

Unweaving the Web: The Plot of July 1483 against Richard III and its Wider Significance

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RICHARD III dated his reign from 26 June 1483.¹ His accession was not contested, but in the autumn of the same year there were rebellions throughout southern England and in the marches of Wales. At a negative level the rebels' aims were clear. All wished to get rid of Richard. Their positive aims are less obvious and there is still scope for further investigation. Whether appropriate sources exist and whether all problems are open to rational solution remains to be seen.

A major difficulty is that we possess no eyewitness account of precisely what happened. Official sources simplified events and depicted them from outside, not within. All the chronicles were written after the event and seem to have explained a complex and confusing sequence of events in the light of what actually happened. By Christmas 1483 Henry Tudor, an obscure exile in Brittany, was Richard's rival as pretender to his crown. It is not certain at what point he achieved that status.

These strictures apply even to the Crowland chronicle, the best contemporary narrative. This records a series of events apparently covering a considerable span of time as follows:

1. 'In order to release them [the Princes from the Tower] the people of the South and of the West of the kingdom began to murmur greatly, to form assemblies and to organize assemblies to this end — many were in secret, others quite open — especially those people who, because of fear, were scattered throughout sanctuaries and franchises'.
 2. There were plots to spirit away their sisters, which prompted Richard to appoint John Nesfield to blockade them in Westminster Abbey.
 3. There were rebellions throughout southern England, usually collectively dubbed Buckingham's Rebellion and beginning in September 1483, initially on behalf of the Princes.
 4. It was rumoured that the Princes had been murdered and so the rebels turned to Henry Tudor as their candidate, perhaps as early as 3 November.²
- This paper is concerned with the first phase: the murmuring that took place before Buckingham's Rebellion.

The Italian historian Dominic Mancini later reported that there were suspicions that the Princes had been murdered even before his departure for France in about mid July.³ Following this up in 1973, Dr Tudor-Craig printed in her *Richard III* exhibition catalogue a signet letter of 29 July from Richard to his Chancellor:

And where as we undrestande that certaine personnes of such as of late had taken upon thaym the fact of an entrepryse, as we doubte nat ye have herd, bee attached and in ward. We desir' and wol that ye do make our letters of commission to such personnes as by you and our counsaill shalbee advised forto sitte upon thaym and to procede to the due execucion of our lawes in that behalve.

Dr Tudor-Craig suggested that this referred to the murder of the princes.⁴ In 1984, Dr Rosemary Horrox⁵ drew attention to the report of the Elizabethan antiquary John Stow of a plot about this time:

After this were taken for rebels against the king, Robert Russe sergeant of London, William Davy pardoner of Hounslow, John Smith groom of King Edward's stirrup, and Stephen Ireland wardrober of the Tower, with many others, that they should have sent writings into the parts of Brittany to the Earls of Richmond and of Pembroke and the other lords; and how they were purposed to have set fire to divers parts of London, which fire whilst men had been staunching, they would have stolen out of the Tower the Prince Edward and his brother the Duke of York . . .

They were tried at Westminster, condemned to death, drawn to Tower Hill and beheaded, and their heads were exhibited on London Bridge.⁶ Subsequently Dr Michael K. Jones drew attention to the much briefer report of the Frenchman Thomas Basin about a plot by fifty Londoners on the princes' behalf which failed to attract support and led to the execution of four of them.⁷ Brief though his account is, it is strictly contemporary — probably written by the very beginning of 1484 — and prompts us to give greater credence to Stow's version than would otherwise be the case. So too do the researches of Dr Horrox, who identified one of the accused, John Smith, uncovered the arrests of other offenders by Nesfield, and pointed out that John Welles was already a rebel on 13 August. Identifying 'the enterprise . . . almost certainly [with] the attempt to rescue Edward IV's sons described by John Stow', she goes on to speculate about the possible involvement of Smith's superior John Cheyne, Edward IV's Master of the Horse, and about the role of the Tudors. Noting correctly that this is 'the first mention of Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, in the context of opposition to Richard III', she suggests that this implies the involvement of Margaret Beaufort, not at this stage to make her son king but to secure his restoration. She thus commits herself to belief in Stow's story. 'The London conspiracy was just one manifestation of growing unrest'.⁸

To summarise, it now seems that there was a plot to free the Princes within a month of Richard's accession. Not everyone accepted his title or the bastardy of the Princes. Some embarked *at once* on a rebellion. These included members of his household and staff at the Tower. The Tudors were involved at a much earlier stage than originally thought, not to prosecute the future Henry VII's claim but on behalf of the princes.

Yet these conclusions have a very weak foundation. Ingenious though the linking of evidence and the argument is, they do not hang very well together. If we compare what the strictly contemporary Basin and the much later Stow write, they agree merely that there was a plot in London to liberate the princes which failed and that the four ringleaders were executed. One has to be suspicious that the only identifiable (and obscure) plotter bears the remarkably undistinctive name John Smith. Are we sure this is the right John Smith? We must look

elsewhere for the source of Stow's material on the burning of parts of London, communication with Henry Tudor, the names of the culprits, their trial at Westminster, execution at Tower Hill, and the display of their heads. He did not find it in the earlier Tudor chronicles of Holinshed, Hall, Grafton or Fabyan, nor in such fifteenth/early sixteenth-century London chronicles as Fabyan's Chronicle, Vitellius A XVI, the *Great Chronicle*, or the one discovered by R. F. Green.⁹ Stow does not mention it in his own *Survey of London*. Given the sensational nature of their crime for a public audience in London and the extremely public nature of their execution, is it not remarkable that no City chronicler thought the events worth recording?

