**Richard III** By [David Hipshon](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/1766) [1] | Published in [History Review](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/83) [2] [2010](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/14784) [3]

David Hipshon outlines the career of the most controversial king ever to have occupied the English throne.

Condemned to suffer the notoriety heaped upon him by the Tudor propaganda machine and the brilliance of Shakespeare, Richard III has been remembered for centuries as the evil hunchback who murdered the Princes in the Tower. Societies dedicated to revising his reputation have sought to overturn the traditional view and he now has many champions prepared to swear he was a saint. The lack of reliable evidence will always leave room for a wide spectrum of speculation and belief, but it is nevertheless possible to step beyond the mystery of the fate of the princes and consider more fundamental historical questions. One important issue is whether the kingdom and the institutions of government benefited from his usurpation and rule, both in the short and the long term.

**Early Life**

Richard was born on 2 October 1452, at Fotheringhay in Northamptonshire. He was the twelfth of Cecily Neville’s thirteen children and the youngest of the seven who survived infancy. His father, the duke of York, emerged as the leader of the opposition to the disastrous rule of Henry VI. Richard was born just as the conflict known as The Wars of the Roses was about to begin. During the conflict, first between his father and the Lancastrians and then between his brother, Edward IV and their cousin, Warwick the Kingmaker, Richard suffered exile and hardship before sharing in the triumph of the Yorkist dynasty. At the decisive victories, against Warwick at Barnet in April 1471 and against Margaret of Anjou and Henry VI at Tewkesbury in May 1471, Richard fought alongside his brother, Edward IV. He was then eighteen years old, a soldier of proven capacity and with a reputation for trustworthiness and loyalty which grew over the next twelve years.

**Ruler of the North**

From 1471 to 1483 Richard, duke of Gloucester, established himself as the dominant force in the north during Edward IV’s second reign. From his base at Middleham in Wensleydale he exercised a far-reaching hegemony which brought the region a stability it had rarely enjoyed. He became warden of the west March, chief steward of the duchy of Lancaster in the north, keeper of the forests, sheriff of Cumberland and eventually lieutenant-general of the north, an office created for him as he went to war with the Scots in 1482. In 1474 he had signed a treaty with the earl of Northumberland by which Henry Percy recognised Richard ‘the right high and mighty prince’ as his ‘faithful lord’. When Ralph Neville, earl of Westmorland, became his man in 1477 Richard had effectively united the Percy and Neville interests in the north in a way few would have imagined possible.

Richard built up a network of staunchly loyal retainers from among the higher gentry of Yorkshire, Westmorland, Cumberland and eastern Lancashire. These men, the Parrs, Huddlestons, Pilkingtons, Harringtons, Middletons and Dacres, were all related in some degree and looked directly to Richard for their own security and advancement. This was a northern, gentry affinity with access to royal patronage that only a prince of royal blood could deliver. As leader of the Council of the North Richard regulated the judicial, financial and administrative offices of a vast region, and he did so with admirable impartiality. In 1483 he was given a new hereditary palatinate made up of the counties of Cumberland and Westmorland and any lands he conquered in Scotland. It gave him regalian rights in these territories equivalent to those of the king.

If there was one element of weakness in the structure he had created it lay in his willingness to support his gentry retainers against noble incursions. This was particularly true when it came to the Stanleys. Richard checked the power of Thomas lord Stanley in eastern Lancashire by promoting into duchy of Lancaster offices men like the Harringtons and the Pilkingtons. Edward IV had to intervene to prevent Richard from obstinately challenging Lord Stanley’s power in the northwest and supporting Stanley’s opponents. Richard, whose motto was ‘*loyaulte me lie*’ (loyalty binds me), preferred to honour his obligations to lesser men who had fought beside him at Barnet and Tewkesbury and had lost family in the Yorkist cause, rather than surrender to the needs of members of the nobility whom he considered to be disloyal. He was a powerful and effective regional lord under a strong king, but his own transition to kingship undermined his authority because it allowed his legitimacy to be questioned.

