

Richard III and the House of Dudley

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AT HIS CORONATION on 6 July 1483, Richard III was escorted on his right hand by William Dudley, Bishop of Durham. The role is one which traditionally belongs to the palatine bishop, but in this instance it was more than symbolic: the Bishop and his family had earned it by their services to the House of York.

The Dudleys rose to power over two centuries in the late middle ages. There is uncertainty about their origins. The family originally bore the surname Sutton, and they probably came from Sutton-upon-Trent, Nottinghamshire. The first member of the family on whom the sources seem to agree was Richard de Sutton, who married Elizabeth, daughter and heir of William Patric, Lord of Malpas, though his dates are uncertain. The family acquired claim to the surname and lordship of Dudley through the marriage of John de Sutton with Margaret de Somery, eldest daughter of the previous Baron Dudley. Chronology only becomes certain with Sir Richard Sutton, lord of the manor of Worksop in 1307, who is recorded as being in the retinue of John de Somery, father of Margaret, in 1319. The family lost the Dudley estates for alleged complicity in Thomas of Lancaster's rebellion in 1321. They recovered them under Edward III, under whom the head of the family was summoned to parliament as Baron Dudley — an honour not repeated until 1440.¹

Six successive heads of the family in the fourteenth century were known as John de Sutton alias Dudley. The sixth of that name, who really established the family fortunes, was born on Christmas day 1400 and was baptised at Barton-under-Needwood, Derbyshire. He served in France under Henry V and bore the standard at his funeral in 1422 — no small honour for a man who had only just attained his majority. He went on to be lord lieutenant of Ireland 1428-30 and constable of Clun Castle in 1435. He fought again in France in the last stages of the Hundred Years War and was summoned to parliament on 15 February 1440 as 'Johannes de Sutton de Duddeley', being known thereafter as Lord Dudley. In 1451, the House of Commons petitioned for his removal from the king's council, but he remained close to Henry VI — he was taken prisoner with him at the first battle of St. Albans (23 May 1455) and was wounded on the Lancastrian side at

Blore Heath (23 September 1459). He was nominated a knight of the garter for the installation ceremony on St. George's day 1459. In February 1460, he became steward of the lordship of Montgomery and in May constable of Wigmores Castle. He served Henry VI in diplomacy as well as warfare, going as ambassador to Brittany in 1447 and Burgundy in 1449.²

Despite these services to the House of Lancaster, Dudley seems to have made his peace without difficulty with Edward IV — who perhaps valued his record of loyalty. He was granted 100 marks from the revenues of the duchy of Cornwall and £100 from the port of Southampton. He served again as a diplomat as ambassador to France, and jointly with Lord Dacre, was chamberlain to Edward IV's Queen. But perhaps his greatest position of trust was as constable of the Tower of London from 1470 until his replacement by Sir Robert Brackenbury on 17 July 1483, early in Richard III's reign.

John Lord Dudley married Elizabeth, daughter of Sir John Berkeley of Beverstone, Gloucestershire, and widow of Edward, Lord Cherleton. Their eldest son, Sir Edmund Dudley, died on the eve of King Richard's coronation (6 July 1483) and the title passed to the latter's son Edward (c. 1459-1532). Edmund's brother John became sheriff of Surrey and Sussex under Richard III 1484-5. There is little doubt that Henry VII's minister Edmund Dudley, John Duke of Northumberland (beheaded 1553) and Elizabeth I's favourite Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, were respectively his son, grandson and great-grandson.³

William Dudley, later Bishop of Durham, was the third (or possibly the fourth) son of the first Lord Dudley. The year of his birth is unknown. He studied at University College, Oxford, graduating as a bachelor of arts in 1454 and master of arts in 1457 — making it probable, from the age at which students usually began their studies, that he was born in the early 1430s. He received his first appointment in 1457 as rector of the wealthy parish of Malpas,⁴ where his family were lords of the manor. There followed a string of appointments not unusual for one of his education and connections: rector of Hendon, Middlesex (1466), chaplain to King Edward IV, prebendary of St. Paul's (1468-73), prebendary of York (1470), dean of the Chapel Royal and of the Collegiate Church of Bridgnorth (1471), prebendary of St. Mary's College, Leicester (1472), dean of Windsor (1473), archdeacon of Middlesex (1473) and prebendary of Wells (1475-6). It may be noted that apart for his original appointment to Malpas, his promotion came under Edward IV, so that he had more reason than his father to feel gratitude to the House of York. He had climbed his way steadily up the ecclesiastical ladder before his appointment to the senior bishopric of Durham in 1476. Apart from some ten years of service to Edward IV in the church, William Dudley had undoubtedly earned his gratitude when in 1471, as prebendary of Stillington in York Minster he had brought 160 men to Doncaster to support him on his march back to the throne. Like his father, William Dudley was a diplomat, helping to negotiate the Treaty of Pecquigny, the commercial treaty with France in 1477 and the exchanges with Bishop Charles de Martigny in 1479.⁵

