The Summer of 1483: Who Was Doing What, Where, With Whom, and Why

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Richard III had been offered the crown in June and had enjoyed a splendid coronation on 6 July. He had effectively disposed of opposition, and had set off to display himself to his people on a royal progress which proceeded westward from Westminster and then northward to York, where it culminate at the beginning of September with the investiture of his son as Prince of Wales. The summer of 1483 was a hotbed of activity for those people who had a political interest in the disposal of the throne of England upon the death of Edward IV.

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So we know where Richard was at any given time. More interesting is where his opponents were, and what they were up to. For although they had been defeated, they were not eliminated; and in his absence they were busily finding ways to overthrow his rule.

Those whose activities will be traced in this article fall into five main strands: the Woodville family; the princes in the Tower of London; the Duke of Buckingham; Henry Tudor; and his mother Margaret Beaufort. All five came to be woven together by the month of September.

The Woodville family

The large Woodville family had established a power-base during the 20 years since Edward IV had married Elizabeth Woodville, but this had been removed with the deposition of the young Edward V. Edward, their 12-year-old son, had been brought up by and among Woodvilles, whose influence on him was reportedly deplored by many in high places. Misguidedly, the Woodville-dominated Council had attempted to crown him within a month of his father's death, bypassing arrangements for the boy's minority set out in the Will of the late king, which had appointed Richard Protector and Defender of the Church and Realm in England and Chief Adviser to the King (I have written books explaining this important office which was responsible for state security).[2] This plan was over-ruled by the King's Council who opted for the protectorate, but rather than reconcile with the new government, the Woodvilles scattered.

Elizabeth, together with several family members, fled into sanctuary at Westminster Abbey in early May. By mid-June young Edward V had been set aside as unable to inherit the throne. This was due to the discovery that the late king (Edward IV) had secretly been married to Lady Eleanor Talbot (daughter of the Earl of Shrewsbury) some years before he secretly and bigamously married Elizabeth Woodville who then bore him children. Edward's combination of sins made those offspring illegitimate; and the complex Canon law of the day made it impossible for the Church to legitimize them. Illegitimate children were banned from inheriting lands or titles under English law.

Young Edward V, together with his younger brother Richard of York (known to history as 'the princes in the Tower') had been lodged in the royal apartments of the Tower of London before this problem brewed, and there they remained while the government decided that Richard III must inherit the throne.

One of Queen Elizabeth's brothers was to play an important role in subsequent events, although Tudor 'histories' ensured that no credit would attach to his name. This was Sir Edward Woodville, who as early as April, while Richard was still on his way to London from the North, had set himself up with a force of ships at sea, in a foolhardy move to counteract French privateering in the Channel. At the same time Thomas Grey, Elizabeth's elder son by her previous marriage, had spent several thousand pounds raising men at arms for the same venture.

When Richard took charge as Protector and Defender of the Realm, most of the fleet was brought safely back to England. However, Edward Woodville escaped with two ships and a haul of £10,250 in gold coin audaciously taken from a ship lying in harbour at Southampton.[3] Woodville and his fortune ended up in Brittany, at the disposal of Henry Tudor, of which more below. Meanwhile Thomas Grey absconded, and history tells us nothing more of his expensively equipped soldiery; we may guess that he and his family made good use of them in the later rebellion that they facilitated.

The Woodville clan had few options once they had refused to reconcile with the new regime. They were condemned as reprobate by the King's Council in June, as shown by the withering remarks in the Chancellor's speech drafted for the 1483 Parliament.[4] Their only member in a strategically influential position was Sir Edward in Brittany, who was working to fulfil their aim of restoring Edward V.

The sons of Edward IV, later known as the 'princes in the Tower'

Reliable details of the princes are scant during this period, but records show that – with or without their knowledge – they soon became a focus for dissidents, and a plot was foiled in July which planned to create a diversion and abduct them. The actual report of the plot, by the 16th/17th-century antiquary John Stow, appears to receive independent support in the writings of Thomas Basin, Bishop of Lisieux.[5] For reasons explained in my book, *Richard III: The Maligned King*, chapter 8, a likely date for the attempt is the third week of July, which ties in with a letter dated 29 July from Richard III to his Chancellor ordering action to be taken against the perpetrators. I have suggested this led to proceedings against them conducted at Crosby's Place by the Earl Marshal, John Howard.

