

The Richard III Society

Promoting research into the life and times of Richard III since 1924

Patron: HRH The Duke of Gloucester KG GCVO, Founder S Saxon Barton



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RICHARD'S PROGRESSIVE PARLIAMENT

- **Sir Francis Bacon acknowledges Richard III as 'a good lawmaker'**
- **Reforms to land conveyancing, the bail system and the administration of justice**
- **Introduction of an early form of Legal Aid**
- **Strong support for the new book printing trade**

'A good lawmaker for the ease and solace of the common people'. This was the assessment of the 17th century statesman and Lord Chancellor of England Sir Francis Bacon on Richard III and Bacon was a man who knew his Acts of Parliament. The high percentage of acts passed by Richard III's Parliament focussing on improving conditions for ordinary people reveals the reason for Bacon's good opinion.

Richard III's only Parliament first met on the 23rd January 1484, having been postponed from 6th November 1483 as a result of the Duke of Buckingham's rebellion. It was opened by a speech from the Lord Chancellor, Bishop John Russell, and the theme was peace. The fundamental matters before the assembly in 1484 were the ratification of the new King's title, which was accomplished by the Act which is known as the 'Titulus Regis', and also included legislation for the attainder of the recent rebels with the formal forfeiture and seizure of their lands into the King's hands.

This delay before Richard III could hold his first Parliament may have given both him and his council time to formulate several Acts which would benefit the country. Probably the most important were those concerned with legal reforms.

By the 1480s the common law had become complicated and open to fraud particularly with land disputes; Richard's Parliament simplified conveyancing and made it more transparent. There were also initiatives to help protect the lower orders from corrupt officials and this was the subject of three Acts directed at the activities of Justices of the Peace (JPs), the courts of sheriffs and piepowder courts. Bail was to be allowed for persons imprisoned on suspicion of felony and their possessions were to be protected until they had been formally tried and found guilty. This act generally encouraged JPs to inquire more carefully into all persons arrested on just mere suspicion. The standard of juries chosen for sheriffs' tourns (or circuits) was raised by ensuring that jurymen should be worth 20 shillings or more a year - it was generally believed that wealthier jurors were less open to bribery. New penalties were introduced, and an earlier Act reinforced, to correct dishonest officials at piepowder courts, which had jurisdiction over cases that arose during markets and fairs and required swift and reliable justice for the traders.

King Richard III also developed an early form of Legal Aid, asking the clerk of his council to favour petitions from the poor, thus allowing those unable to afford lawyers to make direct petitions to the Royal Council. Under Henry VII this became the Court of Requests. Richard's own experience of cases brought before him as Duke of Gloucester made him well aware of the damage that corrupt officials could inflict

on the poorest of his subjects; it was also to be a constant theme of his pronouncements as King throughout his reign.

The fledging book printing industry was encouraged by the removal of trade restrictions, a policy reflecting the King's own personal interest in books. In fact the King's policy went much further it actively encouraged the expansion of the book trade market and the skills-base needed to produce them, an enlightened attitude that contrasts so favourably with that of his successors.

Although some of the acts and policies of the 1484 Parliament may have been promoted by members of Richard's council, there is little doubt they also reflected the King's own priorities. His record both as King and Duke of Gloucester provides evidence of a genuine interest in the law and a commitment to the fair administration of justice for all.

About the Richard III Society

With a worldwide membership and local branches the Society is actively engaged in original research through its own initiatives and through collaboration with other institutions bodies and scholars. Through the Richard III and Yorkist History Trust, a charitable body established by the Society, we publish important academic works and make research grants

The Society publishes an annual journal, *The Ricardian*, with original articles on fifteenth century history and a quarterly members' magazine the *Ricardian Bulletin*.

Visit: www.richardiii.net

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The reinterment of King Richard III - with dignity, honour and solemnity