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MURDER IN THE TOWER





RICHARD III ON TRIAL MURDER IN THE TOWER

When two young princes disappeared more than 500 years ago, it sparked one of the most controversial and debated murder mysteries in history. Did Richard III really kill the princes in the Tower?

Written by Frances White

It was a balmy summer's night in the dark twisting corridors of the Tower of London as Edward and Richard, the two young sons of York, slept soundly. A sob of silver moonlight fell upon their golden hair from a high window, and all was silent. Fast asleep in bed, their hands clutching each other for comfort, they barely stirred as the door opened with a creak.

A figure slipped through the entrance. Stepping lightly, he swept up a feather pillow and slowly approached the beds before lunging forward, firmly holding the pillow over the older boy's face until his breathing stopped. Then he moved to the younger child. In a few minutes the deed was done, and the figure slunk back into the darkness and out of sight.

This story entered the nation's consciousness in late 1483, and it was retold over and over until it was accepted as fact. It was recounted by respected historians and made popular and immortalised by Shakespeare's *Richard III*. But where did this rumour start? Was it really King Richard who masterminded such an atrocious

crime? And how did the death of two young children benefit anyone?

The succession to the English throne has never been as precarious and uncertain as in the 15th century. Since 1154, the English crown had belonged to the Plantagenets, but when Edward III died in 1377, he left behind a series of sons that he had gifted with dukedoms. This created a breed of aristocrats who all had distant claims to the throne. Henry IV, the son of the fourth son of Edward III, deposed and most likely murdered his way to the top and formed the House of Lancaster, as well as making a host of enemies in the process. The line seemed to be stable, but thanks to the inefficiency of his grandson, Henry VI, the conflict known as the War of the Roses broke out. It led to the eventual succession of the first Yorkist king, Edward IV, but his hold on throne was anything but secure.

Despite the instability and political turmoil, Edward IV was a stronger ruler than his predecessor, and managed to establish some order in England. This all came crashing down in 1483



MURDER IN THE TOWER

when he died suddenly, leaving his 12-year-old son, Edward V, as king. This wasn't unprecedented; children had 'ruled' before, usually through the guidance of regents, but it certainly wasn't ideal with so many would-be heirs snapping at his heels. Edward V was an independent boy; he was mature beyond his years and he had already been preparing to be king, but he was a child in a man's world, and it did not take long for people to take advantage of his fragile position.

While awaiting his coronation ceremony in the Tower of London with his younger brother, Richard of York, the throne was torn from beneath Edward before he even had a chance to sit on it. His father's marriage to his mother was ruled invalid, as he had allegedly been pre-contracted to another beforehand, and their children, including young Edward, were declared illegitimate. Bastards were not judged worthy of the throne, so the crown fell into the hands of the next legitimate heir, his uncle - Richard III.

From this point on, the fate of the princes fades into myth and legend. Their last reported sighting was late summer 1483, and from then the records run dry. They were certainly never seen again in public, and soon rumours began to surface that the young boys had been murdered. There was no evidence that the princes had been killed, save their disappearance, but the search for the



"It is entirely possible that Richard had the boys transported out of the country"

culprit has baffled and intrigued scholars for more than 500 years. In 1674, a wooden box containing two small human skeletons was discovered near the White Tower, the suspected site of the boys' burial. Believed to be the remains of the princes, the bones were buried in Westminster Abbey under the order of Charles II. However, these bones have not yet been subject to DNA analysis, and many experts don't believe they belong to the princes at all.

The problem with identifying the children's 'killer' is the era in which the murder supposedly occurred. It was a time when murder and treason were rampant and ambitions were sky high. There is not just one, but an array of possible suspects, all with their own motives for committing the crime. Contemporary accounts are unreliable due to the writer's own political alliances, and all of them contradict other versions of events. Shakespeare's play popularised the figure of Richard III as a scheming, heartless hunchback, willing to murder anyone to secure his throne, but just how accurate is this? Richard had his reasons to do away with the boys, but so did a host of others, and even more people had reason to drag Richard's name through the mud.

Is the common belief that Richard is responsible simply encouraging a vicious rumour created by his enemies some 500 years ago?

Did the boys know what awaited them as they slept in the gloomy Tower?



COUNTDOWN TO MURDER

The final movements before the princes' disappearance

9 April 1483

A king dies

After suffering from a short illness, Edward IV dies. The reason for his death is a mystery, with rumours of a possible poisoning as well as typhoid considered.



