

## The Tower and the Princes

© Annette Carson 2012/2020

I was interested to read Peter Hancock's article about the Tower of London in the *Ricardian Register*, as I am sure were many other Ricardians. Over the many years of research undertaken for my writing on Richard III I have spent countless hours considering the grounds of the Tower as they used to be several hundred years ago, and my conclusions are to be seen in my book *Richard III: The Maligned King* published initially by The History Press in 2008 (subsequently revised in 2013 and updated in six subsequent reprints plus an ebook). Chapter 10 deals exhaustively with this subject together with the bones discovered there which were assumed to be those of Edward IV's sons - the 'princes in the Tower' - and is illustrated with five colour plates and several line drawings.

In Peter's article the geography of the Tower is examined in relation to two sources of information about the fate of Edward V and his brother Richard, Duke of York. Those sources are (a) Sir Thomas More's *History of King Richard the Third*, and (b) the Tower of London itself - or rather the 'traditions' promulgated by the people whose job is to manage what they would undoubtedly describe as the Visitor Experience. I will return to the Tower authorities later.

Peter has done a valuable job deconstructing these sources and pointing out their shortcomings. The gaping lapses of credibility in Thomas More's account are of course common cause for Ricardians. It is a marvel that otherwise quite rational historians (and some not so rational) actually claim to believe More's lurid fables about events that happened when he was a child, narrated some 30-40 years later in a work of literature that the historiographer Alison Hanham calls a 'satirical drama'. This makes it doubly surprising that Peter himself accepted some of More's stories as reliable in his book *Richard III and the Murder in the Tower*. My own decision has always been to afford Master More's tall tales no house-room, so he is entirely dismissed from the various serious sources I have consulted.

Should any doubts remain as to the advisability of placing any reliance on More, consider this statement by Peter Hancock: 'The disappearance of the Princes in the Tower is rightly dubbed one of the greatest mysteries of all time'. Few people would argue with this. Yet if one believes Thomas More, there is no mystery at all. It's all there in black and white, complete with dates, places and a wealth of circumstantial detail - the identity of the king who ordered their murder, the precise manner in which it was performed, the cast of characters who carried out his wishes, their names, physical descriptions and job titles. To round it off, More offers us a choice of ways in which the bodies were disposed of.

What more could one want? A source, perhaps? This More obligingly supplies by means of his unique and unsubstantiated recital of an alleged confession by Sir James Tyrell, conveniently long-since dead.

So if Thomas More has all the answers, why have people considered it a mystery for the past 500 years? The reason, of course, is that More's so-called solution has never stood up to scrutiny, and is so hedged around with 'ifs' and 'buts' that history has rightly labelled the case unsolved.

Leaving aside such works of dramatic fiction, we are left to piece together the events of 1483 from more reliable contemporaneous sources. Details and references for all the following assertions may be found in my book.

### Establishing timelines

One of the most basic foundations of detective work is establishing timelines. We know that Edward V was lodged in the Tower of London, doubtless in the royal apartments at the Lanthorn Tower, by decision of the royal council in May 1483. He was in residence there by 19 May and was joined by his brother Richard on 16 June. As a result of the Hastings plot of mid June, security was heightened and Edward's existing attendants were replaced. This is revealed by the Italian agent in the pay of the French, Dominic

Mancini, one of whose principal informants was Edward's physician, Dr John Argentine – an extremely knowledgeable source.

In or about July, while Richard III was away on his post-coronation progress around England, an attempt to abduct the princes was foiled (as described by the antiquarian John Stow and supported by Thomas Basin). This must have forced a rethink of security arrangements around the princes, and my suggestion is that this occasioned their removal to more secure quarters within the Tower of London (examined later under Geography).

To continue with our 1483 timeline, at the beginning of August preparations for an uprising started coming to light with the aim of restoring Edward V to the throne. In response, Richard III ordered the production of quantities of arms. Mid-month at Brecon, Bishop John Morton suborned the Duke of Buckingham to rebel. Buckingham meanwhile enjoyed the full trust and confidence of Richard until at least 16 September.

