetted replacements employed.

On June 16<sup>th</sup>, the king's younger brother, Richard Duke of York, was allowed by his mother, quite possibly by means of intimidation, ('You either hand him over or we take him anyway') to leave the sanctuary to join Edward in the Tower. This removal was negotiated by the Archbishop of Canterbury; the chief grounds being that the coronation of Edward V required the younger boy to fulfil his role as the next in line.

In view of the young king's legal position, Gloucester, as the senior eligible male Plantagenet, was 'elected' to the throne on 25–26 June as Richard III by the Assembly of the Three Estates, that is the 'rump' of the Parliament originally summoned to approve the kingship of the elder boy and the protectorship of his uncle.

The question now was what to do with the boys, and especially the elder one who had been proclaimed king, Edward V, at the beginning of April 1483 and in the light of his bastardy could not progress to his coronation.

Richard was crowned on July 16, and on the following day Brackenbury was appointed to operational control of the Tower. The king then set off on a progress to show himself to his people. This reached as far north as York and ran well into late October.

The chronicler Stow reports that in early August arrests and executions took place following a foiled plot to remove the boys from the Tower. Stow names the plotters and states that they were beheaded (an unusual means of execution for common men) and the heads were displayed on London Bridge. One of the conspirators was, or may have been previously, an employee at the Tower. If he was actually in post it does not say much for the vetting process on the new attendants.

There seems to have been another almost simultaneous plot to free them by John Welles, half-brother to Stanley's wife, Margaret Beaufort. This too was foiled.

Mancini reported that during August the boys' doctor, Argentine, was dismissed. At that point the boys were known to be alive although they had been relocated into the White Tower and probably were allowed no longer to exercise outside. There was no mention from Argentine that either of the boys was in ill-health, although, as might be expected, the elder, in particular, was depressed and Argentine could well have told others in his circle that this was manifested by the boy having morbid fears of death. Those attending the boy may well have told him lurid stories of the fate of other deposed kings, Edward II and Richard II. Both boys are recorded as being alive in the Tower by Mancini and the Crowland Continuator on or around September 8 when Richard's son was invested as Prince of Wales in York.

In early September, too, the Duke of Buckingham, based in Brecon, had declared himself leader of a rising to free the boys and restore the older one to his rightful position as king. There is reason to suppose that the wellsprings of the rising came from a significant group of those who had held office or had otherwise been dependent on the court of Edward IV (in other words, substantial gentry, not the peerage), or similarly on the Woodville family, and who had not been retained

under the new regime. Restoration of Edward V would have been the only way such men could recover what they had lost. Buckingham's naïve opportunism led him to join and put himself at the head of this movement and he may have been manipulated by those close to Margaret Beaufort – and to Henry her son.

In mid-September came the first rumours that the boys were dead.

The issues for students of the period are:

- Who started the rumours and why?
- What might have been the basis for them?
- Why did Richard not meet the rumours head-on either by producing the boys, or, if they had died, their bodies? Even if they had been murdered, it would have been done in such a way as to look like a natural death.

The first suggestions that the boys were dead may have been deliberately planted among those plotting rebellion as a means of turning them away from the objective of restoring 'King Edward V' to one of supporting the exiled Henry Tudor's claim to the throne. The planters may very well have been the party led by Margaret Beaufort and her co-conspirator, Morton. He had certainly suborned Buckingham while he was in the Duke's charge in a form of 'house arrest'. The rumour may also have served Buckingham as it gave an opening to take the throne himself—Morton playing on the Duke's vanity. No substance, in the form of witnesses or documents was given to the rumour but in the atmosphere of late summer—early autumn 1483 none seemed necessary. The rumour mongers would have seen it as important to spread the story to the ears of opinion-formers in other countries too, which may explain why the French had given it the status of truth in early 1484. The Morton/Beaufort plan needed the boys dead, so their sister could be legitimised and married to the putative Henry VII, but it was not material whether they were dead at the time the rumour was put about. If Beaufort's son became King, the boys, securely held within the Tower, could be disposed of in secret as the first act of the new reign and the responsibility firmly attributed to the deceased or exiled Richard III.

Rumours from late October onwards that they were dead, but again without any supporting evidence, might have had some truth in them, although these did not and could not include specific detail of the manner and place of their death.

My speculation is that when the King, still on his 'progress' in October, first became aware of the extent and seriousness of the rebellion, he either ordered Brackenbury directly, or more probably via the Duke of Norfolk who was in London organizing its defence against threats from rebels based in the south east, to execute a transfer of

the boys to the care of Margaret, dowager Duchess of Burgundy, Richard's sister, an action which may well have been forward planned in detail in the event of just such a situation. This order would probably not have been formalized, the fewer who knew what was being done, the better, but there would have had to be some evidence of the king's intent for either Norfolk or Brackenbury to act. The initial part of the exercise would have been straightforward. The Tower had direct access to the Thames and a suitable ship, Norfolk owned several ships and held the post of Lord Admiral, would be available to collect the boys and their belongings. If this happened after dark, very few, if any, outsiders would have known about it. Some selected servants would have been detailed to accompany them and by the morning others who normally attended on them would be told they had gone to a 'place of greater safety'.