**The Usurpation**

Edward IV’s untimely death, in 1484, could not have come at a worse time. His eldest son, Edward, aged 12, was too young to rule in his own right but not young enough to enable an interim government to be securely established in his name. Dominic Mancini, an Italian observer in London until early July 1483, writing only a few months after the events, described how a council assembled in London after Edward’s funeral to decide on how to proceed. One group of lords proposed that Richard, duke of Gloucester, should govern ‘because Edward in his will had so directed’. A majority of those present, however, voted in favour of a ruling council, with Gloucester as the chief councillor. They were reluctant, Mancini said, to give regency powers to one man as he ‘might easily usurp the sovereignty’. They took this view, he added, because they were of the queen’s family and thought that they might suffer reprisals for the execution of Clarence. They feared that they might ‘be ejected from their high estate’.

When Edward had married Elizabeth Woodville in 1464 he had had to provide for her numerous relatives. She had a surviving father, two sons from a previous marriage and no fewer than five brothers and seven sisters who reached adulthood. During Edward’s reign, the elevation of the queen’s sons and brothers, as also the monopolisation of the aristocratic marriage market by her sisters, had worked in the king’s favour. He had established a wide-reaching royal affinity beholden to him and committed to his interests. His premature death exposed this clan to the retribution of the dispossessed. Although there is little evidence for Mancini’s claim that Richard, duke of Gloucester, disliked the queen’s family, there were many who did. Chief among these were Henry Stafford, duke of Buckingham, and William lord Hastings, Edward’s chamberlain. Buckingham is a complex figure, difficult to categorise but clearly unreliable and unsteady. He may have been embittered because he had been forced to marry one of the queen’s sisters, whom, according to Mancini, ‘he scorned on account of her humble origin’. The fact is that he had been excluded from affairs by Edward IV for reasons that are unclear. He was determined to take advantage of the changes which had been brought about by the king’s death. All we know about Hastings’ hostility to the Woodvilles, apart from the fact that the chamberlain’s companionship with Edward, and his connivance at the king’s licentious behaviour, may have met with Elizabeth Woodville’s disapproval, is that he had a violent feud with her eldest son, Thomas Grey, marquess of Dorset.

Buckingham rode to Richard’s side remarkably quickly, while Hastings wrote to him from London warning him of the council’s decision to overlook the will of Edward IV. Richard replied with a letter to the council insisting that he be made Protector according to his brother’s will and his own entitlement. Thomas Grey is said to have responded to this with the remark, ‘We are so important, that even without the king’s uncle we can make and enforce these decisions’. Even at this very early stage it was clear that two sides were emerging in a struggle for control, and that custody of the young king was essential to both. The responsibility for the care of the king’s eldest son had been given to the queen’s brother and son, Anthony Woodville and Richard Grey. The Woodville family would be secure if they could keep control of Edward V, and have him crowned as quickly as possible. Richard and his allies needed to prevent this eventuality. Crowning a young king was not so much the issue – Richard II had been crowned at the age of ten and Henry VI at the age of seven – but the authority and sanction it gave his wishes would allow those closest to him to assert their influence.

The young king, Edward V, accompanied by his Woodville guardians and his household servants, began the journey from Ludlow to London as Richard was moving south from York. The two retinues met at Northampton on 29 April 1483 in an appearance of amity. The king’s entourage and escort were camped at Stony Stratford, ten miles further south, and Anthony Woodville rode to Northampton to converse with the dukes of Gloucester and Buckingham. Having spent a convivial evening with them he lodged at Northampton. At dawn on 30 April he was suddenly arrested and the two dukes rode to Stony Stratford, arrested Sir Richard Grey, the queen’s son, and Thomas Vaughan, the treasurer of the king’s household, and took possession of Edward V. When Richard and Buckingham paid homage to Edward they explained that they had removed his former ministers because they had been conspiring against them and had sought to deprive Richard of the regency conferred on him by Edward IV. Edward is said to have replied:

He merely had those ministers whom his father had given him; and relying on his father’s prudence, he believed that good and faithful ones had been given him. He had seen nothing evil in them and wished to keep them unless otherwise proved to be evil. As for the government of the kingdom, he had complete confidence in the peers of the realm and the queen, so that this care but little concerned his former ministers.

If Mancini’s account is to be believed, then there was little prospect of a peaceful accession from this point on. Richard’s arrest of Edward’s advisers would reap reprisals sooner rather than later. The king was already old enough to express cogent views and would surely never forgive the treatment meted out to Rivers, Grey and Vaughan who were taken to Yorkshire and imprisoned (and executed without trial after the usurpation). Buckingham, according to Mancini, exploded in rage on hearing the queen’s name and exclaimed ‘It is not the business of women but of men to govern kingdoms, and so if he cherished any confidence in her he better relinquish it’. Edward V was a Woodville, and to expect him to reject his mother and her family was preposterous.