In early September Buckingham set off on a tour all over the southern counties of England, ostensibly pursuing commissions of enquiry ordered by Richard to investigate rebellious activity. What he was really doing was offering himself to the rebels as their new leader, which must have involved a lot of fancy footwork and fast talking for the man who was known as Richard's closest aide and High Constable of England: not a task accomplished in a couple of days. So Buckingham must be allowed at least until, say, 10 September before his new credentials were established throughout the south and west, and his proclamations against Richard were ready to be issued.

At the end of August Richard himself, still on his royal progress, had arrived in York where on 8 September he arranged an impressive investiture for his son as Prince of Wales. The *Crowland* chronicler, aghast at such lavish expenditure, spends all of 100 words droning on about the 'splendid and highly expensive feasts and entertainments' frittered away in the hated north of England. 'Meanwhile,' adds our chronicler, 'and while these things were happening, the two sons of King Edward remained in the Tower of London with a specially appointed guard.' A clear indication (supported by Polydore Vergil, for what it's worth, and demolishing More) that no harm had befallen the princes by 8 September.

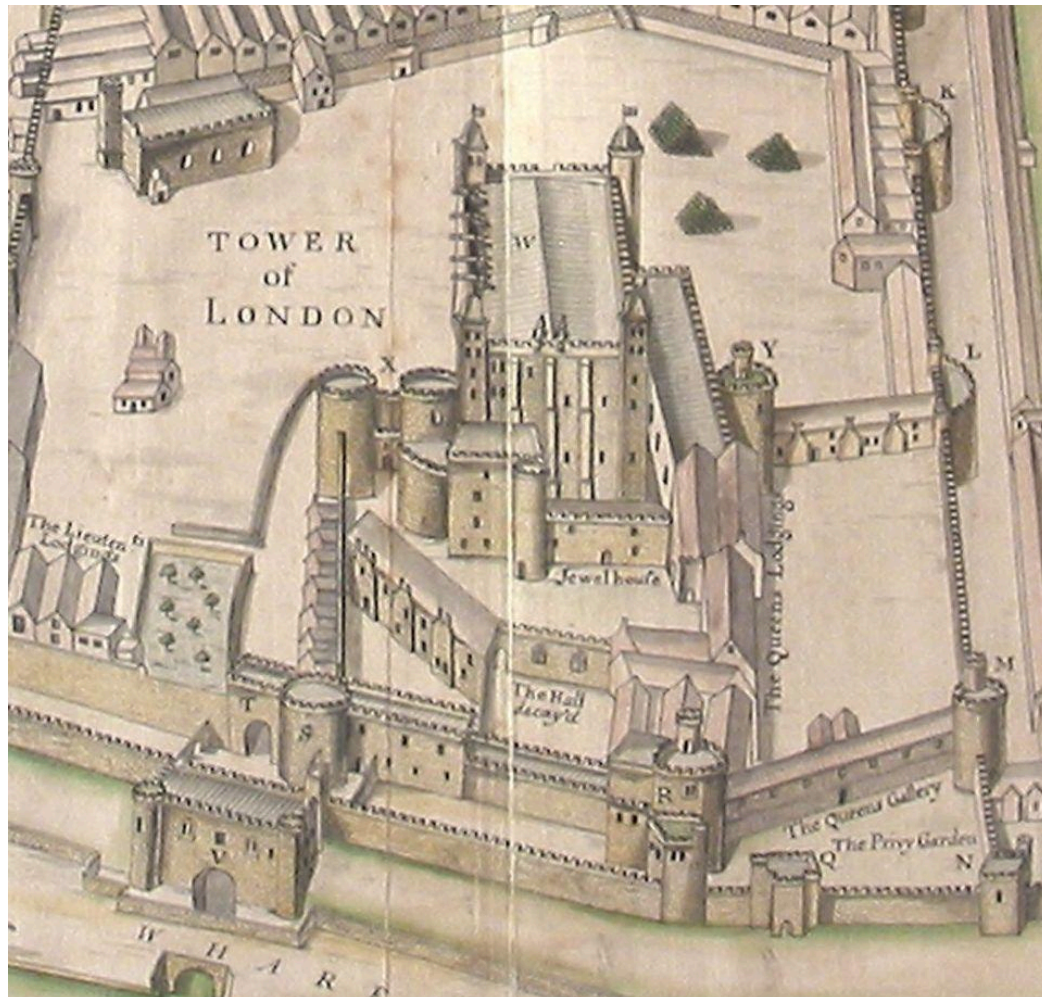
Continuing with the *Crowland Chronicle*, we are able to trace the timeline of the uprising commonly known as Buckingham's Rebellion. In essence the chronicler writes that men in certain counties decided to take up arms, and that Buckingham was proclaimed their leader. But then 'a rumour arose that King Edward's sons, by some unknown manner of violent destruction, had met their fate'. In these circumstances the rebels quickly realized a change of leader was essential. Note that the chronicler does not confirm the rumour as true or false, neither do we know whether the rebels actually believed it or were merely insuring against its possible veracity. Either way it is unlikely such a rumour was spread if the princes were still in London and capable of being put on show to disprove it. Thus we have a likely date of mid September for their disappearance.

