

Richard III and the problem of how to secure the south

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By the late autumn of 1483 Richard knew that he had defeated the rebellion in the south of England but still faced a major problem. The rebels who had fled abroad were the men who made local government work in their counties. They acted as Justices of the Peace in county courts, as sheriffs, members of commissions into major crime or treason or by raising defence forces when needed. Their flight meant that there were now gaps in this network in almost every southern county.

However the gaps in the local government network was only part of Richard's problem. According to historian Louise Gill 'The rebels far out-distanced their loyal colleagues in terms of wealth, power and position. As regional powers with a tradition of service, the rebels' exodus from public life deprived the crown of local knowledge and expertise acquired not simply in a lifetime but over the generations and impossible to replace.' Richard could fill the gaps with southern gentry who had not joined the rebellion but could he trust these men who were the friends and neighbours of the rebels?

Richard therefore had to fill the gaps that had been created in local government, both to make government effective and to make his own position as king secure. In his early weeks as king he had made as few changes as possible but this was no longer possible. Instead he faced a difficult choice – to appoint southerners he did not know or trust or, alternatively, to appoint men he did trust but who mostly came from the distant north and who, as outsiders in the south, would be unable to command the loyalty of local people.

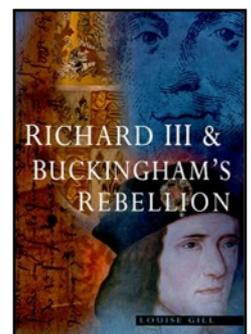
Richard did not blunder in without thinking carefully. Wherever possible he filled the gaps with men who already had connections in the south. In Kent, for example, one of the men he appointed was Ralph Ashton. Ashton was from Lancashire but had married a Kentishwoman, Elizabeth Kyriel, and so had land in Kent. To boost his position in Kent Ashton was also given significant rewards of land, responsibility for investigating rebels' possessions and other posts. However there were not enough northerners with links in Kent and Richard had to import complete outsiders - Robert Brackenbury from Durham, Ralph Bygot, Marmaduke Constable and William Mauleverer, all Yorkshiremen, and several other northern gentry.

This pattern was repeated in other southern counties. In Wiltshire Richard appointed Edward Redmayn, John Musgrave, George Neville and Thomas Stafford, all newcomers to the county, to the Commission of the Peace. He also appointed outsiders to the role of Sheriff in southern counties. In Wiltshire he chose Edward Hardgill, a Yorkshireman, in November 1483 and the following November he appointed John Musgrave from Westmoreland. Edward Redmayn from Yorkshire became Sheriff of Dorset, followed by Thomas Fulford, another Yorkshireman. It was the same story in the appointment of sheriffs in two-thirds of the southern counties. In addition, none of these men were alone. Each brought his own advisers and officials so that around each man was a little pocket of newcomers amongst the southern residents of each county.



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A northern tyranny?

We have one piece of evidence about how local people responded to the appointments of outsiders. The writer known as the continuator of the Crowland Chronicle said that Richard:

‘distributed all these [lands] amongst his northerners whom he had planted in every part of his dominions, to the shame of all the southern people who ... longed more each day for the return of their old lords in place of the tyranny of the present ones.’

‘Tyranny’ is a harsh word to use. To be called a tyrant was the worst thing that could be said about a medieval king because it meant that he was governing the country only for his own benefit and ignoring the welfare and concerns of his people. Was Richard’s use of his northern affinity in the south really so terrible?

Firstly it’s important to note that the Crowland continuator was himself a southerner, a government official based in Westminster. We do not know exactly who he was but in his writing he is consistently critical of Richard III (although not of Edward IV). Therefore this isn’t the testimony of an objective witness. This is also not the only case of outsiders being used in local government in times of crisis or necessity. Similar changes were made on several other occasions in the later Middle Ages including after Bosworth when Henry VII placed southern gentry on the Commissions of the Peace in the north.

Having said that, it is likely that the arrival of the newcomers in 1483-84 was deeply shocking to the local gentry. The gentry in each county made up a close-knit community, inter-married and with long-standing friendships, used to working together. Now they had two, three or more outsiders in their county, men they may well have regarded as Richard’s spies and resented for taking over the lands of local friends or relatives. It seems likely that there was some sense of tyranny, even if we have no objective or extensive evidence to substantiate this belief.

Did Richard have a choice?

Richard did not appoint his northern supporters to positions in the south unthinkingly and without awareness of the likelihood of hostile reactions. However the flight of the rebels to join Henry of Richmond in Brittany left him with no choice. A king was expected to provide security and effective government for the good of his people as well as to safeguard his own position on the throne. In making these appointments Richard was trying to provide that security and stability. He did, after all, make the intelligent effort to appoint people with local links wherever he could but there were simply not enough of them, and hence he had to resort to appointing outsiders.

More broadly, however hard Richard tried to provide effective government, he was not in control of events. The violence he used in taking the crown, followed by the deposition of Edward V, led to rebellion and then rebellion led to the unsettling introduction of northerners into the government of the south. In one sense it worked – there was no further rebellion – but the problem of security never went away. The only chance of security settled lay in facing – and defeating – Henry of Richmond on the battlefield.

Affinity: the followers of a lord who were paid an annual sum of money to advise and support him.

