



King Richard III related themes

Many of us have reflected upon aspects of the King Richard III story, often publicly, in the context of sermons and talks. Others consider what might be useful entry points into the story for schools, communities and other groups. Yet others may be considering the ongoing narration of the King Richard III story to the wider public.

*For all these reasons, and to aid the processes of measured reflection, here are some of the key strands collated under headings below. These are probably not exhaustive, and could be grouped in other ways; but hopefully they provide some succinct shorthand starting points. Not every *i* is dotted or *t* crossed, and, of course, much more could be said under each heading. They form a starter, though.*

The sections are ordered to contain a series of both statements and questions. This is because the sections are intended as entry points, with a small amount of information opening the door to further reflection.

Mortality, death and the hereafter

In the context of reburial of King Richard III there was much debate about tombs, ossuaries and reburial ceremonies. What are the appropriate choices for the re-interment of a long-dead king? Those involved were very aware of the significance of the decisions they make. In the midst of life we are in death - we cannot but be aware of our own mortality. What lie behind our choices of how we are treated after death? What do tombs and burial places say about our understanding of death and the afterlife?

King Richard III, more than 500 years on, is physically no more than a set of bones. What is the status of these or, indeed, any old bones? Archeologists and curators of museums have clear guidelines for the treatment of human remains, including being able to display those who are long dead. How much difference does time make in considering this? Does the King Richard III story play into our sensibilities in considering, for example, whether his bones should have gone on display? How do we feel about WW1 and other ossuaries, where more recent human remains are clearly visible? How do we honour the unnamed dead of Bosworth and other battlefields?

There is both continuity and discontinuity in death. Death is final and we do not know what lies beyond. For those who have faith, there is the sense of death as a portal into the hereafter. In our vulnerability we may reach out to God. Whatever our beliefs, that moment at the end of life is very special, raising questions about how we address and manage it. How can we best accord proper dignity in dying? Where are our shortcomings and how might we address them?

Interpretation, truth and understanding

Archeology, historical sources of evidence and local legends provide a fascinatingly complex picture. How can we best unfold the contemporary story to get behind myth, propaganda and bias? Or can we? What can the King Richard III story, past and recent present, tell us about our attitudes towards and understanding of history?

The dominant image is that provided by William Shakespeare. However this text has been interpreted in many different ways, providing interesting parallels and insightful connections. Knowing Shakespeare's is not a historical account, what role do the play and its myriad interpretations have in contributing to our consciousness, both of Plantagenet and Tudor England, of modern politics and of the role of media in shaping our understanding? How is language used both to illuminate and confuse?

A romantic understanding of history, particularly mediaeval times, emerged in the 19th century in some quarters. How has this, played out in art, architecture and literature, influenced our understanding of Plantagenet times? A face said to be a window into the soul: few visual images remain of King Richard III or members of his family, but

how do we respond to those we have? The recreation of a face from the skull's bone structure profoundly affected many - why?

Government and civil life

Laws passed by the one parliament of King Richard III's reign benefitted far more people than solely the powerful elite, with measures including trade protection and anti-corruption laws. The winds of change had begun, although Parliament only really began to evolve into a structure recognisable to our eyes under Richard's Tudor successors. Citizenship and human rights are relatively modern concepts; but how were ordinary people engaged or heard? Did a greater use of the English language invite more public engagement?

In a city also associated with Simon de Montfort who is regarded as a 'founding father' of modern democracy, not least by curbing the then King's absolute power and involving a wider range of people in governance, how do we view today's tools of government and the roles of the Houses of Commons and Lords?

King Richard III's reign, and those of some of his immediate predecessors, floundered amid dynastic storms and political rivalries. What was the impact upon the country? What parallels can we draw with today's politics? Where are the strengths and weaknesses in our systems?

More than one King

King Richard III and his subjects understood him as anointed King under God - a role clearly expressed in the symbolism at a coronation, including the crown. Although the functional role has changed, Queen Elizabeth II would probably similarly express herself: how do we best understand this in today's society? After being initially hastily crowned in the aftermath of battle, King Henry VII's assumption to that title was quickly ratified by Parliament. From whence does authority derive - including that of local civic authorities? How do we understand the relationship between monarch, state and church?

While faiths teach the respect of civic authorities and the rule of law, God's higher authority is also recognised. Christianity specifically identifies Jesus as Lord and King: his subjects are both citizens of earth and heaven. Is there a tension here, between faith and worldly powers, between sacred and secular? What place do faiths hold in the shaping of our society and the values it holds? How were responses to these questions expressed in the ceremonies surrounding King Richard III's re-interment?

Villain or hero?

Opinion quickly polarises concerning King Richard III, fuelled most specifically but not exclusively by the mystery surrounding the Princes in the Tower. For every questionable act, people will cite other positive conduct - and some of this can never be resolved. What do we make of the circumstances in which he came to the throne? The rights and wrongs of the Battle of Bosworth?