### **The geography of the Tower**

Dominic Mancini left England some time after Richard III's coronation, probably in late July. His final item of intelligence about the princes is that they were 'withdrawn into the inner apartments of the Tower proper', whereafter they began to be seen less and less. Three things may be deduced from this.

First, logic suggests that the move was in reaction to the July plot described by Stow, therefore we have an approximate date for it. Second, because Mancini does not merely say 'withdrawn into the inner apartments', it seems that in specifying 'the Tower proper' he is indicating a location different from where the boys were lodged at the time (N.B. Mancini never tells us where the princes were held in the first place). And third, since no earlier change of lodging is mentioned in any account, it is reasonable to suppose that this was the first time they had been moved from their original lodgings in the Lanthorn Tower (marked 'R' on the plan below).

The Lanthorn Tower is part of the inner curtain wall of the Tower of London complex, situated at the south-east extremity of the Inmost Ward and overlooking the River Thames to the south. It has its own private (triangular) garden area to the east, which is very likely where the princes were observed playing and shooting.



We now need to ask ourselves what Dr Argentine meant by withdrawal into the Tower proper – something in contrast, one would suppose, to the peripheral tower in which they were residing, since this was deemed insecure. My own suggestion is that he meant the central keep known as the White Tower, where King Richard could have ordered special accommodations to be prepared for the boys rather than leave them at the more vulnerable periphery.

For the record, my ever-helpful curator at the Tower of London assures me that the Garden Tower, dubbed the Bloody Tower in the late Tudor period for reasons unconnected with the princes, did not have a storey 'added' after the 15th century: it was already divided into its present two storeys. So the top room in which the princes were supposedly murdered, as the tradition goes, did exist in 1483. However, although it had been refurbished to luxurious standards a century earlier when Edward III stayed there, the Garden Tower was probably seldom inhabited at the time of the events we are describing; by 1483 the royal apartments were located in the well-appointed Lanthorn Tower.

So when Edward V was lodged in the Tower of London to await his coronation, the council undoubtedly would have arranged for him to stay in the royal apartments of the day. He would have remained in the Lanthorn Tower at least as long as his coronation plans remained in place, which takes us to the third week of June.

The events of the subsequent days and weeks are not clearly known to us, but certainly it would have been a PR disaster for Richard to downgrade the boys' quarters – or incarcerate them – while seeking approval of his candidacy for the throne which he was offered on 26 June 1483.

Richard himself had chosen to reside at Baynard's Castle all the while, which was convenient for travelling by barge on the river, and did not attempt to relocate to the Tower himself apart from residing there for one night, as tradition demanded, before his own coronation on 6 July; so there was no need to oust the princes from their current lodgings. When security concerns were uppermost in July, any transfer of the boys to the Garden Tower, which like the Lanthorn was part of the curtain wall, can be dismissed as it certainly did not qualify as a safer place into which they might be withdrawn.

We must be careful, too, about terminology: the princes were never *imprisoned*. If they had been, we should have heard all about it from reports by those who were in London at the time – certainly the Crowland chronicler and Mancini via his informant Dr Argentine.

In terms of the ghoulish tales with which visitors to the Tower are regaled, my friendly curator refers to these as 'the mythology surrounding the two princes', and adds that in the current display, 'the Bloody Tower as a location for the murder is one of the myths explored'. One could wish that the word 'myth' would acquire greater emphasis, and the word 'murder' considerably less.