24 April 1483

The last journey

His son Edward V and the royal party leave their home at Ludlow to travel to London for his coronation.



4 May 1483

A royal entrance

Edward enters the capital with Richard III and the Duke of Gloucester. They are greeted by the mayor and hundreds of citizens.



19 May 1483

Final residence

Edward is moved into the Tower of London, which is the usual place for kings to stay prior to a coronation.

16 June 1483

The brothers reunite

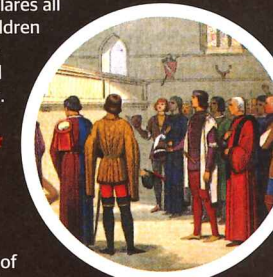
After previously being held with his mother and half-siblings in sanctuary in Westminster, Richard joins his brother at the request of the Duke of Gloucester.



22 June 1483

A new king

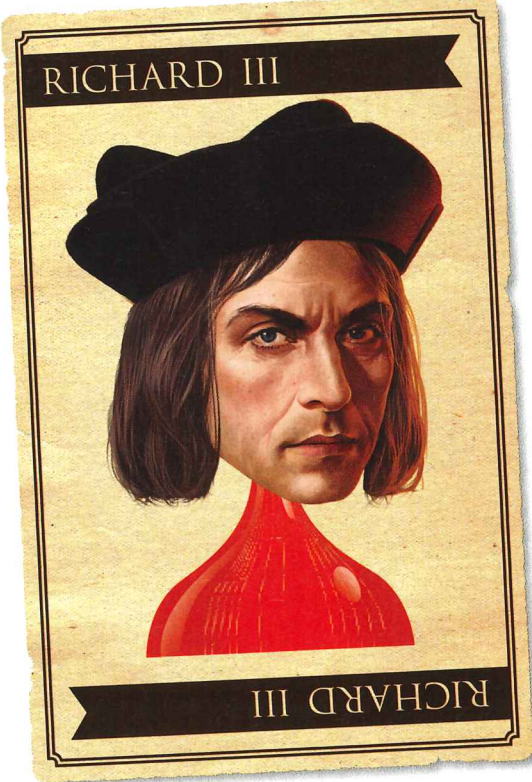
Theologian Ralph Shaa preaches a sermon that declares all of Edward IV's children illegitimate. Three days later, Richard III is declared king.



End of the summer

Last sighting

The children are withdrawn to the inner apartments of the Tower and are seen less and less. By the end of summer, they are presumed dead.



Suspect 01

RICHARD III

Motive Secure his hold on the throne

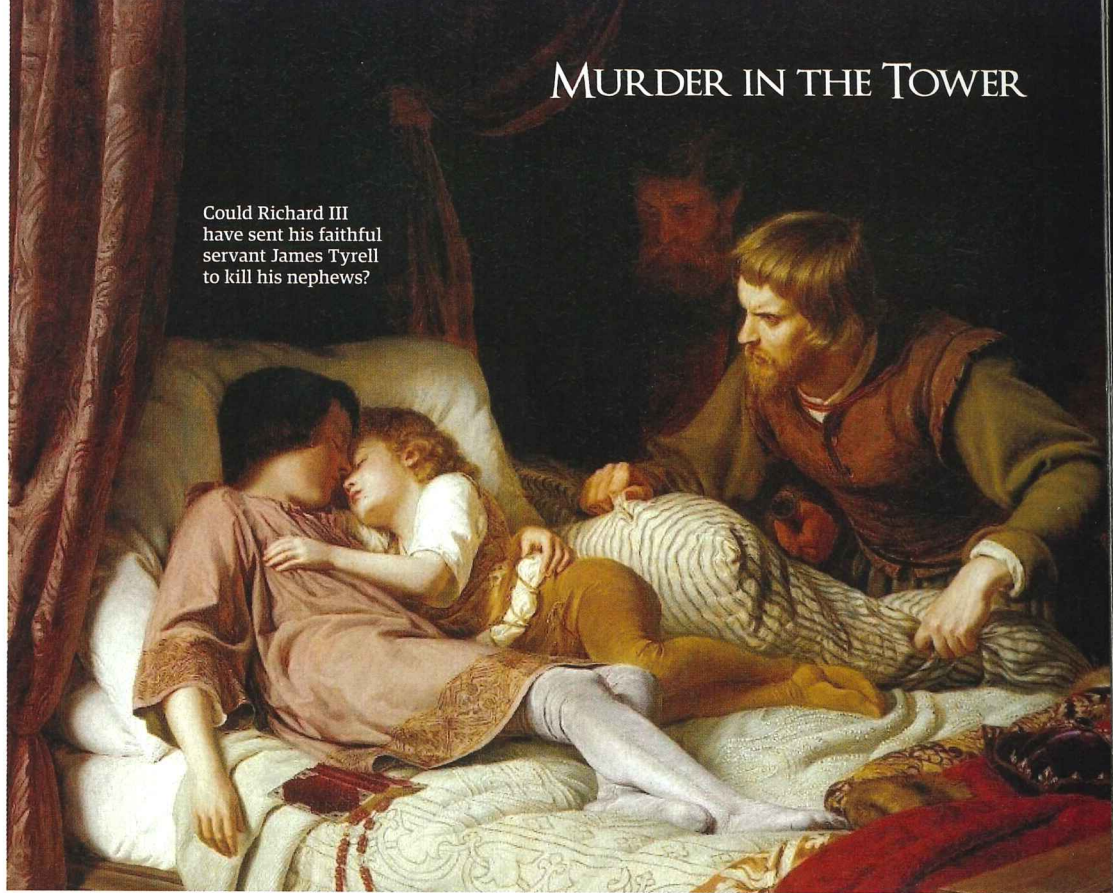
Opportunity Full control of and access to the Tower of London