If Stow did not derive his material from written evidence, where did he find it? Dr Horrox suggests that he used the indictments of the criminals' trial.¹⁰ If implemented, Richard's commands of 29 July should have resulted in the appointment of an oyer and terminer commission, the indictment and trial of the offenders. Personally I doubt that Stow ever resorted to such records. More important, Dr Horrox knew that no such indictments survive. This is not because they were lost, but because they never existed. For the indictments to have resulted in executions, they must either have been taken before oyer and terminer commissions or returned to the court of King's Bench. In either case they would have been recorded in the King's Bench Controlment Rolls, the attorney-general's key to criminal prosecutions, but no proceedings for treason against any of those named by Stow are recorded.¹¹ The story could nevertheless be true. They could have been summarily tried before the court of the Constable: we do not have his records, do not know indeed whether he kept any, and cannot therefore speculate whether Stow's evidence accords with such a source.

What about the date? One of the more important features of Stow's evidence is that the Tudor Earls were involved much earlier than would otherwise have been expected. But is this likely to have featured in any trial record in July given that communication with them abroad was not yet treasonable? Henry Tudor's mother Lady Margaret Beaufort was in frequent communication with lawyers conducting a ransom suit in the Parlement of Paris and was thus probably in regular contact also with him.¹² Again, Stow mentions them communicating with the two Tudor Earls 'and the other lords'. What other lords? Surely there were only 'other lords' after Buckingham's Rebellion caused many other gentry to join the Tudors in Brittany in the winter of 1483? By then, of course, such communication with Richard III's traitor and dynastic rival was indeed treasonable. It is possible, therefore, that Stow — like the Crowland Chronicler — was guilty of hindsight and was reading the Tudors' involvement too far back. Some of the other details could also have been accretions to the original story. Alternatively, was he referring to a plot that happened later? What seems most unlikely, however, is that the events that Stow records happened in July 1483.

Surely the date is fixed by the letter of 29 July and the denunciation of John Welles as a rebel? The former, however, refers to 'an enterprise', not necessarily the one recorded by Stow and Basin, and we do not know on whose behalf Welles rebelled. Stow locates the plot before Buckingham's Rebellion, for which he uses different sources, but does not date it. Although Basin does likewise, his work cannot be dated before early 1484,¹³ by which time the Tudors were definitely involved and nothing becomes incredible. There seems to be nothing to locate

Stow's plot firmly in July and nothing therefore to justify placing Tudor involvement at this date.

We are left with the 'enterprise' of 29 July, for which Dr Horrox's interpretation of a plot seems to be preferable to the alternative that it relates to the murder of princes. It seems very likely that there was such a plot at this stage, but direct evidence is non-existent. Ricardians may feel this cause for rejoicing: it suggests that Richard was less unpopular than has recently been supposed and excited less rapid rebellions against him. On balance, however, the discrediting of the July plot detracts from Richard's reputation in one crucial and strangely unnoticed way. If there was indeed a plot to release the princes in late July with assistance from an officer within the Tower, who surely was in a position to know whether they were dead and thus capable of being rescued, it gives us a later date when the Princes were almost certainly alive. That date, please note, is *after* the departure for France of Dominic Mancini, who *first* records suspicions that they were dead. If Mancini's report was wrong, a major plank in the charge of murder against Richard is destroyed. Moreover, if Stow's plot actually occurred later, it again suggests that the princes were still living at that later date: perhaps in the autumn of 1483 or later, perhaps even after the emergence of the Tudor claim or after Guillaume de Rochefort Chancellor of France had declared them to be dead to the French Estates-General in January 1484. On such shreds of evidence does the fate of the princes and perhaps Richard's popular reputation hang. We need the rebellion that Stow reports. We need to know what it was for and when it happened.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The standard account of Buckingham's Rebellion is in C. D. Ross, *Richard III*, London 1981, pp.105-18. The best recent discussion is in R. E. Horrox, *Richard III: A Study in Service*, Cambridge 1989, ch. 3.
2. *Crowland Chronicle Continuations 1459-1486*, ed. N. Pronay and J. C. Cox, Richard III and Yorkist History Trust, London 1986, pp.162-3.
3. D. Mancini, *The Usurpation of Richard III*, ed. C. A. J. Armstrong, Oxford 2nd edn. 1969, pp.92-3.
4. P. Tudor-Craig, *Richard III*, National Portrait Gallery, London 1973, p.98.
5. R. E. Horrox, *Richard III and London*, *The Ricardian*, vol. 6 (1984), pp.325-6, 329. I am indebted to Miss Anne Sutton for this reference. Dr Horrox's treatment of the Tudors was developed by Dr Michael K. Jones in his *Richard III and Lady Margaret Beaufort: A Re-Assessment*, *Richard III: Loyalty, Lordship and Law*, ed. P. W. Hammond, Richard III and Yorkist History Trust, London 1986, p.30.
6. J. Stow, *Annales of England*, London 1631, p.459.
7. Horrox, *Richard III*, 149n; T. Basin, *Histoire de Louis XI*, ed. C. Samaran, vol. 3, *Les Classiques de l'histoire de France*, vols. 26, 29, 30, Paris 1972, p.234.
8. Horrox, *Richard III*, pp.149-50.
9. R. F. Green, *Historical Notes of a London citizen 1483-6*, *English Historical Review*, vol. 96 (1981), pp.585-90.
10. Horrox, *Richard III*, p.149 and n.44.
11. Public Record Office, King's Bench, Controlment Rolls, KB 29/114; KB 29/115.
12. M. K. Jones, Henry VII, Lady Margaret Beaufort and the Orléans Ransom, *Kings and Nobles in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. R. A. Griffiths and J. W. Sherborne, Gloucester 1986, pp.264-5.
13. Basin, vol. 1, pp.xi-xiii.