### **The discovery of the Bones**

Moving on to the year 1674, we come to the discovery of some children's bones at the Tower of London. In this connection there is another source I would like to add to Peter Hancock's list, and that is the excellent two-part article by Helen Maurer published in *The Ricardian* issues of December 1990 and March 1991. Maurer managed to assemble nearly all the reports of this discovery that are worth considering, and she also provided a thorough description of some of the salient changes the Tower underwent over the years prior to 1674. Some of her conclusions have been superseded by subsequent research\*, but this is inevitable. My own conclusions in *The Maligned King*, written between about 2002-2005, were informed by having the advantage of seeing advance material from a new book due for imminent publication at the time, which recounted the scientific findings of the ground-breaking White Tower Recording and Research Project under the eye of Edward Impey.

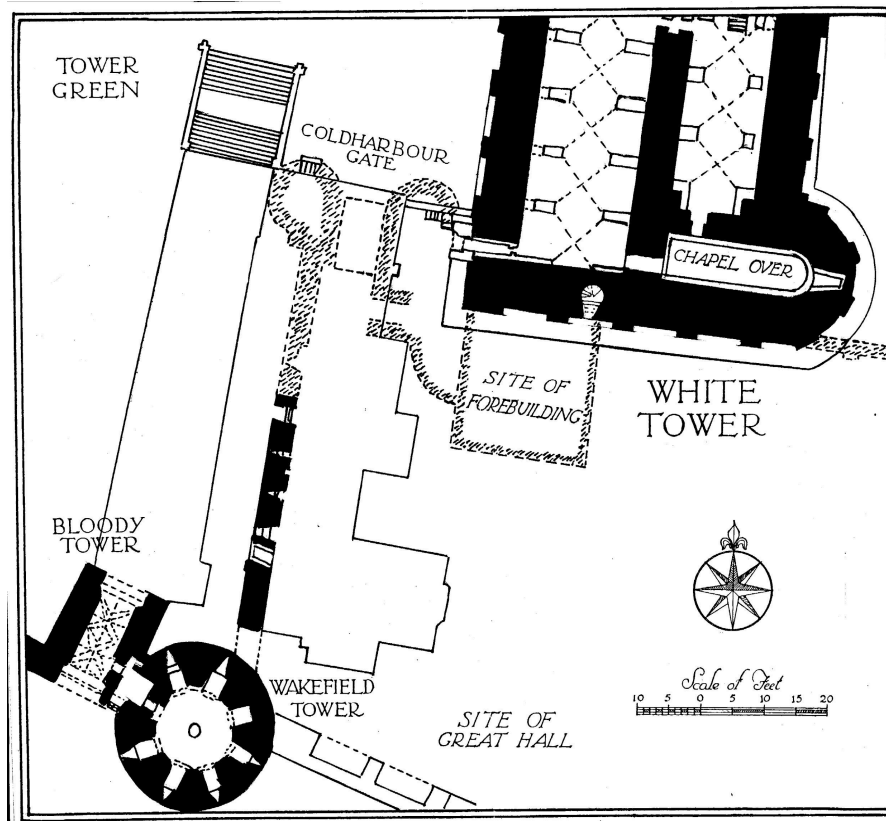
The accounts written by those actually involved in the 1674 discovery (and, in Sir Christopher Wren's case, the account recorded by his son) agree on three main facts. The bones were found ten feet deep in the ground; they were discovered 'in digging down' a staircase that was being demolished; and this staircase led from the king's lodgings to the Chapel of St John in the White Tower. (The king's lodgings were situated in the Inmost Ward.) An additional reliable source remarks that the bones were found 'in digging some foundations'.

Notoriously *unreliable* sources mention all sorts of flourishes – e.g. the remains being found 'face to face in a chest', and accompanied by scraps of velvet. These embellishments must be dismissed. The rather foolish Victorian plaque sited inside the small doorway illustrated in Peter Hancock's article gives the impression that the staircase under which the bones were found was the spiral stair leading from that doorway up to the chapel, cut out in the 14th century from the south wall of the keep, which at its base is 15 feet thick. This must also be dismissed.

