

British Library Harleian Manuscript 433

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THE MANUSCRIPT consists of copies of documents which passed the signet in the reigns of Edward V and Richard III. The signet was the king's own seal, kept by his secretary, and was used to authenticate documents originating with the king himself. Signet material, in other words, represents the king's personal activity. Many of the documents which passed the signet served simply to authorise activity by other agencies. The normal procedure in making a royal grant, for instance, involved at least four stages. The intending recipient petitioned the king for a grant. If the king agreed he sent a signet warrant to the keeper of the privy seal ordering him to send a warrant under the privy seal to the Chancellor. This authorised the Chancellor to issue letters patent embodying the grant under the great seal. Thus many of the grants listed in Harleian 433 can also be traced among the Chancery records.¹ Other documents, however, including many royal letters, went out directly under the signet and for these Harleian 433 often provides the only surviving record.

The manuscript itself is a unique survival. In 1619 the signet and privy seal archives were destroyed by the fire in the Banqueting House at Whitehall.² By this date, however, Harleian 433 had been removed from the archive, probably by Lord Burghley, an avid collector of historical material.³ It is thus the only major body of signet material to survive from this period, and the only collection to represent the day-to-day activity of the signet office. For most other reigns signet activity has to be reconstructed from references to signet material in the records of other bodies. Such references are at best patchy, particularly since the archive of the main recipient of signet warrants, the privy seal office, was destroyed in the same fire. This has naturally tended to obscure the significance of the signet in late fifteenth century government and part of the importance of Harleian 433 lies in the light it sheds on the use and importance of the signet.⁴

Harleian 433 does not represent the complete signet archive for the two reigns. It is a subsidiary collection, abstracted by the signet clerks themselves from the main signet archive. This was lost in the fire of 1619 and can now only be reconstructed from references in Harleian 433 itself. The main archive would seem, however, to have consisted of two categories of document. It preserved all the department's signed bills. Much royal activity was initiated not by the king himself but by a petition from an interested party. This would be countersigned by the king to express his approval and then passed to the secretary, who would issue the appropriate warrant under the signet, retaining the signed bill in his records as his authority for his action. The signet office archive also almost certainly included copies of any letters which originated with the king himself. The two categories of material thus provided a complete record of signet activity.

The bulk of Harley 433 is made up of four registers drawn from the complete archive outlined above. For each of the two reigns covered by the volume there is a register of royal grants made under the signet and a register of matters relating to the royal revenues. These were intended as a means of easy reference for the clerks and in most cases the entries are in the form of brief summaries. The contents of the registers of grants are self explanatory. The other registers, however, include a very wide range of material. Many of the entries are in the form of warrants to royal receivers ordering them to make payments of various kinds. In February 1485, for example, John Hayes, the king's receiver in the south west, was ordered to pay Elis Mowbray £17 2s 8d for making a barge which the king gave to the Earl of Northumberland.⁵ Since the main source of the king's income was the royal land, the registers also include material relating to the administration of the crown estates, not always of a strictly financial nature. The bailiff of Ware, one of the manors which Richard held in his wife's right, was ordered to ensure that the inhabitants practised their archery instead of playing unlawful games such as tennis and bowls. The king's main grievance here, however, was that the inhabitants had also taken to poaching the royal game, using 'engines contrary to the law', presumably some form of trap.⁶

Alongside these four registers the volume includes a variety of miscellaneous material. Much of this was reference material for the clerks of the signet or for the king himself. There are, for instance, lists of the offices granted by Edward IV and still in force at his death, which were evidently drawn up to show the new king what patronage was at his disposal. A contemporary hand has marked the offices which fell vacant early in the reign of Richard III.⁷ Another list, drawn up originally under Henry VI, sets out the fees due for various offices in the king's gift.⁸ The volume also includes various financial memoranda, notably lists of those approached to lend money to the king in February 1485.⁹ Broadly speaking, therefore, all the main documents in the volume may be described as reference material in use in the signet office during the reigns of Edward V and Richard III, which were probably collected and bound up together shortly after the end of the reign. They supplemented, and to some extent summarised, the main signet archive, of which they are now the only survivors.