Stow, who apparently took his information from the original indictment, says that the July conspirators were in correspondence with the Tudor camp in Brittany. This confirms that the Woodville faction have been conspiring with Sir Edward Woodville who has been in Brittany for the past two months, with two fully manned ships and coffers overflowing with gold, desperately seeking a way to restore Edward V (and the Woodville family) to power.

One of those convicted in the ill-conceived plan of July was a man who worked as a wardrober at the Tower, so it is evident that the princes were still in residence at that date. This plot was followed by another soon afterwards, which drew three of our strands together into the mix: on 13 August John Welles, Margaret Beaufort's half-brother, was arrested for plotting rebellion.[6] We have no details, but Margaret's biographers, Michael Jones and Malcolm Underwood, believe that Margaret was up to her eyes in this intrigue, and probably was also involved in the earlier plot to abduct the princes; Louise Gill and Rosemary Horrox agree.[7] It is apparent that no harm has come to them, certainly not on account of Welles's plot because, after forfeiting his lands, he was allowed to go free. However, it was now clearly imperative to remove them from their conspicuous location in the capital city, and Richard seems to have arranged for this to take place in August (see below).

The last reference to their whereabouts in 1483 comes from the Crowland chronicler, who states that at the time of the Prince of Wales's investiture they were in the Tower of London under close guard.[8] No specific date is given, and since the chronicler's general report of the investiture is also flawed, I have come to doubt the usefulness of this unsupported comment. The writer's account was penned two years later, and his chronology (or that of his informant/s) was not always accurate – moreover, the removal of the princes in August would have been carried out in the utmost secrecy, with misdirection probably part of the plan. It is important to note, also, that the Crowland chronicler never reported that the princes had been done away with – though he did report rumours to this effect.

Harry Stafford, Duke of Buckingham

Our third strand follows the rise and fall of the Duke of Buckingham, who was Richard's chief aide in 1483 and a principal proponent of his right to inherit the crown. After Richard's coronation Buckingham made his way to his seat at Brecon, arriving by about 23 August,[9] though his activities during this time are not reliably recorded. It seems he did not, after all, accompany Richard on his westward Royal Progress as hitherto believed, despite the story recounted by Henry Tudor's historian Polydore Vergil that they had angry words and parted at Gloucester (the king was at Gloucester on 2 August). In fact the two friends did not have any such quarrel as Vergil alleges, so this episode appears to be one of Vergil's many inaccuracies.[10]

Buckingham's status in life had been elevated beyond measure by his new association with Richard III. So it is hard to understand why, in view of his new prominence on the royal stage, together with all its material rewards and financial gains, he would rebel against his generous benefactor. As best we can ascertain, Buckingham was duped into supposing that Richard could not hold on to the throne, and that Buckingham himself would be the favoured choice to replace him.

However, he did not desert Richard until very late August or early September, and until that time enjoyed great power and prestige throughout the summer as Lord High Constable of England. We have recently learnt more of him in the new evidence discovered by The Missing Princes Project. There is a document in the Gelderland Archives which gives the testimony of Richard of England, the Royal Yorkist

Pretender who would raise armies in the 1490s to challenge Henry VII's throne. I firmly believe, with Sir George Buc (1619), that this was Edward V's younger brother, whom Henry VII dismissed in a flimsy story saying he was a boatman's son called 'Perkin Warbeck'.[11]

The newly found testimony explains for the first time how the princes were quietly removed from view in the Tower – and it was Buckingham who separated them and arranged for them to be taken away to safe locations, almost certainly in August.

Henry Tudor

In our fourth strand we come to Henry Tudor, Richard's contemporary, who had been raised a supporter of the Lancastrian dynasty of kings (Henry IV to Henry VI). The house of Lancaster had occupied the throne until, in 1460, Parliament had ruled that Henry IV's seizure of the crown had violated the senior rights of the Duke of York's ancestor. This meant that York, father of Edward IV and Richard III, was entitled to the throne.

