

'Our trusty and welbeloved servant and squire for oure body', Nicholas Baker *alias* Spicer

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The merchant family of Baker – with or without the Spicer *alias* – was one of some prominence in Bristol, and in Somerset, during the latter half of the fifteenth century. They were merchant grocers, and on at least one occasion Nicholas Baker was described as a 'spicer'.¹ A commodity, rather than an 'indiscretion', would seem to account for the *alias*.

A contemporary (brother?) of Nicholas was one Thomas Baker, merchant grocer, bailiff of Bristol 1482–83, and sheriff 1489–90.² The will of his widow, 'Lady Mawde Baker *alias* Spicer', was proved in 1504.³ This man, who died in 1492, is unlikely to have been the Thomas Baker of Bridgwater rewarded by Richard III with lands in Wells (forfeited by Sir John St Lo), who may have been one of Richard's yeomen of the crown.⁴ Dame Maude was a notable benefactress to the church of All Saints in Bristol during the latter part of the fifteenth century. Her many gifts included candlesticks and an 'eagle' (lectern) of brass, paintings including an image of St Christopher (who else, in Bristol?) and rich hangings. Towards the end of the century she gave three tapers of wax to be before the image of Jesus, 'to burn at Jesus mass on the Friday and at the anthem at night' – i.e. the Sarum mass *de nomine Jesu*, the anthem being an imitation of the famous *Salve Regina*.⁵ The obits of Thomas and Maude were held well into the sixteenth century at All Saints on February 16.⁶

About the early life of Nicholas relatively little can be gleaned.⁷ What could be the earliest notice of him is a petition by Nicholas Baker *alias* Spicer against one John Pryne concerning a debt of £40. He asked that the matter might be brought before the chancellor, to be determined 'as right and justice required'. The date, however, is uncertain.⁸ The earliest dated notice occurs in 1462, when

¹ CCR, 1461–68, p. 444.

² J. Latimer, 'The Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar', *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society* (hereafter *TBGAS*), vol. 26 (1903), p. 133.

³ *PCCanterbury Wills*, British Record Society (1893), vol. 1, p. 32.

⁴ *Harl. 433*, vol. 4, Index, p. 8.

⁵ E.G.C.F. Atchley, 'On the parish records of the church of All Saints, Bristol', *TBGAS*, vol. 27 (1904), pp. 237, 239, 253, 262, 265, 267.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

⁷ A Nicholas Spicier, bailiff of Bayeux in 1443 is probably too early to be our man, *CPR*, 1441–46, p. 202.

⁸ *The Great Red Booke of Bristol*, Text pt 3, Bristol Record Society, vol. 16, p. 20. The date, 1432–50, suggested in a footnote, is far too vague.

on 20 January, as plain Nicholas Baker of Bristol, he was granted for life the manor of 'Belyngton' (Belluton in Stanton Drew) in Somerset, forfeited by James Botiller, Earl of Wiltshire.⁹ This grant was repeated on 30 March 1465.¹⁰ Ten days earlier, with five other men and the sheriff of Somerset he, as Nicholas Spicer, had been commissioned to enquire concerning lordships, lands, rents, etc. in the said county held by John Botiller (Wiltshire's brother and next heir), attainted.¹¹ James Botiller (and possibly his brothers, John and Thomas) had fought for Henry VI at Mortimer's Cross and Towton in 1461 and had been attainted in parliament on 4 November of that year. The grant of Belluton may well have been a reward for 'pains and labours' at one or both of those battles.

He continued to deal as a merchant. On 7 September 1467 he, as Nicholas Baker of Bristol, spicer, made gift of all his property, wares etc. in London and elsewhere, to William Bentele (Bentley?), citizen and grocer of London, putting the grantee in possession by delivery of a gold ring.¹² A minor setback occurred in 1469 for on 24 April Nicholas Baker, 'late of Bristol, gentleman', was pardoned of outlawry for not appearing (with several others) before the justices of the Bench to answer John Walker, of Southampton, 'marchaunt', touching a debt of £40.¹³ This did not affect his standing, for when in June 1471 one John Swaynscote was appointed by Edward IV as approver of the subsidy and alnage of cloths for sale in Bristol, its suburbs and precincts, it was by mainprise of Nicholas Spycer, 'gentilman', and Robert Stanshawe, 'gentilman', both of Bristol.¹⁴

It was perhaps in 1475 that a foreign petitioner alleged that one John de la Porte by means of Nicholas Spycer brought actions against him in the mayor and sheriff's court, the 'Tolzey' court, and the Staple, and then left Bristol, leaving Nicholas as his attorney. The aggrieved petitioner claimed that he had been arrested and imprisoned, a verdict having been given against him by a jury friendly with Spycer. Though ready to find surety, he had been refused bail, solely, he believed, because he was a foreigner.¹⁵ It is clear that Nicholas had influence in Bristol.