King Richard III's tomb lies in a prominent position in Leicester Cathedral; but no saint is buried here - merely a human sinner like all of us. It will not be a shrine. Was King Richard III good or was he bad? The answer is, of course, he was both, as we are. How can you weigh up a human being? How do we measure good and evil?

For a number of reasons, we can assume he was quite conscious of his own mortality, not least in the building of several chantry chapels. What would he think of his legacy today and the interest shown in him and his remains? How might he have wished to be remembered? How do we wish to be remembered?

The role of faith

Christianity underpinned the life of England and all its inhabitants at the time of King Richard III. Abbeys and friaries abounded, not least in Leicester itself, and were a significant part of the economy of the country. In these senses, all would have understood themselves as living in the presence of God, with God an active participant in their lives and

the practice of faith a natural ongoing activity. What is the place and role of prayer today? Where is God in our lives? How is faith lived out?

King Richard III is generally thought to have been quite pious, using a Book of Hours for daily prayer and attending Mass regularly. The prayer associated with him 'speaks' out of a belief in redemption and resurrection, which the location and form of his tomb seek to communicate. Theologies shift, but mercy, grace, the conflict of good and evil and the possibility of forgiveness are timeless threads in our understanding, both of ourselves and the divine. What language and understandings are most powerful in our thinking today? What 'speak' to us?

Renaissance and Reformation

King Richard III's life was lived out on the threshold of the Renaissance in England. Here was the cusp of something new: printing was just emerging, the Bible had been translated into the vernacular and whole new worlds were opening up. King Richard himself, young, intelligent and reflective, was clearly neither immune nor indifferent. Indeed, he is said to have read widely and, unusually, owned a Bible in English. In exile for a period, he was in Burgundy, a flourishing hub for music and other creative activities. Our generation has seen equivalently significant shifts: the equivalent of the impact of printing to King Richard's generation is internet technology for ours. What can we learn from these parallels?

Mistakenly, we in England all too easily associate the Reformation solely with King Henry VIII's marital problems. Not so - a wave of new thinking swept across Europe, embracing new theologies and taking different forms in different places. Within not much more than a generation after King Richard III's death, monasteries were in disarray and their assets confiscated. This was a huge break up of the established order. Yet we forget there was continuity also, as the worshipping life of the nation continued, now under the umbrella of an English church with a different approach to ecclesial authority but inheriting the same and traditions. In practice, less changed than we might think, and the same buildings, like Leicester Cathedral, continued to be used for the same purposes as ever. Thus the Church of England both is the custodian of his remains and was the prime celebrant at his re-interment. How did King Richard's re-interment reflect both changes in thinking and continuity with the past?

Parent, spouse, sibling and friend

King Richard III lived through the highs and lows of all human living. His father and elder brother met a violent untimely end, intense sibling rivalry disfigured the remaining family unit, his wife who was also his cousin died young and his son died in childhood. In contrast, his childhood was relatively secure, his mother outlived him, he held a fierce loyalty towards his brother, King Edward IV and many whom he governed held him in high regard. Here is a man with whom many can identify: one who in his short life experienced so much and yet continued not only to function but to govern and lead.

We may not ride into battle, but in many ways King Richard's life mirrors ours. We are reminded, as he was, of the constant fragility of our relationships. How we should value right now, those who are dear to us? Whom do we take for granted? What scars do we carry? How can these help us better to understand those around us? How can we better embrace both joy and grief? What place does loyalty have in today's world?

Who are we - who am I?

Archeology has enabled us to locate the remains of King Richard III. It is a rich vein of evidence pointing us to many other aspects of ourselves. What is under our feet in Leicester? How has that shaped the Leicester we know today? We are what we eat: even King Richard III's diet, scientifically gleaned, raising some interesting questions!

King Richard III is buried near to prominent citizens in the memory of the city's history, in the mediaeval guild church, for centuries and, indeed still today, at the heart of the city's civic life. The Cathedral site itself dates back further to Roman times, like other places nearby. Here is both continuity and discontinuity. How should we tell the history of our City and County? How do we relate our awareness of the past to our collective self-understanding

today? How does this heritage connect with those whose ancestral roots lie outside of the City and County of Leicester?

Genetic coding has been key in identifying King Richard III's bones. We gaze in wonder at its detail and technical brilliance. A set of bones is recreated as a once-living historical figure. History and legend meet science. Through our DNA and family trees we realise our connections with others, and trace ourselves back into the past. Do we understand our identity primarily as genetic sequences, or are we more comfortable with souls and bodies? King Richard III's bones are often talked about in personal terms - they are a 'he' - and yet they are inanimate dry bones, what most of us will ultimately be, unless we are cremated first. What constitutes the 'I', the person? Do we become a collection of memories, the sum of our deeds or the possessions we leave behind? Who am I?

War and conflict, reconciliation and peace

King Richard III was the last English king to die in battle, although not the last British king so to do, nor the last English king to lead his army into battle. Many people died on that battlefield and lie buried, nameless, nearby. Who were they? What were their hopes and fears? In a decade where we are remembering especially the sacrifices of life in two world wars, we have become better at naming and commemorating those who lost their lives; but still many lie in unnamed tombs. What are our relationship and obligation to those who died at Bosworth Field? How best should we remember all who died in the service of their country, whether recently or centuries ago?