Henry Tudor had been on the losing side in the Wars of the Roses that led to the change from Lancaster to York, and had fled into exile. By 1483 he and his supporters were in Brittany enjoying the hospitality and financial support of Duke Francis II. Evidently he harboured ambitions that prevented him from reconciling to the rule of York, for although terms had been discussed for his return to England if he swore allegiance, he had obstinately refused to budge.[12]

Duke Francis had been using Tudor in an attempt to pressurize Edward IV, without success, into complying with his demands for military support. During this period Brittany's policies leaned more strongly against England, and Edward Woodville found sympathetic ears. Aiming to restore Edward V, and with ships and treasure at his disposal, Woodville received (as he supposed) support from Tudor and the Bretons: a fleet was duly prepared to cross the Channel. However, as it turned out, Henry Tudor would see this as a golden opportunity to further his own ambitions.

Lady Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond (and her supporter Bishop John Morton)

Our last strand deals with the partnership between Tudor's mother, Margaret Beaufort, and the man who emerged as her politically astute counsellor, John Morton, Bishop of Ely: 'a man of many designs and much boldness, versed in party intrigue since the time of King Henry VI'.[13] As our curtain goes up, Morton is under arrest for participating in a plot (led by William Hastings) to assassinate Richard. He has been sent to Buckingham's seat of Brecon in south-east Wales, and is held there in custody when Buckingham arrives in mid-August.

It is Morton who is clever enough to suborn him to treason against Richard, deceiving the duke into believing he could supplant the king by placing himself at the head of a rebellion. This rebellion has been fomented by the Woodvilles in favour of Edward V, but is now undergoing a hiatus due to the spreading of rumours that Edward is dead. With the presumed absence of the prince as figurehead, this offers an opportunity for someone to take over. It is easy to see Morton as the *éminence grise* behind all this, persuading Buckingham to step up and proclaim he is the rebels' new leader – though Buckingham is unloved and too recently seen as the man whose arguments deposed the boy-king.

In reality, Morton and Beaufort have a different candidate in mind: Henry Tudor. Secret letters are soon flying between Brecon and Margaret Beaufort, and between Beaufort and Brittany, arranging to place her enormous wealth at the disposal of her son's ambitions.

From her involvement already in the Welles plot, Margaret Beaufort was evidently leading the Woodvilles to believe she was on their side, using for her own ends the unrest they had stoked. Otherwise there was no earthly reason why she and her half-brother would risk being involved in rebellious plots in support of Edward V, which served their family's interests not one whit.

Best of all, by ostensibly joining forces with the Woodvilles, she was working towards the potential hand in marriage, for her exiled son, of Elizabeth Woodville's eldest daughter. Such a marriage would transform him at a stroke into a major player on the royal stage. Accordingly she sent intermediaries to the queen in sanctuary to commence negotiations. Historians have been quick to fall into line with the story peddled by Henry Tudor's historian Polydore Vergil, that Elizabeth subscribed to a glorious destiny of uniting York with Lancaster, and that because the promotion of Tudor was clearly against the interests of her own sons, Elizabeth must have believed them dead. Such conclusions, however, are over-credulous, as I have explained in my book *Richard III: The Maligned King*.[14] Before offering a daughter to Tudor, the queen would first have demanded support in restoring her sons to the throne.

Merging the strands

If we now cross to Brittany to see what is in progress there, Henry Tudor has leapt into action with his new (soon-to-be-forgotten) friend Sir Edward Woodville, ostensibly aiming to restore Edward V to the throne. In August the duke agrees to prepare and provision a flotilla of ships to invade England, which is already being equipped by the first weeks of September.[15]

In England, Buckingham is working on the assumption, fed to him by Morton, that all this international support is from people wishing him to replace Richard III on the throne. Richard meanwhile is so trusting that at the end of August he has sent Buckingham a commission requiring him to investigate reports of uprisings that have broken out in London and the southern counties. Instead of bringing the rebels to justice, Buckingham tours the seats of rebellion in early September presenting his credentials as their brand new captain-in-chief. As the Crowland chronicler tells us, he now issues his public proclamation against Richard while the king is still in the North.[16] Since we know that Richard was happily ordering monies to be paid over to Buckingham as late as 16 September,[17] this proclamation cannot have been issued before about 10-12 September.