The material preserved in Harley 433 is thus an important cross section of material, but it is not complete. There is, for example, virtually no great wardrobe material in the volume, although the surviving wardrobe accounts of Edward IV show that great wardrobe expenditure was usually authorised by the signet.¹⁰ More important, the volume theoretically excludes any royal letters not covered by the registers, which means most of the diplomatic, personal, and what would now be regarded as the 'political' letters of the king. In fact, however, a number of royal letters are contained in the volume, including an important group of diplomatic letters. These represent only a small proportion of the total output of signet letters and seem to have strayed into the volume from the main signet archive more or less by accident. A letter from the king to the Chancellor concerning the amendment of morality in England, for example, is noted on the back of a settlement of a land dispute referred to the king for arbitration.¹¹ This accident of binding has fortunately preserved a number of otherwise unknown letters. Of these perhaps the most famous are Richard's letter to his mother and his letter to the Chancellor concerning Thomas Lynom's infatuation with Mistress

Shore. The latter prompted an early user of the manuscript to add a terse Latin rhyme on women's inability to be content with one man; an unflattering verdict on 'Jane' Shore somewhat at variance with More's eulogy.¹²

The selection of documents in Harley 433 means that the personality of the king is rarely at the forefront. The volume is not a substitute for the almost complete lack of wardrobe or household accounts for the two reigns.¹³ Reading Harley 433 cannot provide such a vivid sense of the minutiae of the king's daily life as do, for instance, the accounts of Henry VII and his wife with their payments for puddings and rose water.¹⁴ Nevertheless the volume does provide glimpses of Richard III and his family. The most revealing is the brief account of the expenses of the Prince of Wales in the summer of 1483, including 13s 4d spent on a primer for the prince. Shortly before this in the manuscript is a warrant for the payment of a York draper for black cloth bought for Richard's use, almost certainly for mourning for Edward IV.¹⁵

If Richard III himself remains a rather shadowy figure, Harley 433 is still arguably the single most important source for his reign as a whole. It amplifies the chronicle evidence on a number of issues. It supports, for instance, the chroniclers' insistence that the Archbishop of York began the reign in disgrace. Mancini merely notes that Rotherham was arrested at the time of Hastings' execution because Richard thought that he would support Edward V. It is left to the Tudor chroniclers to provide fuller details of his arrest and, in the case of More, a tangible reason for his disgrace.¹⁶ Harley 433 adds some indication of the consequences of the archbishop's fall from favour. After his accession Richard III found it necessary to write to the archbishop's tenants ordering them to resume the payment of their dues to the archbishop, the clear implication being that they had stopped during his imprisonment.¹⁷ The inclusion among the signet memoranda of a valuation of the temporalities of the archbishop suggests moreover that the crown had considered seizing the archiepiscopal estates, even if it had not actually done so.¹⁸

Elsewhere, Harley 433 modifies rather than supports the chroniclers' version of events. Take, for instance, the Croyland Chronicler's fulminations against Richard's financial expedients:

He had recourse to the exactions of King Edward, which he had openly condemned in parliament, although he was careful to avoid any use of the word 'benevolences'.¹⁹

Harley 433 preserves the letter which the king sent out to ask for loans, together with a speech which the commissioners were to use to encourage potential lenders. The letter makes it clear that the loans were just that: repayment was promised after eighteen months. The chronicler is wrong in his insistence that they were really benevolences, in other words outright gifts. However his rhetoric captures the ill feeling that the loans undoubtedly aroused. Legally the king was entirely within his rights; politically it was a serious miscalculation to outlaw benevolences and then ask for money, in whatever form, just a year later.²⁰