The reasons why Richard would murder his nephews are rather straightforward. After serving his brother loyally for years, upon his death, the jealous and ambitious Richard seized the opportunity to claim the throne as his own.

He first did this by dismissing, arresting and eventually murdering many of the ministers appointed to his nephew, Edward V, claiming that he did so for his protection. He then placed Edward and his brother in the Tower of London and delayed his coronation ceremony. Two weeks later they were declared illegitimate and Richard ascended the throne. Although they had been disenfranchised, keeping the princes alive when they had such a strong claim was too dangerous, so he had them murdered.

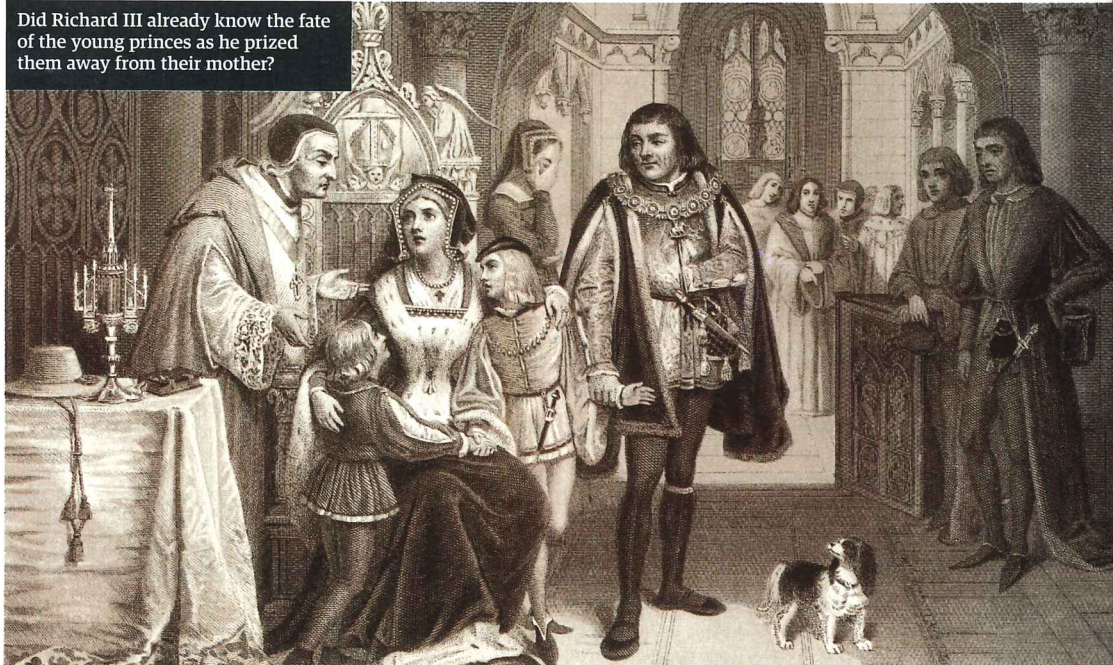
If the events were this clear-cut, there would be no question as to who was responsible, but unfortunately they are not. Strictly speaking, Richard didn't take the throne illegally, he was asked to by a parliamentary committee. The only part played by Richard in the bill that declared the boys illegitimate, *Titus Regius*, was accepting it, perhaps indicating that Richard instead was a man who had no choice but to accept his role of king, else face a crisis of royal succession.