His activities, however, already extended beyond Bristol. In 1474 Richard, Duke of Gloucester, in the partition of the Warwick and Salisbury lands (the Warwick inheritance) secured the Welsh Marcher lordships of Glamorgan, Abergavenny, Pains Castle, Elfael and Welsh Bignor. In the parliament of 1477/78 he exchanged Elfael for the duchy of Lancaster lordship of Ogmore,

⁹ *CPR*, 1461-67, p. 142.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 437.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 452.

¹² As note 1, above.

¹³ *CPR*, 1467-77, p. 142.

¹⁴ *CFR*, 1471-85I, no. 18.

¹⁵ *The Great Red Book*, Text pt 1, p. 22 (in footnote the suggested date of 1475). In the 'Tolzey', or tollbooth, the market courts of 'pie powder' were held.

which – as Dr Horrox observes – complemented his holdings in Glamorgan.¹⁶ At some time during the 1470s – most probably after 1474 – he appointed Nicholas Spicer constable of Caerphilly Castle in Glamorgan.¹⁷ Less than a fortnight after the duke's coronation as Richard III, Nicholas was commissioned, on 23 July 1483, as collector of customs and subsidies in the port of Bristol and adjacent places, and keeper of the 'coket' seal there.¹⁸

Before that month's end the king was aware of conspiracies and intrigue. On 29 July, from Minster Lovell, he wrote to Chancellor Russell about an expected 'enterprise', cautioning him to attend to the matter.¹⁹ He took precautionary measures. Early in August (at about the time of the discovery of a plot involving Margaret Beaufort's half-brother, John Welles) he ordered weapons to be made. From Warwick Castle, on 9 August, he issued a warrant allowing Nicholas, as receiver of Abergavenny, to retain in his own hands £28 10s., a sum which had been spent by him, including 18s. for staving and making twenty-four bills, 8s. for carrying the said weapons from Abergavenny to London, 20s. 6d. for making and staving thirty glaives, 15s. 4d. for eighteen glaives and for carriage of the same from Llanllwyd to Warwick, and 6s. 8d. for the carriage of bills from Abergavenny to Warwick. Among other, more pacific, items was 6s. 8d. for 'mynstrelles' at Greenwich.²⁰

Eight days later, from Leicester, the king informed all his officers, liegemen and subjects concerned, that commanded his 'full trusty squire and servant Nicholas Spicere, one of the usshers of our chamber', to cause 20,000 Welsh bills to be purveyed and made in all haste possible, with the power and authority to take in the king's name, wherever should seem most expedient, as many smiths as he considered necessary to accomplish this.²¹ The king was not yet aware that the duke of Buckingham, who was then heading commissions into treasons in several southern counties, was already planning to rebel. The duke was in south Wales early in August, and at his castle of Brecon by the 23rd. Until mid-September the king, unaware of Buckingham's treachery, was directing his receivers in north and south Wales (including, presumably, Nicholas) to pay their accounts to the duke.²² By mid-October the king was alerted and he took appropriate measures. A late-comer to the rebellion,²³ Buckingham failed to raise support in south Wales and atrocious weather prevented him from crossing the Severn. Captured in Shropshire, he was executed in Salisbury on

¹⁶ R.E. Horrox, *Richard III. A Study of Service*, Cambridge 1989, p. 81.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹⁸ *CFR*, 1471–85, no. 745.

¹⁹ L. Gill, *Richard III and Buckingham's Rebellion*, Stroud 1999, p. 63, citing PRO, C 81/1392/1. I am indebted to my son, Richard, for bringing this to my attention – and for much else.

²⁰ *Hart*, 433, vol. 2, p. 8.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.