In other cases Harley 433 provides us with new information. It shows that the temporalities of Salisbury, the see of Lionel Woodville, the brother of Edward IV's queen, were not seized in the aftermath of Buckingham's rebellion but before

the rebellion broke, on 23 September 1483.²¹ Remaining on the subject of rebellions, the manuscript provides the names of many of the rebels not listed in the act of attainder itself, including a blanket condemnation of all the household men in Wiltshire and Hampshire.²² The volume is also the main source for our knowledge of the rebellion in Essex and Hertfordshire in the winter of 1484/5. This involved two of the household men whom Richard III had inherited from his brother, John Fortesque and John Risley, and it undoubtedly did much to drive Richard into a closer dependence on his own northern supporters in the last months of his reign.²³ Another household man whose fall from grace is noted in Harley 433 is Piers Curteis, Richard's keeper of the wardrobe, who was in disgrace and his land forfeit by June 1484.²⁴

Mention of these three household men introduces the other great strength of Harley 433: the picture it gives of the men with whom the king surrounded himself. The chroniclers, even the Croyland Chronicler who must have known Richard's household well, produced only a handful of names of Richard's supporters. The number can be increased by reference to government records, particularly the patent rolls and duchy of Lancaster records which list the grants made by the king and usually give some indication of the recipients' status. None of these sources, however, gives such a clear impression of what royal service entailed.

Thomas Fowler is a typical example. He is described both as gentleman usher and esquire of the body under Richard III but was never one of the inner circle around the king. He was a Buckinghamshire man who had been an usher of the chamber of Edward IV. His wife, whom he married in the summer of 1483, was a sister of Lord Dynham and had been a lady in waiting of Elizabeth Woodville.²⁵ His commitments under Richard III were considerable. He served on royal commissions for five counties: Bedford, Berkshire, Buckingham, Northampton and Oxford. Richard also made him receiver of Busshy; steward of Buckingham, Amersham, Brickhill, Calverton, Whitchurch and Stony Stratford; and parker of Beckley. Alongside all this, he appears in Harley 433 carrying out various specific jobs for the king. In August 1483 he was selling wood from Bernwood to pay for a new stable and other buildings at one of the king's manors. In November he was commissioned to seize the lands and goods of the rebels in Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire. The following August he was searching for buried treasure in Bedfordshire on the king's behalf. In December he was again selling wood, this time throughout Oxfordshire. In February 1485 he was one of the commissioners for loans in Buckinghamshire, Berkshire and Oxfordshire.²⁶