Usurpation followed swiftly. Being innocent of any crimes, Edward and his brother were declared illegitimate on the grounds that Edward IV had been pre-contracted to marry Eleanor Butler at the time of his marriage to Elizabeth Woodville. This claim may have had a legal justification, but breaking precontracts was commonplace and of little consequence. If any question of legitimacy had arisen then ecclesiastical dispensation or parliamentary instruments could have been sought. They were never required because the issue had never been raised. Time and custom conferred legitimacy.

Richard may have believed that he was the only man who could guarantee the survival of the strong and stable polity established by his brother. He may also have believed that his own survival gave him little choice but to take the throne. He wrote to the city of York on 10 July urging them to send troops ‘To aid and assist us against the queen, her blood adherents and affinity, which have intended and doth intend, to murder and utterly destroy us and our cousin, the duke of Buckingham, and the old royal blood of this realm’.

On 13 July William Hastings was arrested and summarily executed. Again, it is possible that Richard thought Hastings was involved in a plot against him. The other three arrested with him were certainly not friends of Richard. Stanley, Morton and Rotherham all went on to prosper under Henry Tudor, having demonstrated disloyalty to Richard III. The most obvious reason for the removal of Hastings was that he would not countenance the deposition of Edward V. The power struggle, as Richard expressed it in his letter to York, was a matter of blood. Richard was conscious of his lineage and the royal blood flowing in his veins. His mother and his father were direct descendants of kings; the queen’s ‘blood adherents’ could not make this claim, and that included her sons. On 22 June a sermon preached at St Paul’s Cross proclaimed Richard’s title to the throne. On 26 June a petition was presented to Richard at Baynard’s Castle, offering him the throne, and on 6 July 1483 he was crowned in Westminster Abbey.

**The Reign**

Richard attempted to present a government of continuity. He offered a period of just and firm rule, with the unimpeded progress of the legal and administrative functions revived by Edward IV, in contrast to the factional chaos of the transitional rule of a minor. While Richard was on progress and travelling to York, however, plotting began, aimed at releasing the princes from the Tower and their sisters from sanctuary. It may have been at this time that the princes were murdered; they were not seen again after September. There has been much debate about the fate of the princes, one of the most controversial episodes in English history, but two points are clear. First, by disinheriting his nephews Richard had exposed them to annihilation. They would always be the focus of the attentions of would-be plotters and disaffected malcontents, and therefore had to be killed. Secondly, as their guardian, whether complicit in their murder or not, Richard III was manifestly culpable.

It must have been disappointing for Richard to discover that rebellion was so widespread in the south and the east, but he was truly shocked by the defection of Henry Stafford, duke of Buckingham, his principal noble ally during the usurpation. There has been much speculation about the reasons for Buckingham’s rebellion but no clear motive has emerged. He was part of a plot involving Elizabeth Woodville, Margaret Beaufort and her son, Henry Tudor. Richard described Buckingham as ‘the most untrue creature living’ and had him quickly executed after he had been captured. The rebellion was swiftly suppressed but it left a significant legacy. Richard now realised that his theme of continuity had failed. The chief supporters of the rebellion were the former household servants of Edward IV. Richard now had to supplant the regional officers in the south with men he could trust from the north. His distrust of all those who had served in the old regime was considerable. In the county of Wiltshire, for instance, he ordered the seizure and forfeiture of all property held by former servants of Edward IV, whether or not there was any evidence of their involvement in the rebellion. His reaction to the rebellion may also account for the vitriolic condemnation of Edward’s regime which appeared in the Titulus Regius, the act of parliament setting out his title to the throne. Richard had posed as the continuity candidate, but now he attacked the former regime for its corruption. This could only weaken his support and undermine his credibility.

Buckingham’s rebellion demonstrated the weaknesses inherent in Richard’s regime. Edward IV had successfully deposed the king in 1461 because he had strong support in London and the south. He had the support of the Church, including the papal legate, and he had a justified grievance against Henry VI who had broken the Act of Accord and waged war on, and killed, Edward’s father. Richard’s support was in the less populated, less wealthy and less influential north. The Church was divided in its view of him and the bishops of Ely, Exeter and Salisbury, along with the Archbishop of York, all opposed him. The charges against Edward V concerned his legitimacy and not his conduct. This was quite without precedent in English history and bound to cause conflict.