It seems almost immediately afterwards that rumours spread like wildfire among the rebels, claiming the boy-king they want to restore has met an unspecified but violent end. Now bereft of a candidate for the throne, they are not, however, prepared to promote Harry of Buckingham to that role.[18]

There is, of course, no way that the scattered pockets of rebels can confirm the fate or even the whereabouts of the princes. A decision must urgently be taken to cover the eventuality that the rumours *may* be true, and at this point someone – probably the ever-helpful Morton – mentions that Lady Margaret Beaufort happens to be negotiating a marriage contract between Henry Tudor and Edward IV's eldest child, the princess Elizabeth of York. The rebels accordingly make Tudor their champion, apparently on the presumption of this marriage – which is, of course, something else they are unable to confirm for themselves. But it's good enough to trump Buckingham, who must by now be wondering whether he has been talked into some rather hasty decisions.

So at this point all our strands have come together. Buckingham has joined Morton and Margaret Beaufort in a rebellion that now has Henry Tudor catapulted to prominence as leader rather than supporter. Sir Edward Woodville, having sought Tudor backing, now has rather more involvement from Henry and his mother than he bargained for. And Elizabeth Woodville finds her daughter publicly promised away to Henry Tudor, who is making a bid for the crown on the basis of nothing more than a rumour that her sons are dead.

But had her negotiations with Margaret Beaufort really gone that far? Just how happy was she to have her boys written off in the space of a few days, while her family's long-planned activation to restore them has been hijacked by this Lancastrian adventurer from Brittany – who clearly intends to use her daughter to set himself up in their place? I would argue that a frantic mother would never voluntarily accept any such rumour without instituting the most strenuous enquiries and searches. We know that Elizabeth brought money and possessions with her into sanctuary, and had the wherewithal to hire agents to carry out her instructions. Even had she been told to her face that the boys were dead, would she not keep hoping? Short of seeing their bodies for herself, what could possibly induce her to enable Tudor to take their place on the throne?

This entire chapter is one that any observer would find hard to believe, but hardest of all is the alleged co-operation of Elizabeth Woodville in the abandonment of her sons' birthright.

NOTES

1. Rhoda Edwards, *The Itinerary of King Richard III, 1483-1485* (London, 1983).
2. See particularly *Richard Duke of Gloucester as Lord Protector and High Constable of England* (Horstead, 2015).
3. Rosemary Horrox, *Richard III: A Study of Service* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 102-3.
4. Published in full in Carson, *Richard Duke of Gloucester as Protector and Constable*, Appendix X.
5. John Stow, *The Annales or Generall Chronicle of England* (London, 1615), p. 460; Thomas 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.
6. Horrox, *op. cit.*, p. 150; Louise Gill, *Richard III and Buckingham's Rebellion* (Stroud, 1999, 2000), p. 63.
7. Michael K Jones and Malcolm G Underwood, *The King's Mother: Lady Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 125; Gill, *op cit*, pp. 63-4; Horrox, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

8. *The Crowland Chronicle Continuations 1459-1486*, ed. Nicholas Pronay and John Cox (London, 1986), p. 163.
9. Bill Hampton, in '"Our trusty and wellbeloved servant and squire for our body", Nicholas Baker alias Spicer',
The Ricardian, 2003, and Louise Gill, *op. cit.*, agree on Buckingham's probable route to Brecon. He was certainly
there on 23 August when an order passed under his personal signet: Gill, p. 64.
10. Edwards, *Itinerary*, p. 5; Vergil, https://philological.cal.bham.ac.uk/polverg/25eng.html, ℙ10: traditional historians have followed Vergil and claimed, along with Shakespeare, that the two former friends quarrelled
because Richard refused Buckingham the Bohun inheritance. However, documentary evidence proves that Richard had already made arrangements for this grant before Buckingham rebelled.
11. Carson, *Richard III: The Maligned King* (Cheltenham, 2023), pp. 345ff.
12. Jones and Underwood, *op. cit.*, pp. 60, 61.
13. Carson, *Domenico Mancini: de occupatione regni Anglie* (Horstead, 2021), p. 63.
14. Carson, *The Maligned King*, pp. 275-6.
15. Ralph A Griffiths and Roger S Thomas, *The Making of the Tudor Dynasty* (Stroud, 1993), p. 102.
16. *Crowland Chronicle*, p. 163.
17. *British Library Harleian MS 433*, ed. R.E. Horrox and P.W. Hammond (Upminster and London, 1979-83), vol. I,
pp. 3-4.
18. *Crowland Chronicle*, p. 163.