

Richard III and the problem of how to secure the south

Introduction

This brief activity is for use with A level students after they have studied Buckingham's rebellion and as part of the explanation of why Richard was never secure as king (and lost his crown). The activity focuses on how - and how effectively - Richard tried to solve the problem created by the flight of southern gentry to Brittany i.e. how to ensure effective government in individual southern counties and thereby increase his own security.

The activity asks students to work on a case-study, analysing the changes in the composition of the Commission of the Peace in Wiltshire during Richard's reign. What this analysis will show is that Richard made as few changes as possible when he first became king but that the involvement of local gentry in the 1483 rebellion necessitated a much greater number of changes after the rebellion. Students also have to think about the options Richard had after the rebellion and therefore should appreciate the difficulty he faced in achieving effective government in the south.

Anyone wanting to build up their own knowledge of these issues will find that Rosemary Horrox, *Richard III: A Study in Service* (1989) is still the most detailed and best guide – and available cheaply second-hand.

Support

The resources include:

- a chapter from my A level book (published in 2012) which provides an overview of Richard's reign as context for these issues
- details for the case-study on Wiltshire
- follow-up text for students which analyses the issues they've explored
- PowerPoint slides which may help with classroom teaching

Objectives

This case-study will help students understand that medieval kings faced difficult situations and decisions, often with no obvious or best solution. They therefore had to choose the ‘least worst’ option rather than the best option.

More specifically in the context of Richard III’s reign students will learn about:

- the problems Richard faced in securing control of the southern counties after the rebellion and the flight of local gentry to Brittany
- the options faced by Richard in counties such as Wiltshire and why he chose the options that he did
- how these issues played a part in his failure to establish complete control and thus made him vulnerable to opposition

The case-study will also give students an insight into some of the sources used by historians of the 15th century.

The Activity

1. Make sure that students are comfortable with the context – the 1483 rebellion, its failure and the flight of southern gentry to Henry of Richmond in Brittany.
2. Set out Richard’s problem in the aftermath of the rebellion – how to govern the southern counties efficiently and ensure that no further rebellion broke out (PowerPoint slide 2). To do this he needed to replace the gentry who had rebelled and fled – only a minority of gentry had fled but they were often the most politically active and knowledgeable people in the locality.
3. Look at the options facing Richard – Powerpoint slide 3 – should he fill the gaps with:
 - a) other southern gentry he didn’t know well
 - b) his northern supporters who already have connections in the south
 - c) his northern supporters who are not known in the south

Discuss the pros and cons of the options e.g. reactions of the remaining southern gentry. Here you could use PowerPoint slide 4 which shows a quotation which relates to a parliamentary election in Norfolk but the principle is the same i.e. local people expected other local people to fill the important roles in their county. If outsiders filled those roles then people felt they had lost good worship i.e. respect.

Finish by asking students if there is an ideal or obvious option for Richard to choose or is it a case of choosing the least worst option – and which would they choose?

4. Introduce the case-study of the Wiltshire Commission of the Peace – explain the work of the Commissioners (summarised on the Wiltshire information sheets).

Then take them through the three phases of the Commission:

- a) The February 1481 commission provides a base for comparison – you can help students see the four types of member (again see sheets for summary) and the dominance of local men as members.
- b) The July 1483 commission – new commissions were issued for every county soon after Richard became king. Ignore the judges and ecclesiastics and ask students to identify how many changes were made and why, using the information about the members provided. (Whytokesmede had died, Dorset and Cheyney were already seen as a threat to Richard or believed to be involved in attempting to free Edward V).

Also explore who was added to this commission and how this fits into Richard's options – emphasise that he was seeking continuity in membership and why?

- c) The December 1483 commission – new commissions were issued for many counties at this time in the wake of the rebellion.

Ask students to identify the extent of the changes – who has been added and why have they been chosen, how numerous are these changes? Then relate these changes to Richard's options – why has he made the choices he has? Did he have any choice in taking this option?

One question that might crop up is about local men who didn't rebel e.g. Long, Mompesson and Baynard – they were all their 50s and I wonder if age was a factor.

Ask students to reflect upon

- a) likely reactions of other local people to the omissions and the newcomers
- b) how difficult a task this was for the newcomers.

Concluding Issues

The text pages provide a summary for students to consolidate their understanding. However, before they read that, discuss with them:

- why Richard chose to use his northern affinity to fill gaps in Wiltshire and other counties and whether this was the best policy or, maybe, the least worst policy
- look at PowerPoint slide 5, a quotation from the Crowland Continuation – this is the only near-contemporary comment on these changes in the south. Does this help us understand attitudes in the south or is it just one view? (There's a note below about the Crowland Continuation.)
- what the benefits and problems were of this policy and what part it may have played in Richard's defeat in 1485.

The Crowland Continuation

The narrative sources for the Yorkist period are, apart from two very detailed accounts of the events of 1470-1471, limited in their coverage. The Second Crowland Continuation is by far the most coherent, one of the earliest histories (as opposed to chronicles) written in England. The original chronicle of Crowland Abbey in Lincolnshire was written by monks in phases – the final stage, known as the First Continuation ends in 1470. Then, in late 1485 and/or early 1486, along came an outsider who added the Second Continuation which covers 1459-1486. It's this Continuation which is so important and has prompted a considerable literature over the last 40 years.

Internal evidence suggests this continuation was written by a high-ranking government official, apparently a southerner with strongly negative views on the north. He is supportive of many of Edward IV's actions but consistently hostile to Richard III. We don't know precisely who, though several candidates have been suggested. It was written at the latest by April 1486 (i.e. within eight months of Bosworth) and Michael Hicks has argued that the majority was written by November

1485. The author sets out to write a coherent history of the Yorkist kings, beginning in 1459 and ending after Bosworth. There is also brief reference to events in April 1486 which may have been added separately. One oddity is the inclusion of brief biographies of abbots of Crowland Abbey at the point at which they died, thus disrupting the main narrative. The author makes good use of ‘Meanwhile, back at in the world of politics ..’ links!

There is a translation of Crowland on-line (the 1859 edition by H T Riley) but my university tutor told me it has numerous errors and made me work from the Latin. He was working on a translation at the time but refused to let me see it until after finals! That translation is:

N. Pronay and J. W. Cox, *The Crowland Chronicle Continuations 1459-1486*, 1986

A personal note on the Wiltshire case-study

This analysis has its roots in my undergraduate research on Richard III and his relationship with the north of England submitted a very long time ago - in 1973. Since then a vast literature has been created on Richard III but in the early 1970s the most respected monograph on Richard was still James Gairdner’s book, published in 1879. Paul M Kendall’s biography had appeared in the mid-1950s – a great read, full of original ideas but too subjective in its approach. So I had the chance to do some original work and spent a happy 18 months (when I wasn’t struggling through the Latin in the Crowland Continuation) trawling the Calendar of Patent Rolls in particular and analysing the changes in commissions of the peace and commissions of array across the whole of the south, in the appointments of sheriffs and land grants to northerners. This case-study of Wiltshire was a small part of that wider study. The satisfaction and pleasure of this work stayed with me and later I was able to re-use it when I was teaching at degree level. Of course, by then, much new work had been published, covering the ground I’d explored but in far more depth and with much greater expertise and insight – the work of Rosemary Horrox, Tony Pollard and Charles Ross leading the way. No matter how much has been published, however, it’s still a fascinating subject, all the more so for remembering that behind every name was a real individual who faced considerable changes, choices and clashes of loyalties.