If Richard did indeed murder the princes to secure his own hold on the throne, then why did he not publicise their deaths? He could easily have claimed they died of illness, but he did



Could Richard III have sent his faithful servant James Tyrell to kill his nephews?

Did Richard III already know the fate of the young princes as he prized them away from their mother?



nothing of the sort. When faced with the vicious rumours that threatened to destroy his reign and certainly lessened the public's support of his claim, he avoided even acknowledging the boys' disappearance. If his motive was to strengthen his grip on the throne, he failed to take advantage of the opportunity he created.

Most crucially, there is no solid evidence that the princes were murdered at all. If people can disappear in the modern day, then it is certainly likely that they could in the 15th century. It is entirely possible that Richard had the boys transported out of the country, and this is the reason why he was unable to easily present them when he faced accusations of their murder. It would also explain the uncertainty that surrounded their fate and the lack of evidence.

For Richard to be innocent, at least one other man had to have been lying - Sir James Tyrell. Tyrell was a loyal servant of Richard III and was bestowed with an array of titles and grants once he was in power. When Henry VII was crowned, Tyrell was initially pardoned for being a supporter of Richard, but in 1501 he was arrested for treason and executed. According to Thomas More, upon 'examination', Tyrell admitted that he had murdered the princes. Although we only have More's word for this, the fact that both King Henry and his wife attended Tyrell's trial - a very unusual event - indicates Tyrell did make this confession. Whether this was forced by torture or was actually true, we may never know - but it had huge implications for his master, Richard, firmly placing the murders at his feet for the next 500 years.



Suspect 02

HENRY STAFFORD, DUKE OF BUCKINGHAM

Motive: To claim the throne and his lost inheritance

Opportunity: Only possible while under Richard's orders or by forced entry

After Richard III, the Duke of Buckingham Henry Stafford is one of the earliest suspects for the murder. Buckingham had multiple links to the throne, but these were through the daughters of younger sons, making the chances of him claiming the crown very slim indeed. Despite his family fighting for the House of Lancaster in the Wars of the Roses, he went on to become the ward of Elizabeth Woodville, the wife of Edward IV. He was married to her sister, but this was not a happy union; he considered it an insult to be married to a woman of lower class and resented the Woodvilles from that point onwards. When Richard took guardianship of the young Edward, Buckingham was by his side. But what exactly did the duke have to gain from the princes' deaths?

One suggested motive is Buckingham's interest in the Bohun estate - worth some £1,100 annually. He had inherited the property from his great-great-grandmother Eleanor de Bohun, but Eleanor, and therefore Buckingham, only received half of the estate. Her sister inherited the other half and ended up marrying Henry IV. When Edward IV took the crown, the estate became crown property, but Buckingham insisted it belonged to him.



Did Richard III and Buckingham conspire to murder the young princes together?

This desire to reclaim his estate certainly explains why Buckingham supported Richard's ascension, but not why he might have killed the princes, for the simple fact that Richard granted him his inheritance in July 1483, pending parliamentary approval.

Instead, a very common motive for murder is given to Buckingham's actions: ambition. Buckingham had acted as kingmaker for Richard, aligning with him the moment he came into power and guiding his hand to the throne. He was as entangled in the events that led the children to their deathbeds as Richard himself. He held Richard's train and staff on his coronation, perhaps thinking that he may stand in that position soon enough. In order to achieve this, he placed Richard on the throne just to see him fall and killed the princes in the Tower either to begin a vicious rumour against Richard or to eliminate his first stumbling block to the crown. In the autumn of

1483, he unleashed an uprising against Richard that would eventually lead to both men's deaths.

Many have claimed that if he didn't act alone, Buckingham killed the princes on behalf of Richard, and the rebellion was a result of his disillusionment with his new king. It is impossible to prove whether Buckingham was acting out of guilt, ambition or malice when he led his rebellion. However, it seems peculiar that a man who knew the princes were dead would lead a rebellion demanding they be reinstated on the throne.