²² Gill, *Richard III*, p. 64, citing PRO, SC 1/44/75; *CPR* 1476–85, p. 465.

²³ C. Ross, *Richard III*, London 1981, p. 105.

2 November. Nicholas may well have been active against Buckingham in south Wales.

On 3 September, before Buckingham's rebellion, Nicholas Baker *alias* Spycer, esquire, had been granted the office of steward of several lordships in Gloucestershire, and one in Wiltshire, that were in the king's hands by reason of the minority of Edward, son and heir of Isabel, widow of George, Duke of Clarence.²⁴ Nicholas was efficient. On 19 November 1483 receipt was acknowledged at Farnham by the king of £31 10s. by the hands of Nicholas Spicer, usher of the chamber, from Christopher Congreford, late receiver of Thornbury, Gloucestershire, 'late belonging to . . . the late duke of Buckingham'.²⁵ On 26 November officers, farmers, tenants, and occupiers of the lordships of Usk, Caerleon, Newport, Brecon, Monmouth, 'Monnemouthes landes' and Hay, within the march of Wales, were charged to pay to Nicholas, appointed receiver of the said lordships, all sums due to the king.²⁶ On 29 November the king acknowledged the receipt from Nicholas of £383 10s., from the customs of Bristol, the revenues of Glamorgan and Morgannok, of the lordship of Abergavenny, and of six other lordships.²⁷ Little more than a month later, on 6 January 1484, receivers were ordered to bring moneys in person 'in goodly haste'. Included was Nicholas, receiver of Abergavenny (and other lordships already named).²⁸ He was occasionally ordered to disburse, as when on 12 January the king gave Lord Fitzhugh £40, to be paid by Nicholas.²⁹ On 28 February he was commissioned to levy and collect, in person, in the port of Bristol and ports and places adjacent, subsidies granted to the king in parliament.³⁰

On 4 April his responsibilities were increased, when the king appointed him constable of Bristol Castle for life, with a fee of £20 yearly and a porter and two watchmen.³¹ A month later, on 3 May, he received a warrant to deliver to the bailiffs and burgesses of Brecon £60, which the king had given towards making the walls of the town.³² Four days later he is seen to have been promoted. From Middleham the king wrote to his 'trusty and welbeloved servaunt and squier for oure body', Nicholas Spicer, receiver of Abergavenny, Glamorgan and Morgannok, allowing him to recover £152 9s., paid by him on the king's behalf.³³ On 11 May his receivership of Brecon, Newport, Usk,

²⁴ *CPR, 1476-85*, pp. 404-05. The lordships were Sodbury, Barton hundred, Edlescourt of the honour of Gloucester, and Fairford, in Gloucestershire, and Sherston, Wiltshire.

²⁵ *Harl. 433*, vol. 2, p. 38.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

³⁰ *CFR, 1471-85*, no. 812.

³¹ *CPR, 1476-85*, p. 422; *Harl. 433*, vol. 1, p. 214.

³² *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 131.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

and Caerleon was renewed. His fee was to be twenty marks. Added to his fee as constable of Bristol Castle this gave him over £33 per annum – quite apart from the fees received for his other offices.³⁴ At some time before the end of June he had a privy seal to the mayor of Cork, who was to attach two of his citizens and keep them until they had paid him, Nicholas, £68 15s.³⁵

Not until September 8 does his name next appear, when the king, at Nottingham, renewed the grant of Belluton. The grant was now to Nicholas Baker of Bristol and Elizabeth, his wife, for life and for the longer living, in lieu of the grant of the manor to Nicholas alone by letters patent of Edward IV, surrendered.³⁶ The inclusion of his wife in such a grant was unusual. Was this done to safeguard the wife's future? Tantalizingly, this seems to be the only surviving reference to his wife. It is indeed the first to suggest that he had any family life. He continued to pay out large sums of money by the king's command, and on 16 and 17 September he was given warrants to the auditors of Abergavenny, Glamorgan, Morgannok, Usk, Monmouth, and all castles, lordships, manors and lands forfeited to the king in Gloucestershire, to allow him, receiver of these, the sum of £289 11s. 8d. in his accounts.³⁷