Warfare at the time had plateaued in technical competence. The scale of modern warfare is very different and the technology mind-boggling, but the causes and effects not dissimilar - instability, power vacuums, lawlessness, greed, to name but a few. We may not pick up a sword or a pike, but in what ways are we still playing out the same battles? Behind the stand-off at Bosworth lay personal self-interests and ideologies - are there parallels today? What does it feel like, then and now, to be the ordinary soldier or local citizen, caught up in conflict?

Was the Battle of Bosworth a battle which had to be fought? On what grounds should we go to war? Or should we? This is a hugely topical question, usefully informed by the centuries-old just war debate. With different cultures and faiths providing different angles into both this question and the ethics of war, what do we require of our national decision makers?

The Battle of Bosworth ushered in a kind of peace and stability, cemented by the marriage of King Henry VII and Elizabeth of York. But it was not long before the country was wracked in religious conflict. Is peace the absence of battles or something deeper? What kind of peace is worth having? How do these questions relate to our world today?

Dignity and honour

This was the generic catchphrase of the King Richard in Leicester project. But now let's apply it more specifically still - to his disability. More than almost any figure in history, King Richard III has been characterised by his supposed deformities. These have now, thanks to modern science, been proved to be neither strange mutation or some work of the devil, but the outward signs of a known physical condition. We know scoliosis did not inhibit Richard in pursuing the usual physical activities which men of his time and status indulged in. It would appear that it was not a barrier to normal social interaction and relationships. Were Richard one of today's political leaders, he would probably have become a role model or champion for the disabled - someone who has succeeded in the face of adversity. What was the status of disabled people in his time? Did they suffer exclusion, more or less than their modern counterparts? Did Richard's birth protect him from those excesses? Would he be disadvantaged today?

Behind all that lie other issues. How do we relate to people who are different from us? Does the demonisation of Richard result from distrust, whereby his physical shape and condition, demonstrating his 'otherness' imposes on him a different moral status or value - he is disabled therefore the devil's work? How real is that kind of thinking in today's world, whether overt, in cultures which brand children as witches, or more subtly, as in the case of mental illness?

Sanctuary and hospitality

King Richard III lived in turbulent times, where the threat of violence was ever present as warring factions struggled for supremacy. At one stage he fled the country. Many people come to the UK from similar situations, fugitives and exiles. The city of Leicester is a vibrant mix of many different communities from around the globe. It is a City of Sanctuary. What does this mean for the citizens of Leicester? How do we live together in all our variety and in community? What is the place of refugees and asylum seekers in our society?

King Richard III is buried in a Cathedral dedicated to St Martin. Martin, a Roman soldier, is remembered for his act of compassion and charity in sharing his cloak with a stranger. He went on to be a great Christian leader. His tomb, in Tours, became both a symbol and an inspiration to others to carry on and develop his work of reaching out and supporting others. How might King Richard's tomb in St Martin's Cathedral similarly challenge us?

Buildings, monuments and places

We look at Leicester as it is today, and find it hard to imagine its mediaeval and Roman past. Thankfully archeological teams have enabled us to reclaim that, and it is fascinating to superimpose earlier layouts upon the map. Roads we take for granted were not there, while others have vanished. Information boards tell us, for example, where the Roman heart of the city lay; and, of course, we still have some buildings and remains from former times. A combination of archeology and historical research enabled not only the discovery of the Greyfriars site, but pinpointed its exact location and orientation. Finding King Richard under a car park starkly reminds us of the changing nature of places, and the transience of even sacred buildings and monuments. What other history lies under our feet all around Leicestershire? Tombs, manors, other buildings, even bells..... which of these were part of King Richard's landscape? What remains of other pasts, also long forgotten, wait to be reclaimed in our consciousness?

King Richard III was reburied in Leicester Cathedral, in whose parish his first tomb was located. This is consecrated ground, just as his original burial place was. Certainly not tucked away, his exact location in the Greyfriars church marked him as a person of status. His location in Leicester Cathedral, mirroring that of several other English monarchs buried in other locations, gives him a visibly meaningful, dignified and peaceful final resting place. This is in a building, sensitively re-ordered not only to house the tomb of a king, but to facilitate the work and worship of the Cathedral in the 21st century. Here is a place of hospitality, where many visitors journey with the King Richard story, but are also able to reflect and pray. How does the presence of this very English tomb contribute to our understanding of national and local identity, amid monuments to many who laid the foundations of modern Leicester's identity and success and a chapel honouring the military dead of the 19th and 20th centuries? As we gaze upon the pall and crown commissioned for his re-interment, and consider the newly commissioned stained glass, hinting at but not telling the King Richard story, what are the overwhelming threads, questions and narrative we take away to journey with?

Alison M Adams, November 2014, updated 2015