It was the rumours of their deaths that caused Buckingham to be replaced by Henry Tudor as leader of the rebellion. Perhaps strangest of all is the fact that when Buckingham was captured and tried, Richard did not accuse him of murdering the princes. With Buckingham at his mercy, it would have been the perfect time to implicate him for the murders he was aware he committed, clearing his own name in the process. But he did not.



PRETENDERS OF THE THRONE

The princes' presumed murder didn't stop people coming forward claiming to be them

Perkin Warbeck

Warbeck claimed he was Richard in the court of Burgundy in 1490, saying that he had been spared by his brother's murderers due to his young age, but swore to not reveal his identity. His claim was supported by Richard's sister, Margaret of York, and he gained support from various monarchs, most notably James IV of Scotland. However, after hearing the king's army was advancing towards him, he fled. He was eventually captured and taken to the Tower of London after being paraded through the streets to be made an example of. He was imprisoned alongside Edward, Earl of Warwick, the son of Richard III's brother, and when the two of them attempted to escape in 1499, he was hanged.

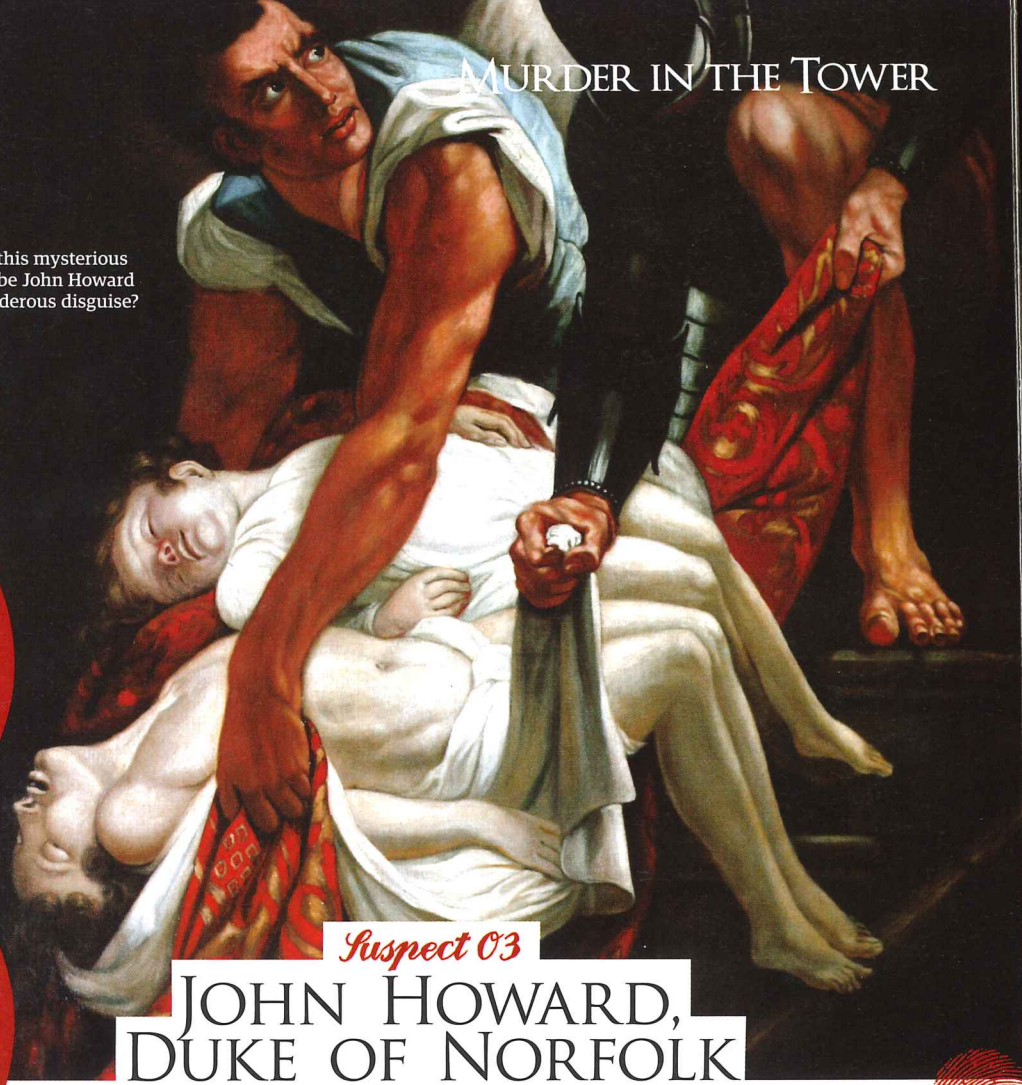


Lambert Simnel

When the young Simnel was taken in by a priest named Richard Simons, the man noticed the alarming similarity between the boy and the sons of Edward IV. He made plans to present Simnel as Richard, but when he heard that Edward, Earl of Warwick, had died in imprisonment, he changed his claim and declared him as the earl instead. With a rebellion already planned by the Yorkists, Simnel became the figurehead and gained support in Ireland. However, his army was defeated by the kings and due to his young age, Simnel was pardoned and given a job in the royal kitchen.



Could this mysterious figure be John Howard in murderous disguise?



Suspect 03

JOHN HOWARD, DUKE OF NORFOLK

Motive To claim his rightful inheritance

Opportunity Constable of the Tower at the time

Howard was yet another member of the aristocracy descended from royalty: Edward I on his mother's side and King John on his father's. He was a staunch supporter of the House of York and was knighted by King Edward IV. He slowly made his way up the ranks, even carrying the crown to Richard III at his coronation.

