

Richard III and ‘our poor subject Katherine Bassingbourne’

David Johnson

In September 1484 Richard III laid before the mayor and aldermen of York a ‘grievous complaint’ on behalf of ‘our poor subject Katherine Bassingbourne’. The king directed the city corporation to consider Katherine’s grievance in ‘due and mature examination’, and to ensure the ‘administration of justice whereunto we be professed’.

Richard’s concern for the law will, of course, come as little surprise to Ricardians. Importantly, however, the relative obscurity of the Katherine Bassingbourne case provides additional significant evidence of the king’s determination to secure justice for all – regardless of wealth, rank, or social condition. The surviving details of Katherine’s suit show how ordinary people, when legal remedies were seemingly beyond them, enjoyed free recourse to their king. And, just as important, how Richard himself supported their supplications, going to considerable lengths to procure justice without favour or undue delay. Here, in the joint action of king and commoner, the documentary evidence speaks very clearly indeed; revealing, on the one hand, Katherine’s desperate struggle for justice, and, on the other, Richard’s good character and honourable intentions.

To date it would appear that only Paul Murray Kendall in 1955 and Anne Sutton in 1976 have drawn attention to Katherine Bassingbourne¹. Kendall cited the case in order to illuminate Richard’s larger policy of redress for the poor:

To the lower classes – peasants, yeomen, urban artisans – Richard sought to give the protection of justice, not only under his law and through his officers, but by making himself accessible to appeal, particularly through the medium of his council. Sometimes the council took action; sometimes it referred the case to an appropriate court; sometimes it requested local authorities to investigate. This latter course it took, for example, in the case of a woman of York, about whom the king despatched a communication to the Mayor in September 1484².

Kendall’s ‘woman of York’ is, of course, Katherine Bassingbourne, and, although her first appeal to King Richard was made in September 1484, records show that Richard was still actively involved in the dispute as late as 12 March 1485. While his wife, Queen Anne Neville, lay on her deathbed, Richard still found the will to intercede for a second time. The only benefit Richard could possibly derive from his support of Katherine Bassingbourne was the personal satisfaction of playing a not-inconsiderable part in the pursuit of justice. The documentary evidence for Richard’s interventions in the Bassingbourne case appear in four separate entries in the municipal records of the city of York³. Because the precise details (but not the overall terms) of the dispute are incomplete, it is proposed to discuss each entry chronologically, thereby establishing the origin and subsequent development of proceedings.

¹ P. M. Kendall, *Richard III*, London, 1973 edn, p. 310; A. Sutton, ‘The Administration of Justice Whereunto We Be Professed’, *The Ricardian*, iv (1976), p. 4. Later amended and reprinted in *Richard III: crown and people*, ed. J. Petre, Richard III Society, 1985, pp. 359–70.)

² Kendall, p. 310.

³ L. C. Attreed (ed.), *The York House Books 1461–1490*, Stroud, 1991, vol. i, pp. 336, 338, 356–7.



All Saints Chantry House. This fifteenth century house in North Street, York, may be similar to the disputed property at the centre of Katherine Bassingbourne's legal struggle.

Image courtesy of David Johnson.

First, we have a letter written by Richard III on 18 September 1484 to Thomas Wrangwish, mayor of the city of York, ordering impartial adjudication in a dispute involving two citizens. Richard enclosed a petition from 'our poor subject' Katherine Bassingbourne, setting out a 'grievous complaint' against a certain Henry Faucet. It is immediately apparent that Katherine had appealed directly to the king and that Richard had responded accordingly, handing down a firm directive to mayor Wrangwish to dispense justice in accordance with 'our laws and good conscience'. Richard commanded the relevant parties to be brought before the mayor,

aldermen, and common council, which, we are promptly informed, duly took place. We do not know whether Katherine's ill-treatment had been raised previously, nor are we given precise details of her supplication or any indication of the verdict. However, the second and third entries in the municipal records reveal that the September hearing was adjourned and subsequently reconvened on 11 October 1484, when additional evidence was presented to the mayor.