William Dudley received papal provision to the bishopric of Durham on 31 July 1476; he was consecrated in September or early October, and received the temporalities of the see on 14 October 1476.⁶ It is not known whether Richard, Duke of Gloucester (as he then was) had any influence over his appointment,

but it is fair to assume that he had no objection. Richard had had an uneasy relationship with Dudley's predecessor, Lawrence Booth, bishop from 1457. They had been involved in a specific dispute over possession of Barnard Castle, but behind this lay a deeper rivalry for power between the traditional authority of the bishop as palatine and the new power of Duke Richard as the King's representative in the North, a situation not made easier by the arrival of Richard in 1471 as a new, young man in a situation where the Bishop had enjoyed his power before the accession of the House of York. Nevertheless, Richard had been able to establish a working relationship with Bishop Booth in his first five years of power.⁷ 'Dudley's arrival allowed [Richard] quickly to assume the leadership of local society.'⁸ Despite his aristocratic connections, Dudley was essentially a royal servant and willing to comply with the wishes of the King and the Duke in most things.⁹ Richard conceded the bishop's rights at Barnard Castle, at least in name, while Dudley granted Richard Stanhope Park and Weardale Forest for life. Richard was included in the commission of the peace for Durham (which he had not enjoyed under Bishop Booth) and given authority as lieutenant to call out the militia — an important function if Richard were to defend the North from the Scots. Richard strengthened his position by securing posts for his retainers in the administration of Durham and built up a party among the clergy, notably the Prior of Durham, though he overplayed his hand by trying to secure his right to hold the priory *in commendam* after his elevation to Carlisle, which pleased neither the monks nor Bishop Dudley. Richard went on pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Cuthbert in Durham in 1479, as he was to do again, as King, in May 1484. Richard's good working relationship with Bishop Dudley may be one reason why he did not follow Booth to York on the latter's death in 1480. This was to prove Dudley's only chance of further promotion, as none of the other senior bishoprics (Canterbury, London and Winchester) fell vacant in his time.

Dudley remained dean of Windsor after his elevation to Durham, and clearly spent at least part of his time there. The rebuilding of St. George's Chapel began when he was dean, and it can be regarded as being at least in part his monument. On 18 April 1483¹⁰ he said a mass of Our Lady as part of Edward IV's funeral ceremonies, as did John Russell, Bishop of Lincoln; Thomas Rotherham, Archbishop of York, sang the requiem. On 24 May, his father Lord Dudley gave a banquet at Windsor. The Dudleys, father and son, were therefore close to the dramatic events which brought Richard III to the throne without (apparently) being directly involved. On the day of the coronation, Bishop Dudley said the prayer at the beginning of the procession to Westminster Abbey. He on the right and Bishop Stillington of Bath and Wells on the left walked beside the King to the Abbey, led him to the altar for the coronation oath, and after the crowning supported the crown on the King's head. At four o'clock in the afternoon, Richard took his seat at the king's bench in Westminster Hall; the Queen sat at his left, Bishop Dudley, deputising for the Archbishop of Canterbury, sat at his right. At the coronation banquet in the evening, Bishop Dudley again sat at the King's right in place of the Archbishop. The absence of Archbishop Bouchier from the ceremony at the king's bench and the feast has inevitably aroused speculation from historians, and some have seen it as a gesture of disapproval of Richard's assumption of the throne — the furthest he dared go. A more likely explanation is that Bouchier, who was seventy-nine at the time, was exhausted with the day's

ceremonies in which he had played a leading role, though ironically he was to outlive both Bishop Dudley and King Richard and to crown his successor. Another absentee from the banquet was Lord Dudley — at least, his name is missing from the lists; at eighty-three he was even older than the Archbishop, but the death of his eldest son the day before seems the most likely explanation for his absence.