Howard's support of Richard alone isn't enough to accuse him of murder, but the benefits he apparently reaped because of his ascension certainly are. Just two days into Richard's reign, Howard received the lands and titles held by Richard of York. These lands, the 'Mowbray inheritance', had been given to Richard as 'compensation' after the death of his betrothed. This meant Howard was denied his inheritance, and had not been compensated at all for this loss.

Adding to this theory is the fact that it was Howard who encouraged placing Richard in the Tower with his brother - the Tower he was constable of. He was also devoted to Richard III, even dying on the same field as his king. If he had not acted alone to secure his fortunes, it is not impossible to believe he acted alongside the king - agreeing to do away with the boys as both a favour and a means to claim what was rightfully his.

It seems Howard had both the means and the motive to commit the act, but this theory actually falls apart under closer inspection. Howard was not the all-powerful constable of the Tower - he held the second reversion of the post, making it unlikely he could do as he wished there.

In this case, we have to believe that Richard allowed Howard access to the Tower, but in

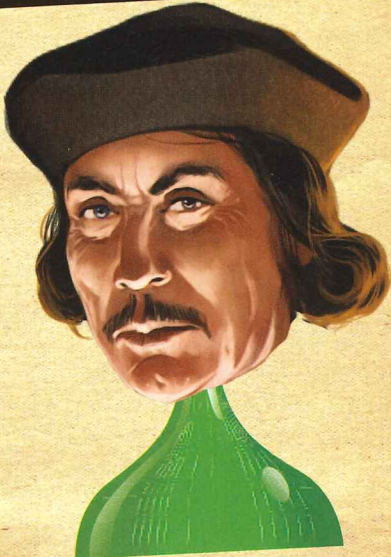
reality their friendship was not as great as it seemed. It is more likely that Howard's commitment was to the House of York, which had helped him ascend the social and political ladder, rather than to Richard himself. Such loyalty to a house at this time was a remarkable thing, and it is a little cynical to assume its source was shared blame for murder.

Most damning of all is his motive. If he did indeed wish to claim his lands and titles, he would have only had to kill the current owner - Richard of York. Why then would he also kill Edward V? The entire argument falls apart if we consider Howard only had 12 days to do away with them - the time between Richard's arrival at the Tower and when Howard was granted his estate. But both princes were reportedly seen after this date. Considering he had his title when they were seen alive, Howard really had no reason to kill them.

"Howard encouraged placing Richard in the Tower with his brother"