On 8 December the king issued his second commissions of array. Nicholas, who had not been among those nominated earlier, in May, was now one of those appointed for the county of Gloucester. The commission for that county survives. The commissioners were to array and inspect 'all and singular men-at-arms and all other defensible men, both light horsemen and archers dwelling in the said county'. When arrayed and inspected these men were to be placed in thousands, hundreds or scores, or as convenient and necessary, and the commissioners were to lead them or cause them to be led to the king with all possible speed, to attack and repel his enemies. Musters of these troops were to be taken from time to time, as need should arise. The commissioners were to begin immediately.³⁸ Ten days later the king ordered military census to be taken by knights and gentry in the counties of Surrey, Middlesex and Hertford, in order to discover how many men each could call up at half a day's notice.³⁹

Nicholas continued to perform his administrative duties. On 3 January 1485 the auditors of Abergavenny, Morgannok, Usk, and all castles etc. forfeited to the king in Gloucestershire were instructed to allow Nicholas in their accounts £301 14s. 6d., which sum he had already paid into the king's own hands.⁴⁰ A warrant to Nicholas given on 22 January shows him also to have been receiver of the lordship of Cardiff. As such he was directed to give one Richard Warde

³⁴ *CPR, 1476–85*, p. 437; a mark was 13s. 4d.

³⁵ *Harl. 433*, vol. 1, p. 214.

³⁶ *CPR, 1476–85*, p. 507.

³⁷ *Harl. 433*, vol. 2, p. 160.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 125–28.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 182.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

the sum of £23 out of the issues of that lordship, due to him for 'bieffes' (beeves).⁴¹ On 5 February he was instructed to pay Richard Willoughby, a gentleman usher of the king's chamber, £20 – 'of the king's reward'. During the next few months he was not idle. On 6 June, from Kenilworth, came two warrants. The first directed the auditors of Abergavenny, Glamorgan and Morgannok to allow him in their accounts £135 4d., for repairs made by him at Sudeley Castle in Gloucestershire, for twenty 'tonnes and an hoggeshede' of wine (which fruit of the vine accounted for £115 18s) bought by him and conveyed to the castles of Kenilworth and Sudeley (clearly these castles were not 'dry')⁴², and a sum 'by him paid to oure use in diverse behalves'. The second warrant, to the same auditors, allowed for £120 paid into the king's hands out of the revenues of the said lordships.⁴³ Clearly Richard's squires were not mere courtiers.

A lull in the king's preparations for the defence of his kingdom ended on 22 June 1485, when from Nottingham he issued orders to his commissioners of array. They were to review recently mustered men, see that they were able, horsed and harnessed to serve the king and replace those who were not. The knights, esquires and gentlemen were ready to move at an hour's notice 'upon peril of losing their lives, lands and goods'.⁴⁴ On the following day Richard issued his last proclamation, denouncing the Tudor and his associates.⁴⁵

Two months later King Richard and many of his household and affinity were killed at Bosworth. It seems certain that the trusty Nicholas was there with his king. Soon his offices were being granted to others. On 16 September John Frye, a yeoman of the new king's 'guard' (a Plymouth mariner who had been granted 'his life' by Richard) was given the office of searcher of the port of Bristol 'which one Nicholas Spycer lately held and occupied', and on 30 January 1486 one John Moton got his stewardship of Abergavenny.⁴⁶ Nicholas was not among those named as attainted in Henry Tudor's first parliament. Yet an inquisition *virtute officii* of 31 October 1486 examined the Somerset lands of those attainted, Nicholas Spicer being one of them. First named was John, Lord Zouche. It was found that he 'was attainted of high treason in the parliament held at Westminster on 7 November, 1 Henry VII. On the day of his attainder he was seized in fee of the under-mentioned manors and lands'. These findings were repeated, *mutatis mutandis*, for four others listed as attainted. After Lord Zouche were named Walter Devereux, Lord Ferrers (killed at Bosworth), Roger Wake, Sir William Berkeley, and lastly Nicholas Spycer late of Bristol, 'merchaunt', attainted, his holdings in Somerset being described as

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 228–29.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 230, the proclamation is incomplete.

⁴⁶ *Materials Henry VII*, vol. 1, pp. 7, 305.