One more honour remained for Bishop Dudley — his election as chancellor of Oxford University in place of Lionel Woodville, Bishop of Salisbury. William Dudley did not have the reputation for scholarship enjoyed by his successor at Durham, John Shirwood. But he is unlikely to have received this honour if he had not commanded the respect of scholars. His predecessors as chancellor, Bishops Neville and Woodville, were like him, aristocrats, but also men of learning.

Bishop Dudley fell ill and died on 29 November 1483 — a sudden end to a distinguished career; the cause of death — disease, food poisoning or otherwise — is unknown. He was probably about fifty at the time of his death. He was buried in St. Nicholas' Chapel in Westminster Abbey, with a canopied tomb of Purbeck marble, which still remains.

Lord Dudley survived his son by nearly four years. The patent rolls contain a number of grants, including one in March 1484 'for his good services against the rebels.'¹¹ Even at eighty-three, it seems, he was able to assist King Richard against the Duke of Buckingham. In March 1484, Dudley was also appointed steward of the forest of Kynfare in Staffordshire. In December 1484 he was included in the commission of the peace for Staffordshire and in March 1485 that of oyer and terminer for Essex.¹²

Lord Dudley thus enjoyed favour under Richard III. Nevertheless, although he was a powerful magnate in the North West Midlands, he seems to have made no attempt to bar Henry Tudor's march from Milford Haven to Bosworth via Shrewsbury. In March 1486, he received two grants from Henry VII, one of 100 marks, the other of 1000, perhaps as a reward for his neutrality, perhaps as compensation for a promised payment out of the estates of Lady Margaret Beaufort, which he never received.¹³ Lord Dudley died on 30 September 1487, and was buried at St. James's Priory, Dudley, a foundation of which his family were traditionally benefactors. His ability to retain favour with successive kings in one of the most turbulent centuries of British history is a tribute to his discretion and his diplomacy. Perhaps Dr. Pollard's description of his son, quoted above, as 'essentially a royal servant' would apply to the father also — like the modern civil servant, he carried on his duties irrespective of who was in power. The title was passed on among his descendants until 1757 when it fell into abeyance through failure of male heirs. Unlike the junior branch of the family with its dramatic changes of fortune under the Tudors, the elder branch seems to have followed its founder in a tradition of stability and security.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Henry Sydney Grazebrook, *The Barons of Dudley*, in *Collections for a History of Staffordshire*. The William Salt Archaeological Society vol. 9 (1888), pp.46-54.
2. *The Complete Peerage* vol. 4 under Dudley; also *Dictionary of National Biography* (DNB) under John Dudley.
3. *Complete Peerage* (see n.2). During the disgrace of the Dudley family, some Tudor writers tried to suggest that the family were of humble origin.

4. In the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* (see John Lloyd, *Thesaurus Ecclesiasticus*, London 1788, p.71). Malpas is reckoned in two portions worth respectively £48-8-6¹/₂ and £44-19-2d. Although too much reliance cannot be placed on these figures, it was clearly rated more highly than most parishes.
5. A. B. Emdin, *A Biographical Register of the University of Oxford to A.D. 1500* (Oxford 1957); DNB under William Dudley.
6. *Biographical Register of the University of Oxford to A.D. 1500*, (see n.5).
7. A. J. Pollard, St. Cuthbert and the Hogs: Richard III and the County Palatine of Durham, 1471-85 in *Kings and Nobles in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Ralph A. Griffiths and James Sherborne (Gloucester-New York 1986), pp.109-15.
8. *Ibid.*, p.115.
9. *Ibid.*, p.115.
10. According to some authorities, 20 April. For the details of events between the death of Edward IV and Richard III's coronation see *The Coronation of Richard III*, ed. Anne F. Sutton and P. W. Hammond (Gloucester-New York 1983) *passim*, under the Chronology.
11. *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1476-85*, pp.422-3.
12. *Ibid.*, pp.452, 458-9.
13. Dudley was promised the manors of Norton in the Moors, Staffs., and Rokeby, Warwicks., formerly belonging to Lady Margaret Beaufort, on the death of her husband Thomas, Lord Stanley, *ibid.*, p.423. As Stanley survived until the accession of Lady Margaret's son Henry VII, Dudley's chances of obtaining the manors disappeared.

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