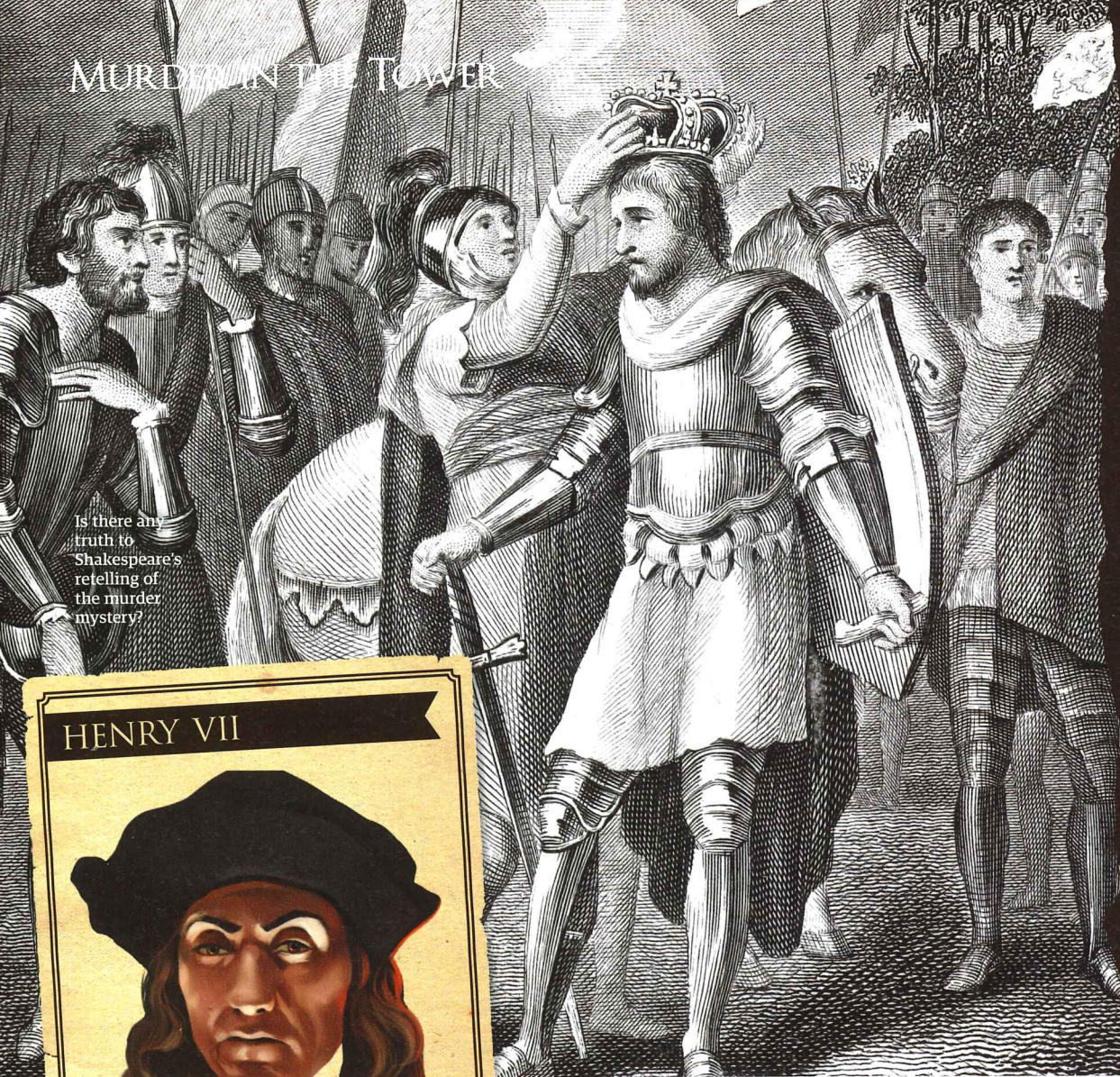


JOHN HOWARD

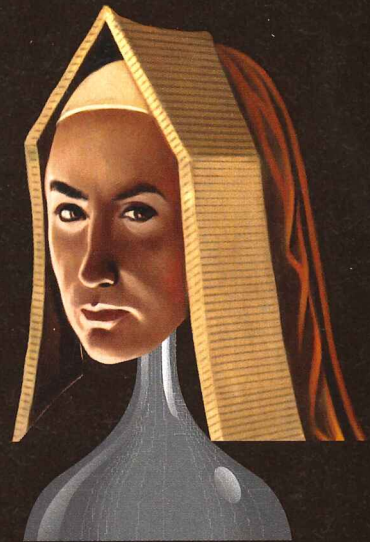


JOHN HOWARD





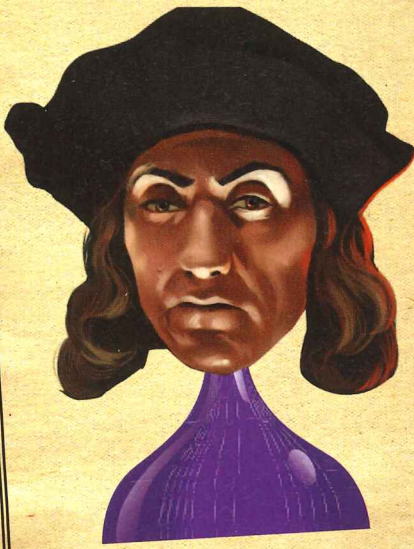
Is there any truth to Shakespeare's retelling of the murder mystery?