'lands etc. in Pensford by Bristol, worth 40s.'⁴⁷ When and how Nicholas was attainted does not appear, but like the others he must have fought for Richard at Bosworth.⁴⁸

Pensford lies about one mile south-east of Belluton, which is not mentioned. Did Nicholas survive Bosworth? He received no pardon during Henry VII's reign, nor indeed mention apart from those already detailed above. We have neither writ of *diem clausit extremum* nor inquisition *post mortem* for him. He vanishes. A Nicholas Baker, groom of the chamber, was in attendance at Henry Tudor's funeral.⁴⁹ He remained in office well into the reign of Henry VIII, but could hardly have been Richard's man, whose attainder was never reversed.

One tempting possibility remains. D.M. Palliser has shown that merchants had by this period come to be the 'wholesale traders in mixed goods, usually but not exclusively overseas traders'.⁵⁰ From Bristol Nicholas would hear rumours from abroad and he was well placed to transfer wealth to the continent, as 'insurance'. Most alien merchants, for example those in London, were 'Dutch' (Germans and Netherlanders) and it was to Flanders and Margaret of Burgundy that Ricardians such as the earl of Lincoln, Viscount Lovell and Richard Harleston went to seek assistance and shelter early in Henry's reign. Perhaps Nicholas did likewise, was too wary to take part in their enterprises and settled as a merchant.

Towards the end of 1505 Richard's nephew Edmund de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk, was the prisoner at Namur of Archduke Philip. His poverty was extreme. He received some clothing from Philip and more from one Claus Bakker. Edmund, whose spelling seems that of one almost analphabetic, asked his steward, Thomas Killingworth, to thank 'Clakes' Bakker for the gift.⁵¹ On 20 December 1505 the steward – writing from Antwerp – informed the earl that 'Hans Nagell and Claus Baker recommend them humbly unto you'.⁵² Claus and Claes are German and Dutch for Nicholas. Bakker and Bäcker are in Dutch and German respectively, Baker.⁵³

Edmund was surrendered to Henry VII in 1506 and executed by Henry VIII in 1513. No more is heard of Claus until 1515. Edmund's brother, Richard, 'the White Rose', was by 1512 under the protection of Louis XII of France. In 1514 he moved to the imperial city of Metz, in Lorraine. During 1515 and

⁴⁷ Pensford was ex-Botiller land, M.A. Hicks, *False, Fleeting, Perjur'd Clarence. George, Duke of Clarence, 1449–78*, Gloucester 1980, p. 210.

⁴⁸ *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem, Henry VII*, vol. 3, 1504–09, Appendix 1, nos 1080–84, the last being that of Nicholas Spycer.

⁴⁹ *Letters and Papers HVIII*, vol. 1, pt 1, 1920, p. 13; this man never appears as Spicer.

⁵⁰ D.M. Palliser, 'Urban society', in R.E. Horrox, ed., *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes*, Cambridge 1994, p. 140.

⁵¹ *Letters and Papers RIII and HVII*, vol. 1, p. 256.

⁵² *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 383.

⁵³ I am indebted to my friend Dr Wilfried Deckner for his help.

1516 Claus was busy on Richard's behalf. Spies informed Henry VIII and Wolsey that he was with Richard before May 1515,⁵⁴ and was at Bergen op Zoom in December.⁵⁵ In January 1516 Henry VIII learned that 'Cles Bakker' was surely with the king of Denmark, who was willing to assist Richard.⁵⁶ On 4 February it was reported that 'Cales' was again at Bergen op Zoom,⁵⁷ and two weeks later Wolsey heard from Brussels that 'Claes' Baker has been in Denmark and in Scotland, was gone to Cologne, thence to Messe (Metz) unto Ric. de la Pole'.⁵⁸ Lastly, on 7 October 1516, the spy Spinelly tells Wolsey of his going to the chancellor at Brussels to speak to Nicholas Baker. This seems to be the last reference to him that we possess.⁵⁹

His name and his Yorkist sympathies must beg the question – could this man and Richard III's squire be one and the same? If so, his would be a remarkable example of fidelity to the Yorkist cause. It is not impossible. The man granted Belluton must have been at least forty-five years of age in 1485, therefore *circa* seventy-six in 1516 – not too old for him to get about. He would thus have arrived, and departed, plain Nicholas Baker. It is an alluring possibility. Would that we could be certain.

⁵⁴ *Letters and Papers HVIII*, vol. 2, pt 1, no. 541.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 1339.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 1388.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 1479.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 1553.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 2427.