All these activities were directly authorised by the king. Harley 433 bears witness to the wide range of business with which the king was personally concerned. Alongside major issues, such as the preparations to resist Tudor's invasion or the negotiations with Scotland, the volume shows Richard III ordering the mowing of hay at Warwick or authorising Catesby to fell timber to fence the park at More End. Harley 433, moreover, embodies only part of the king's activity. It is a valuable reminder of the immediacy of the king's personal control over late medieval government and of its corollary, the enormous burden of administration borne by the king and his servants. The entries in Harley 433 present the other side of medieval kingship from the rose water and puddings of the household accounts.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- Public Record Office, *Privy seal writs temp. Richard III*, C81/886-907; Signet warrants, *ibid*/1392 which are being edited by R. C. and P. B. Hairsine, *Ricardian March and September*, 1979, and following issues; Signed bills, *ibid*/1530-1; Patent rolls C66/552-60, printed in *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1476-85*.
- J. Otway-Ruthven, *The King's Secretary and the Signet Office in the XV Century*, Cambridge (1939) p.115.
- B. W. Beckingsale, *Burghley, Tudor Statesman 1520-1598* (1967), pp. 250-2; C. E. Wright, *Fontes Harleiani* (1972) p.321; a catalogue of the Harleian Manuscripts in the British Museum, Volume I (1808), p.256.
- This point is treated at greater length in my introduction to Volume I of the Society's edition of Harley 433.
- B. L. Harleian MS 433*, f.205. References are henceforward by folio number only. Folios 1-105 will be printed in Volume I of the Society's edition, ff.106-220 and ff.221-340 in the two subsequent volumes.
- f.215.
- ff.310-322b.
- ff.336-339b.
- ff.275b-277b.
- Edward IV's great wardrobe accounts from April to Michaelmas 1480 were printed by N. H. Nicolas, *Privy Purse Expenses of Elizabeth of York: Wardrobe Accounts of Edward the Fourth* (1830). The main wardrobe entry in Harley 433 is a warrant to Piers Curteis to send specified clothes to Richard III at York, perhaps for the investiture of the prince of Wales there in September 1483: f.126.
- f.281b.
- ff.2b, 340b; Thomas More, *The History of King Richard III*, Ed. R. S. Sylvester, Volume II of *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, New Haven (1963) pp.55-7.
- Great Wardrobe accounts are extant for the early months of Richard III's reign, covering his coronation: P.R.O. Lord Chamberlain's Department, LC9/50, partially printed by F. Grose and T. Astle in *The Antiquarian Repertory Volume I* (new edition, 1807) and which will be edited in its entirety by P. W. Hammond and Anne F. Sutton in *The Coronation Records of Richard III*. Harley 433 itself includes some household assignments, but for general expenditure on supplies, not the king's private expenses: ff.290-292b.
- S. B. Chrimes, *Henry VII* (1977) pp.305-7 and Appendix E. The privy purse expenses of Elizabeth of York are printed by Nicholas *op. cit.*; for the rose water and pudding see pp.8, 10.
- ff.117, 118-118b.
- Dominic Mancini, *The Usurpation of Richard III*, Ed. C. A. J. Armstrong, Oxford (2nd ed., 1969) pp.84-5, 88-91 and notes.
- f.115. After Buckingham's rebellion, and the implication of the Bourchiers, Richard III provided a similar, but slightly more explicit letter, for the archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Bourchier: f.128.
- ff.324-327b.
- Historia Croylandensis Continuatio*, in *Rerum Anglicarum Scriptorum Veterum*, Ed. W. Fulman, Oxford (1684) pp.571-2. The translation is that of Mrs. Hanham, *Richard III and his early historians 1483-1535*, Oxford (1975) p.18.
- ff.275b-276. For the legal distinction between loans and benevolences see G. L. Harriss, 'Aids, Loans and Benevolences', *Historical Journal*, 6 (1963).
- f.117b. This earlier date for the forfeiture does much to explain bishop Langton's jubilant letter from York in which he hints that he has been promised the next English bishopric to fall vacant and speaks of 'tidings in haste' to that effect. Far from having to wait for the death of a bishop he probably already had his eye on the temporalities of Salisbury, although in the event he was not formally granted them until the following March: *Christ Church Letters*, Ed. J. B. Sheppard, Camden Society new series 19 (1877) p.46; PRO C81/1531/31.
- f.121b.
- ff.198b-199. Fortescue linked the trouble in England with the disaffection in Calais, where he was porter. He defected to Tudor with James Blount in October 1484: C81/1392/19, which dates Richard's first awareness of trouble at Calais to October. Fortescue, Blount and Risley were all esquires of the body to Richard III: f.125; C.P.R. 1476-85 p.379; P.R.O. *Pardon Rolls*, C81/51/m.13.
- f.105; and compare P.R.O. *Duchy of Lancaster*, DL 42/20 ff.50-51, 54b, which shows that he fell from favour between February and May 1485.
- Victoria County History of Buckinghamshire*, Volume III pp.484-5; *Registrum Thome Bourchier, Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi 1454-86*, Ed. F. R. H. du Boulay, Canterbury and York Society 54, Oxford (1957), p.55; R. P. Chope, 'The Last of the Dynhams', *Report and Transactions of the Devonshire Association*, 50 (1918), p.475.
- ff.53, 53b, 61b, 62, 111, 121b, 139, 186, 199, 275b, 277b.