A DEADLY RUMOUR

Margaret Beaufort, Henry VII's mother, is another name that has been linked to the murders, but a more compelling theory is that although she didn't kill them, she began the rumour that Richard did. With her focus on the interests of her son, Beaufort enlisted the help of Woodville and Buckingham to drive the autumn rebellion and place her son on the throne. The rumour of the boys' deaths and Richard's connection to it certainly started a domino effect that led to Henry VII's rule, and this very well may have been due to his mother, as the ultimate spin master, working behind the scenes to tarnish Richard's name and prompt people to flock to her son's side.

HENRY VII



HENRY VII

Suspect 04

HENRY VII

Motive Secure his hold on the throne

Opportunity Access to the Tower upon becoming king

When Henry VII set his sights on the English crown, his claim was incredibly weak; there were almost 30 nobles with a more credible claim. He knew ascension would not happen through birthright, but instead conquest, and to achieve this he needed allies. So he vowed to marry Elizabeth of York, daughter of Edward IV and sister to the princes in the Tower. By doing this, he gained the support of Lancastrians as well as disenfranchised Yorkists unhappy with Richard's reign.

But once he became king after Bosworth and was set to marry Elizabeth, he encountered a

problem. Richard III had declared all the children of Edward IV illegitimate in *Titus Regius*. Now that Henry was king, he could easily overturn it, which he did - even burning all copies to deny it ever existed. Although this returned legitimacy to his wife to be, it also meant the princes were the legal claimants to the throne. This left Henry with no choice - he had to have the princes killed, or lose his throne as a result of his own actions. It is argued that this happened not in 1483, as commonly believed, but in 1486.

This date is supported by Tyrell's confession, as he received two pardons from Henry in 1486. This is an unusual occurrence, and Henry would later proclaim that Tyrell had indeed confessed to the murders - and as Tyrell was Richard's loyal servant, it was easy for him to shift the blame on his predecessor. This theory is also supported by Henry's treatment of the princes' mother, Elizabeth Woodville, who was deprived of her lands and fees.

It is no secret that Henry made efforts to wipe out remaining Plantagenets, but it seems very unlikely that nobody would have mentioned the boys if they had survived three years longer than previously believed. For the early part of his reign, Henry faced constant rebellions from angry Yorkists; it is difficult to believe none of



"He had to have the princes killed, or lose his throne"

them would have accused him of this crime had it occurred during his time on the throne. Additionally, if they had survived until this date, why did Richard III not previously display them after being accused of their murder?

This would have helped redeem his reputation and likely quell the rebellion, but he did not. It is also similarly unlikely that Elizabeth Woodville would have supported Henry's claim to the throne, as she did by agreeing to his marriage with her daughter, had she known her sons were still alive.

Most revealing of all is Henry's reaction when pretenders of the princes emerged. When Perkin Warbeck claimed to be the young Richard, Henry was so worried that he made peace with France to prevent a rebellion. His actions were those of a nervous man, very unlike his confident response when Lambert Simnel emerged posing as the Earl of Warwick, who Henry knew was locked up in the Tower. This is a telling indication that Henry had no idea what happened to the princes. Considering Henry was 14 when he left England and didn't return until the Battle of Bosworth, it is more likely that Henry knew less about their fate than most; he never accused Richard of the act for exactly that reason. All Henry could do was assume and hope, for the sake of his throne, that they were dead.



WHO MURDERED THE PRINCES?

There is not enough evidence to charge any of the suspects with the crime, so instead we must determine the most likely perpetrator. We cannot ignore the fact that Richard, after years of loyalty to his brother, was willing to usurp his own nephews in order to gain power after being appointed their guardian. These are not the actions of a trustworthy or honourable man, this was a man who was hungry for power and willing to do anything to obtain it. Not only did he have the most to gain from their deaths, but he also had the access and opportunity to do it at the time they were last seen.

Richard being innocent of the murders relies on a belief about his character, which is impossible to prove - with the cold hard facts alone, the blame lies squarely with the usurper king.