

THE ARREST OF HASTINGS

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The detail of the famous 'strawberries' episode is taken from More and Shakespeare, wherein Richard entered the Tower meeting in cheerful mood at 9 a.m.; talked with the assembled dignitaries for an unstated time, then asked Morton to send for some strawberries from his garden, after which he '*set the lords fast in communing*'; left the room at about 10 a.m.; returning after about an hour he asked Hastings what punishment should be accorded to treason, then bared his arm, accused Hastings of collusion in witchcraft, had him summarily executed '*sone apone noon*' and his fellow conspirators arrested. One is usually led to assume that the events were planned by Richard to lead up to the witchcraft accusation and Hastings' death; that the sole reason for each detail is to reach this conclusion.

On the basis that it is too odd a detail for anyone to make up most commentators accept the reference to strawberries as factual, although it has been also characterised as probable "artistic licence".¹ Two persons at least² have suggested that Richard knew himself to be allergic to the fruit, and therefore ate it, absented himself for sufficient time to allow allergy symptoms to develop, then used these symptoms to support an accusation of witchcraft.³ In the context of the Tudor view of the '*usurpation*' this sounds possible, and is a stumbling-block in the path of those seeking to clarify Richard's position in the events prior to his acceptance of the Crown.

However, the actual request for the strawberries should be considered more closely, for there is a significant point which I have not seen remarked upon—that the immediate effect of the request was that Morton (Shakespeare) or his servant (More) left the room where the meeting was being held.

Most commentators accept that a conspiracy was afoot against Richard and that Hastings was implicated; Hastings would have had at his disposal the manpower necessary for such a purpose—he had held London for Edward V and Richard after Edward IV's death, and there is no reason to doubt that his followers stayed with him afterwards. It would therefore be the most likely intention to seize Richard while he was at the Tower, separated from his supporters; Edward V, lodged in the Tower, could be taken under Hastings' '*protection*' at the same time. However, the plotters could not act until Richard was in the Tower meeting, and a signal must then be given to the conspirators' helpers outside; they could not enter the Tower grounds beforehand without arousing suspicion.

I suggest that it is therefore possible that Morton *offered* to send for the strawberries, and then either he or his servant left the room intending to give the signal for the revolt to start. However, something went wrong. Perhaps one of Richard's men overheard some careless talk, or was alarmed at an attempted influx of men into the Tower grounds, or perhaps Richard himself became suspicious and left the meeting with Buckingham to investigate.⁴ Thus they returned only after the Tower had been secured for the Protector, and (perhaps) allowing time for information to be wrung from captured underlings.

Richard knew that Hastings was one of the richest and most powerful men in the country, and that probably large numbers of his men were in or near London.⁵ If Hastings was allowed to live, even for the minimum period required for a trial, his fellow conspirators could probably whip up an armed revolt which Richard would be powerless to quell. Richard was therefore left no alternative but to order his immediate execution.⁶ To execute Morton only on suspicion of conspiracy would bring upon Richard the anger of the Church; Morton and the other suspects were therefore only arrested.

This reconstruction takes the main events of the Tower episode in the same sequence as traditionally accepted, but by placing them in a different yet logical context releases Richard from the odium of events whose misinterpretation has shadowed him second only to the 'murder' of the Princes.

1. Alison Hanham ('Richard III, Lord Hastings and the historians' (English Historical Review, April, 1972)).
2. J. Dover Wilson in 'A note on Richard III' (included in 'To prove a villain', Macmillan (NY) 1964), and David Unwin in 'A withered arm' (Diagnostica, May-June, 1968).

3. V. B. Lamb, however ('The betrayal of Richard III'), considers that the reference to the withered arm must be "an invention which probably had its origin in some words of Richard's to the effect that the Woodville plots had paralysed his arm—quite a likely metaphor".

4. William Duse Dunham ('Lord Hastings' indentured retainers 1461-1483' (Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, Vol. 39, September, 1955)) notes Simon Stallworth's statement that after Hastings' execution "all the lord chamberlain's men became my lord's of Buckingham men", and points out that Henry VII knighted two of Hastings' ex-retainers for fighting against Richard III at Bosworth. Did Buckingham know of the Tower plot, but decide to betray Hastings and delay the planned overthrow of Richard until the Princes were definitely barred from the succession? This would certainly throw some light on his subsequent actions and particularly on his puzzling request to be granted custody of Morton.

5. Dunham ('Lord Hastings' indentured retainers') records that during Lord Hastings' career "at least 88 knights, esquires and gentlemen, and 2 peers signed and sealed indentures to serve him for life in both peace and war", provides an illustration (relative to Edward IV's 1475 French expedition) of what this meant in actual manpower—"Sir Nicholas Longford and Sir William Trussell each brought 6 spears and 60 archers, while James Blount took with him 3 men-at-arms and 20 archers".

6. The execution of Hastings apparently within one hour of his arrest and presumably without formal trial, has been quoted as positive proof of Richard's ruthless plan to dispose of all who might dispute his claim to the throne. However, if one accepts the definition of 'Protector' given by Parliament to Humphrey, duke of Gloucester, following the death of Henry V ("a personell duetee of entendance to the actuall defence of the land, as well against themys outward, yf cas required, as ayenst Rebelles inward"), and the reference to Richard (in the sermon which was to have been preached by the Chancellor in Edward V's first parliament) as possessing "the tutelle and ouersyghte of the kynges most roialle persone duryng hys yerres of tendrinesse", then might it not be argued that an armed attack upon the Protector constituted an attack upon the King and as such punishable by instant death? (The above quotations are from J. S. Roskell's article 'The office and dignity of Protector of England' (English Historical Review, Vol. LXVIII, April, 1953)).

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