This new information consisted of two witness statements confirming the nuncupative will of Katherine's father, Thomas Worcester, a dyer of York. A nuncupative will is a verbal deathbed will requiring two witnesses, primarily intended for the terminally ill who are unable to draft a conventional written will. These witness statements provide a clue to the 'injury to be done unto her by one Henry Faucet', and the reason for Katherine's 'bill of supplication' to Richard III. On his deathbed in 1452 Thomas Worcester bequeathed:

my said house [in North Street] unto Ellyn my wife to hold to her after my decease during the term of her natural life, and after her decease I will and bequeath my said house unto my daughter Katherine and unto the heirs of her body lawfully begotten, and if she decease without heir of her body lawfully begotten then I will and bequeath the same house unto the said church of St. John for evermore, to pray for my soul and the souls of all Christians⁴.

It is at once striking that more than 30 years after Thomas Worcester's death the mayor and council appear to have summoned witnesses to confirm the details of his will. An attempt to either contest or set aside its terms is therefore strongly implied as the cause of Katherine's action against Henry Faucet. From the wording of these statements it seems possible that Ellyn might have been

⁴ Attreed (ed.), York House Books, p. 338.

Katherine's stepmother, and that Thomas Worcester's first wife, Katherine's natural mother, died while Katherine was young. It is also apparent that Katherine herself had married, as Worcester was clearly her maiden name and Bassingbourne that of her husband. If, as therefore seems likely, Katherine had children of her own by 1484, the clause that the property in North Street would descend to 'my daughter Katherine and unto the heirs of her body lawfully begotten' would have provided an additional impetus to uphold her late father's wishes. Unfortunately, we are provided with no further information other than the impression that Katherine may have been a widow and that she attempted to resolve the dispute before seeking redress from King Richard. However, the fourth and final entry provides further significant evidence, shedding fresh light on the case, and emphasising the importance Richard attached to Katherine's fight for justice.

On 12 March 1485, following a dramatic second intervention by King Richard, the respective parties once more assembled before the mayor. Katherine, it seems, had yet to receive satisfaction, despite the witness statements of 11 October 1484 certifying her entitlement to the property in North Street. Katherine, in her dire need, felt no compunction in approaching Richard once again, proving, if proof were necessary, Richard's well attested reputation for justice. And, such was Richard's determination to assist Katherine, that he appointed a royal official, 'John Lewes, sergeant at arms unto the king's highness', to represent



St John's Ouse Bridge End, situated at the junction of Micklegate and North Street, was the parish church of Katherine's father, Thomas Worcester.

Image courtesy of David Johnson

Katherine at this second hearing. We then learn that, following Thomas Worcester's death, his wife, Ellyn (possibly Katherine's stepmother), had married Henry Faucet. Henry had now died, and his executrix, Ellyn (his widow), was attempting, through the terms of Henry's will, to dispossess Katherine of the disputed property in North Street. Ellyn, it appears, was determined to settle the house not upon Katherine, but, following 'the term of her natural life', upon the surviving members of the Faucet family. This, therefore, was Katherine's 'grievous complaint'; a clear breach of the terms of her father's deathbed will, and the true nature of the 'injury to be done unto her by one Henry Faucet'. It seems certain there was considerable ill-feeling between Katherine and Ellyn, and that by 1484 Katherine herself may have been a widow with children to provide for. If her livelihood had been taken from her by the death of her husband (Master Bassingbourne) then, as previously suggested, she would have been even more desperate to secure the house in North Street – both for her old age and 'the heirs of her body lawfully begotten'. No further information is provided and the entry concludes by setting a future date on which it would appear a final judgement was anticipated.

Although, frustratingly, the mayor's verdict is not recorded in these municipal records, it is nevertheless difficult to imagine that Katherine would not have succeeded in her litigation. With the indefatigable support of her influential royal advocate, she would surely have proved the legitimacy of her father's will and her lawful entitlement to the property in North Street. It is worth considering that, in the absence of such an outcome, Katherine and her children may have been rendered destitute. More generally, Katherine Bassingbourne's struggle provides irrefutable evidence of Richard's genuine and energetic concern for the 'administration of justice whereunto we be

professed'. As far as Richard was concerned, the law was the law, and justice would be made available to the highest and the lowest in the land. Katherine's lengthy legal travail adds considerable weight to the testimony of Dr Thomas Langton, Bishop of St. David's and later of Salisbury, who accompanied Richard III on his royal progress in the late summer of 1483 (English modernised):

[King Richard] contents the people wherever he goes better than any other prince; for many a poor man that has suffered wrong many days has been relieved and helped by him . . . God has sent him to us for the benefit of us all⁵.

⁵ A. Hanham, *Richard III and his Early Historians*, Oxford, 1975, p. 50.