Richard’s one and only parliament met in January 1484 and enacted some useful legislation which showed him as a king concerned to protect the rights of the common man. Those accused of crimes could be granted bail and their goods were protected from forfeiture before conviction. Aspects of land law were made more equitable, and there were detailed provisions relating to the regulation of the cloth trade. Unpopular local courts were reformed. A concern for justice is reflected in an annuity awarded to an official known as the ‘clerk of requests’ for expediting the requests and supplications of poor people. When he visited Kent in the aftermath of Buckingham’s rebellion, the king invited every person with a grievance who felt they had been unlawfully wronged, to bring a bill of complaint to him:

... and he shall be heard and without delay have such convenient remedy as shall accord with his laws. For his grace is utterly determined all his true subjects shall live in rest and quiet and peaceably enjoy their lands, livelihoods and goods according to the laws of this land, which they be naturally born to inherit.

It is difficult to separate real concern from propaganda, appeasement and simple routine legal administration, but his royal pronouncements are consistent with the concerns he had previously demonstrated as leader of the Council of the North.

Richard’s financial measures reflect a similar efficient pragmatism. Edward had used his ‘chamber’ in the royal household to bypass the cumbersome mechanisms of the exchequer. Revenue from the crown estates was paid directly into the king’s chamber where it could be deployed immediately. Richard revived this system, which ensured that a more efficient system of accountancy was available for the Tudors to exploit. He abolished the detested ‘benevolences’ by which Edward had extracted money from his subjects and, although he had to raise a national loan in early 1485, he did not ask for a grant of taxation. Richard was unfortunate in inheriting a depleted treasury. The Scottish war had absorbed any surplus funds and the Treaty of Arras in 1482, between the French and the Burgundians, ended the payment of the French pension awarded to Edward IV. Richard met the shortfall by a more thorough exploitation of the rents of crown lands and an investigation into the feudal rights attached to them. Again it was Henry Tudor who developed and extended this programme.

**Bosworth Field**

Richard’s main difficulty was the lack of noble support after Buckingham’s fall. He alienated Henry Percy, earl of Northumberland, by appointing John de la Pole, Richard’s nephew, as leader of the Council of the North, a position Percy coveted and probably expected. It is no surprise that the earl of Northumberland and Thomas Stanley stood aloof at the battle of Bosworth and William Stanley joined Henry Tudor. The only substantial magnate to fight for Richard, John Howard, duke of Norfolk, had been made a duke by Richard himself. Given time, Richard might have successfully elevated to high rank others upon whom he could rely, but he was seriously short of aristocratic support at Bosworth. The Wars of the Roses had themselves whittled down the number of independent peers who could command the loyalty of a region and present substantial numbers of troops in battle. Those who remained might have a disproportionate influence on the outcome of a conflagration.

Richard charged into battle at the head of his loyal household knights and esquires of the body, leading the last charge of knights in English history. He had been a good lord to them and they were prepared to die for him, but to exercise kingship this was not enough. Henry Tudor was relatively unknown with a derisory claim to the throne and no experience of battle, but he had powerful backing from professional French soldiers and his troops were led by the able and committed earl of Oxford. The outcome was surprising, but the failure of Henry Percy and Thomas Stanley to engage for Richard proved decisive.

**Assessment**

Richard might have been an excellent king if he had won the battle of Bosworth. Victory in battle would have vindicated him in the eyes of many and delivered God’s favourable verdict on the usurpation. His intelligence, vigour and vision might well have delivered a period of good rule. Instead, he died ‘fighting manfully in the thickest press of his enemies’, within yards of his nemesis, Henry Tudor. We can never know whether Edward V might have been a strong ruler, but the likelihood is that a power struggle would have ensued and the spectre of civil war would have been raised again. Richard’s character, and the trajectory of power he had experienced, made subjection and obedience to those he considered his inferiors impossible. The usurpation guaranteed the preservation of strong central authority, but it was the Tudors who benefited from it. The Yorkist achievement, in making royal administration more accountable and effective, did survive Richard’s death, even if the dynasty itself was all but destroyed.

**Issues to Debate**

* How far was the usurpation of the throne by Richard III justified?
* Why was Richard so hampered by a lack of support?
* Why was Richard more successful as a duke than as a king?

**Further reading**

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