Opinions vary as to the configuration of the exterior staircase under which the remains were found in 1674. This is because we have no helpful visual depiction of this area prior to the mid 16th century. Even then, such depictions as survive are less than reliable and provide none of the details we are looking for.

We know there was a square stone forebuilding built around the main entrance of the White Tower, which was removed along with its associated staircase and other structures in 1674. The stone access stairs as originally built probably ran east-west like the present timber reconstruction. But these stone stairs up to the forebuilding must have been removed at some time. This would have been necessary at least by 1508 in order to make way for the Jewel House, a structure that was erected right across the south face of the White Tower.

Since they couldn't have the Jewel House and the stone staircase occupying the same space, the staircase obviously had to be reoriented. Stairs were still needed rising to the small doorway leading ultimately to the chapel, because by now they were using the chapel more and more for the storage of state documents. The forebuilding was too small to contain these stairs, despite Lawrence's Tanner's hopelessly inaccurate and ill-proportioned plan published in 1934 – see below.



My reconstruction, therefore, shown in the artist's impression below, offers the most sensible arrangement of the entry stairs after 1508, and may indeed have been the arrangement ever since the 1360s. Although conjectural, it is based on a Royal Armouries reconstruction until recently on display to visitors at the Tower.

It will be noticed that no Jewel House is shown, and no small turret at the south-east corner of the forebuilding. This is because we really do not know the configuration of either of these structures, so my illustration imagines the basic edifice of the White Tower without them. Depending on the date, whether the 14th, 15th, 16th or 17th century, different structures were added abutting these walls and subsequently modified and removed and replaced, so we have no idea how the area looked at any given time. Nevertheless, access by staircase along the lines of my reconstruction remained a necessity all the while.



So it is my argument that the external stone stairs demolished in 1674 must have appeared something like this. And it was under these stairs that the bones were found.



### **Whose Bones?**

Given that the Tower of London site has been in use since before the Roman occupation, it should not surprise anyone that bones are there to be dug up. What should have surprised those people in 1674 who leapt to identify their discovery as the sons of Edward IV was the inordinate depth at which they were found, when the average depth of a grave in the 15th century was around 2-3 feet.

This, unfortunately, is what comes of following the fertile imagination of Thomas More, who we can confidently believe never dug a hole in his life, let alone to bury bodies ten feet deep at dead of night in a royal palace occupied by hundreds of servants, guards, employees of the mint and the menagerie, clerics attached to the chapel, cleaners, cooks, armourers, and heaven knows how many other staff needed to keep the Tower supplied, armed, maintained and serviced on a daily basis.

From 1933 onwards, ever since their examination by the over-enthusiastic Lawrence Tanner and William Wright, the bones in Westminster Abbey have been assumed by historians and scientists to be those of the princes. Conclusions have been reached about consanguinity, age, gender and antiquity

despite a complete absence of credible evidence. In recent years scientists have been less eager to pen articles making claims which other scientists then leap to refute, and historians have tended to be less dogmatic. Even Michael Hicks in his biography of Edward V, while admonishing unbelievers, sits uncomfortably on the fence as to what he personally believes about the bones.

The mystery of the princes therefore *remains* a mystery. We do not know when either of them died, nor whether either death occurred in the Tower – or even in England. What we can conclude with reasonable certainty is that they were neither imprisoned nor murdered in the Garden Tower; and that burying their bodies in secret ten feet under a stone staircase is beyond the realms of credibility

Certainly the curators of the Tower of London regard the association of the Garden (Bloody) Tower with their disappearance as a myth, so most of the stories presently sold to visitors in London are pure fiction. Or, to borrow Peter Hancock's picturesque phrase, confabulations rather than realities.

\*There were other, earlier discoveries of small skeletons at the Tower which also inevitably gave rise to speculative identification with the missing sons of Edward IV. They have been omitted from this article for reasons of space. However, they are analysed in *Richard III: The Maligned King* ... and a more recent examination of the dating of these discoveries can be found in the article 'Disputed Remains Found at the Tower of London' on my website [www.annettecarson.co.uk](http://www.annettecarson.co.uk) under the tab Research News.