

# INVESTIGATING THE BONES OF A KING

This book is about the discovery of the grave of one of England's most notorious and enigmatic monarchs, Richard III. For five centuries he lay buried under the dismantled remains of the church of the Greyfriars, the Franciscans' church in the centre of Leicester, in a location which by the twenty-first century had become a car park. The archaeological excavation which recovered his remains was made possible by a joint project between the Richard III Society, the University of Leicester and the city of Leicester. However, as the story unfolds it will become clear that many other people became involved in the subsequent research on the bones of the king led by the University of Leicester. A glance at the members of the team makes clear that only with the expertise of researchers from a wide range of academic disciplines from archaeology to art history, engineering, forensics, genetics, geology, history, medicine and beyond, could the bones have revealed so much about the life, death and burial of this man.

Even during his lifetime Richard attracted controversy, and from the time of his death up to the present day, the nature of his deeds in life, his moral character and the mode of his demise have all stimulated public interest. He has been represented a villain, most famously, but not exclusively, by Shakespeare, assisted in the twentieth century by Laurence Olivier, whose iconic performance in film (*Richard III*, 1955) has become a benchmark in modern times. But, from George Buck, writing in the seventeenth century, to the eighteenth-century essayist Horace Walpole and onward to his many modern enthusiasts, he has been romanticised as a hero wronged by the Tudors and by the

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fate which relegated him to the losing side in history. The enormous scale of public interest in the discovery of a skeleton in September 2012 that might possibly have been that of Richard III reflects these longstanding controversies and the emotions they provoke even today. In the first instance the identification was far from certain, and the global response was overwhelming for the research team. This book presents the reality behind the many months of complex, painstaking research by highly trained experts from many different fields who sifted through and evaluated the available evidence that allowed them to pin down the identification ‘beyond reasonable doubt’.

We still cannot answer the question of whether Richard III was a villain or a hero, probably because that is the wrong question to ask. Although archaeology can uncover a huge amount of information about his life, health, death and the manner of his burial it cannot tell us anything about his personality, his morals or his character. Even written historical documents and texts cannot reliably help us on this most of the time, since even accounts from the time of Richard himself, or those written only shortly after his death, were certainly not objective and were tainted by the turbulent morally and politically charged environment in which they were written.

Compared to that given to the human remains normally recovered by archaeologists, the time, effort and resources devoted to the bones of Richard III has been exceptional. For the academic researchers involved this was not because they were studying the body of a king. Rather, this discovery presented an extraordinary opportunity to find out about the life and death of a very well-documented individual. This allowed the team to set the information obtained from archaeological and scientific analyses into an exceptionally rich and detailed historical context, enabling them to achieve the most from scientific methodologies. It also provides a body of evidence about the lifestyle of an elite, indeed royal, individual, which can be compared to the information we can obtain from the bodies of ordinary people to see what experiences they must have shared and in what aspects their lives differed. This will lead to a much better understanding of the impacts of social and political hierarchies on late medieval society more broadly.

This book is based on the research and publication of the academics and other experts who carried out the investigations, and on conversations with them about how they followed the trails where the evidence led. It covers the progress of the project from its inception to a period shortly

before the reinterment of Richard's remains in Leicester Cathedral in March 2015. The initials which appear after chapter and section headings indicate the specific researchers whose work underpins that chapter or section. The book also attempts to set the results of the discovery and the subsequent research findings against the background of England in the time of the Wars of the Roses and to consider the implications for how we now might understand contemporary Tudor and later representations of Richard. That process of reconsideration is only just beginning.

In this book we have tried hard to make clear the difference between actual primary evidence and data on the one hand and interpretations of that evidence by scholars on the other hand. Primary evidence consists of archaeological 'facts' (such as the grave itself) and data (such as the radiocarbon dates for the bones), as well as texts, documents and images from Richard III's time. Inevitably, all of these are fragmentary and incomplete. The job of researchers is to try to assemble the pieces, which do not always fit together smoothly: no single piece of evidence tells the whole story, and the researchers must try to assemble them in a way that gives the best fit on the basis of their expert knowledge of similar material and its wider contexts. This is the case for all academic research. It is often the case that more than one interpretation is possible, and experts do not always agree. Where the experts have come to different conclusions on the basis of the same evidence we have tried to make this clear.

Sometimes the fragmentary nature of our evidence means that questions have to be formulated in appropriate ways to fit the nature and the state of preservation of the primary evidence available. Inevitably there are questions which cannot be answered, and there are questions that cannot be appropriately asked of the available evidence. Hence, we have also tried to explain the processes of research to show how academic experts generate and assemble their primary data and how they form their interpretations. These are not simply rabbits pulled out of a hat by a magician. Rather results, conclusions and interpretations are formed on the basis of many hours of painstaking investigation and the application of carefully formulated and rigorous research methodologies. It is important to present these methodologies and research processes to explain how it is that we think we know something and why we have asked these particular questions in the specific ways that we have asked them.

Although this book is not cluttered with academic referencing, at the end of each chapter we have included a limited selection of items for further reading. Generally, we have kept to those most likely to be easily available.

Wherever possible, we have attempted to make clear the primary sources which have been used to tell this story. Many of the key historical sources are freely available online, and for those that are we have included website addresses. Where appropriate we have also listed useful works of secondary scholarship, some of which are also freely available online. One major source that we have not cited in the further reading items but that many readers of this book will find useful to follow up the lives of several of the historic individuals mentioned in this book is the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, available online through many libraries. The University of Leicester website also has a large amount of information that is regularly updated along with links to academic publications of the project.

We have tried to tell the story of the discovery as it happened, painting in the background as we go along. Chapter 2 covers the Greyfriars excavation and the research that led up to it. Chapter 3 sets the excavation in the wider contexts of the roles of medieval friaries and the medieval town of Leicester. Chapter 4 explains the complex multidisciplinary research on the skeleton. Chapter 5 sets Richard and his life in the context of the Wars of the Roses. Chapter 6 explains the genealogical and genetic research. Chapter 7 explores what Richard might have looked like working from the surviving portraits. Chapter 8 recounts the announcement of the discovery and the world's reaction to it. Chapter 9 considers the implications of the discovery for broader cultural understandings of Richard III from Tudor times until today. Chapter 10 presents the background to the reinterment of Richard III's remains. Alongside what we do and can know – the facts that the archaeological and historical processes uncover – runs so much that we can never know of the small, personal details of lives lived in the past. We have tried to capture something of the inevitable intertwining of these evanescent events with historical record in the short introductory paragraphs at the beginning of chapters that we have headed 'Imagine ...'; they are purely speculative. Interspersed with them, at the head of other chapters, are factual paragraphs in which we have hoped to show something of the tension for the Greyfriars team as Richard's history became part of their own, these are headed 'The Slow Reveal ...'.

Undoubtedly the controversies surrounding Richard III will continue, and it will take many years for the full impact of this momentous discovery to sink in. But, the repercussions are still reverberating, and we await with eagerness the new results and insights still to come. Now, as we write this, we are only beginning the journey of re-evaluating what this discovery means for interpreting the life and death of Richard III.