Erasmus tells us that cases of The Sweating Sickness, a highly infectious and generally fatal disease possibly spread by rats, were reported in England in 1483 (earlier than the commonly accepted 1485 and introduced by Tudor's mercenaries after Bosworth). Thomas Stanley gave an attack of it as his excuse for not joining the King's forces before Bosworth and so it is likely that he would have expected those whom he told to be familiar with its presence and to know what effects it had on the sufferer. One possible answer then to 'what happened to the "Princes in the Tower"?' is that when they took ship they were incubating the disease. Living in the Tower as virtual prisoners confined to their apartments, they would be highly susceptible to infectious diseases. Their servants might have passed it on to them or the sweeping up of rat droppings in their chambers could have caused them to catch it. It was a disease which appeared to target the younger and better off rather than the lower orders. Stone floors regularly swept, both in private houses and public places such as taverns and inns may account for this.

The weather was particularly bad that October, it effectively neutered the rebellion, and the sea crossing to what is now Belgium would have been rough for much of the time. Suppose that once out into the North Sea, the boys' sickness broke out and rapidly infected most of the rest of those on board. The vessel founders out of sight of land in severe gale force winds and there are no survivors. It would take time for those on either side of the sea to realise the ship might be lost and then even longer to communicate that between them. Only the principals would share this knowledge, and the matter would be 'hushed-up' initially perhaps because it would reflect badly on the competence of the English parties to the exercise, and later because Richard's advisors saw that to prevent all those intent on upholding the rights of Edward V from throwing their weight behind Tudor's party it might be

sensible not to state officially the boys were dead. Richard himself would not have known for some time after that; telling him might well have been something no one was keen to do.

Then there would have been no certainty about what did happen, only that the ship and its passengers never arrived at its intended destination. Even though loss of life at sea would have been a common enough occurrence, the king might have carried remorse for the rest of his life, knowing that his nephews had probably died as a result of his decision to send them out of the country. 'Probably' because it could never be established as a certainty they had died, although as time went on and the ship had not made a landfall somewhere, it ought to have seemed more and more likely. But we only have to think of the number of times Shakespeare, writing just over a hundred years later, uses as a plot device some lord, prince, king, or female equivalent, who turns up not having been drowned as everyone has supposed, to appreciate the degree of uncertainty attributable to a disappearance such as that of the two boys.

The rumours, which surfaced after the failure of 'Buckingham's rebellion' might have originated from relatives of those who sailed with the boys as attendants. Some refer specifically to drowning 'in the deeps'. These relatives would only have known that their son, husband, brother, cousin, etc. had disappeared without trace but some may have known, unofficially, that these people had left on a secret mission out of the country and said they would be away for a while.

My speculation also provides some possible answers to questions that arise over what happened to the boys; who knew about it before Richard's death in battle, why Richard's successor appears not to have known how or when they died, and what, if any, use was subsequently made of the story.

- James Tyrell may have been a party to the original plan to remove the boys from possible abduction by those who would have had the elder one restored to the throne, and to send them to Flanders. Annette Carson cites some evidence that Tyrell went 'over the sea', possibly in 1483 to set up arrangements, as payment is recorded in early 1485 to the Corporation of Dover for sums it had paid out for his passage 'to Flanders'. The reimbursement for those payments may have been very slow – the Crown was chronically short of money throughout Richard's reign – or his journey may have been made in 1484 as an attempt to find out for the King what might have happened once the government in London knew the ship had not arrived in a Flemish port long after it was supposed to have done. By the time

of Bosworth, Tyrell was commandant of the Castle of Guisnes, part of the defences of Calais, and was, eventually, re-appointed to that post in May 1487 by Henry VII. It doesn't seem he told his new master what had happened to the boys in 1483. It may have been a secret he guarded closely as an obligation to his previous master and the concealment could have been an (unrecorded) reason for his execution for treason in 1502. Like everyone else involved, Tyrell would not have been certain the boys *were* dead – they might both turn up somewhere, sometime, nor, if it could be assumed they were dead, what had been the cause. Perhaps Tyrell covertly harboured a hope or belief that the Perkin Warbeck of the 1490s was really the younger boy who had survived and 'crossed over to the other side' – in this case, Flanders.

- Brackenbury would certainly have known if the boys had taken ship for Flanders but whatever else he knew died with him at Bosworth. It is also noteworthy that neither at the time nor afterwards did anyone seriously suggest that Brackenbury had had any involvement in the 'murder' of the boys, although he was directly responsible for them as Governor of the Tower.
- It seems highly likely too that while he was preparing the defence of London against rebels, Norfolk would have visited the Tower, and would have known whether or not the boys were there. Although there is no evidence of his involvement, his would have been the authorization that would empower Brackenbury to release his charges, knowing that doing so had royal approval.
- In February 1484, the King and the Queen Dowager became reconciled and the ex-queen and her daughters left the sanctuary and were eventually resettled at court, where they played an active part in the festivities at Christmas 1484 that drew such finger-wagging criticism from the Crowland scribe. It is clear that from then on, Elizabeth did not entertain support for the exiled Tudor (if she ever had) and sent messages to her Woodville sons in Brittany to leave the Tudor's court and return home. The eldest attempted to do so and was detained by Tudor's men. Was an element in this rapprochement an admission from the King of the tragic and unintended result of an attempt to keep the boys out of the clutches of Buckingham or of Margaret Beaufort and John Morton? Again, neither the King nor their mother knew for certain the boys had not survived, though by then it would have been practical to assume so. Proving their deaths legally would however have been difficult without evidence. The question arises again: if Elizabeth

had good reason to believe her boys dead why did she not tell her new son-in-law after August 1485? Contemporary writers, dealing with the sudden confiscation of the Queen Dowager's assets and her virtual incarceration in an abbey in early 1487, hint strongly at a punishment for treason. Did she unwisely or inadvertently express an expectation or a hope that at least one of her missing sons had survived, was living in Flanders, and, his cause promoted by Richard's sister, might one day succeed in becoming the rightful King of England?