

7

How certain can we be about why Richard III took the crown?

Rivers, aged 41, was brother of Elizabeth Woodville, Edward V's mother

Richard, aged 30, was Edward IV's brother Buckingham was 28

Northampton, 29 April 1483

It was a good evening, according to the sources – laughter, cheerful conversation, a good meal. Three men enjoyed that evening. One was Anthony, Earl Rivers, uncle of the new King, Edward V. Rivers was escorting 12-year-old Edward from Ludlow to London for his coronation. Edward was staying in nearby Stony Stratford that night.

The second man was Richard, Duke of Gloucester. Gloucester and Rivers had known each other for years, had fought together to win back Edward IV's throne, and shared a deep religious piety and enthusiasm for chivalry and Crusading. The third man, Henry, Duke of Buckingham, was the outsider that evening. He had played little part in Edward IV's government. Edward apparently doubted Buckingham's abilities and never gave him responsibility.

The three men said good-night, agreeing to ride together next morning to meet the King. What actually happened shocked everyone, except Gloucester and Buckingham.

Next morning they arrested Rivers, then more of the King's household, including Richard Grey, the King's half-brother. Rivers and Grey were sent north as prisoners. Two months later, they were executed on Gloucester's orders. Next day, Gloucester was proclaimed king as Richard III.

Edward V's reign had lasted less than three months. The boy had not died and yet now his uncle Richard was king. Did Richard of Gloucester have the crown in mind that evening as he sat talking cheerfully with Rivers and Buckingham? This chapter explores what may have led Richard to take the crown.

Fig 17_01

◁ Richard, Duke of Gloucester, Richard III. Portraits from the 1500s show Richard as a thin-faced, slim, wiry figure, but as most portraits were copied from others the similarities are not surprising! He is also shown fidgeting with his ring, a habit echoed in Vergil's description of his constantly pulling his dagger half way from its sheath and putting it back. This may have been a real habit or a later invention of hostile witnesses trying to show a restless, anxious personality.

What happened in the spring of 1483?

<p>The beginning</p> <p>9 April</p> <p>Mid-April</p>	<p>Edward IV died. His 12-year-old son, now Edward V, was at Ludlow on the Welsh border. He was supervised by Anthony, Earl Rivers. Edward IV's brother, Richard, Duke of Gloucester was on his lands in Yorkshire.</p> <p>The coronation was set for 4 May. Councillors headed by Lord Hastings told Rivers to limit King Edward's escort to London to 2000 men. Hastings and Buckingham were in communication with Gloucester.</p>
<p>The first shock</p> <p>29 April</p> <p>30 April</p> <p>4 May</p> <p>Early May</p>	<p>Rivers met Gloucester and Buckingham at Northampton over dinner.</p> <p>Gloucester arrested Rivers and took control of Edward V. Rivers and Richard Grey were sent north as prisoners.</p> <p>When the news reached London, the King's mother, Elizabeth Woodville, and her other children fled to sanctuary in Westminster Abbey.</p> <p>Edward V arrived in London, accompanied by Gloucester and Buckingham.</p> <p>The Council appointed Gloucester as Protector until Edward V was old enough to rule. Edward was lodged in the royal apartments in the Tower of London to prepare for his coronation, now set for 25 June.</p>
<p>The second shock</p> <p>13 June</p> <p>16 June</p> <p>25 June</p>	<p>William, Lord Hastings was executed without trial on Gloucester's orders. Gloucester said Hastings has plotted treason against him.</p> <p>Gloucester sent the Archbishop of Canterbury and a band of armed men to Elizabeth Woodville in sanctuary in Westminster. They persuaded her to allow her second son to join Edward V in the Tower. The coronation was postponed again.</p> <p>Rivers and Grey were executed at Pontefract in Yorkshire.</p>
<p>Richard's crown</p> <p>26 June</p> <p>6 July</p>	<p>A petition was presented to Gloucester, asking him to become king. It said that Edward IV's children were illegitimate because he had made a pre-contract of marriage with another woman before he married Elizabeth Woodville.</p> <p>Richard of Gloucester was crowned King Richard III.</p>

Who's Who? (Check the family trees on pages 00 and 00.)

- Richard, Duke of Gloucester (Richard III) – Edward IV's brother, powerful landowner in the north
- Edward V and Richard, Duke of York – Edward IV's sons
- Elizabeth Woodville – wife of Edward IV, mother of Edward V and his brother
- The Woodvilles – relatives of Elizabeth Woodville, including her brother, Anthony, Earl Rivers, and her two sons by her first marriage, Thomas, Marquis of Dorset and Richard Grey
- William, Lord Hastings – Edward IV's closest friend and chamberlain (head) of his household
- Duke of Buckingham – related to the royal family but given little power and authority by Edward IV.

■ Enquiry Focus: How certain can we be about why Richard III took the crown?

Richard III's reign is full of puzzles we don't have definite answers for, including why he took the crown. So, instead of pretending we can be precise, this enquiry explores how far we can go along the line towards certainty about Richard's motives.

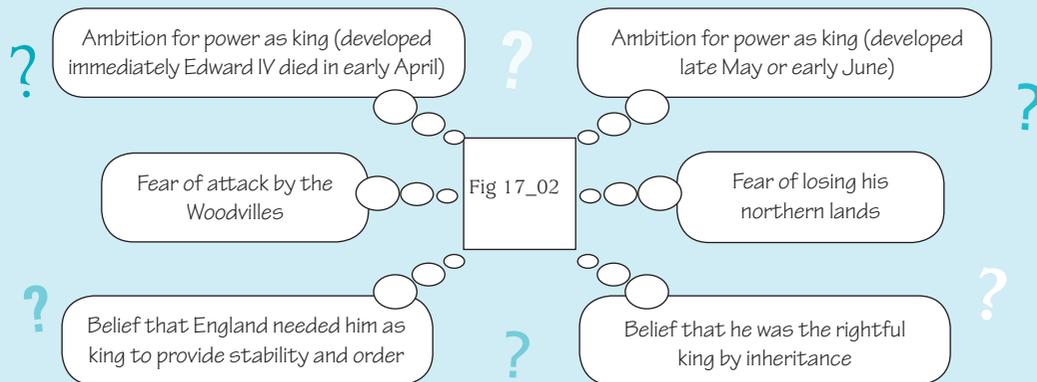
Certain motives	Probable motives	Possible motives	Unlikely motives
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1. Create a copy of the Certainty line above, then pencil in each motive where you currently think it may go on the line.
2. Make a list of possible reasons why we might not be certain about Richard's motives.
3. Use your answers to 1 and 2 to sketch out a short paragraph answering the question.
4. Read pages 106–11 fairly quickly. Don't try to take in all the details but get an overview of the main issues and ideas. Then read it again slowly, tackling the activities as you go. This 'double-layer' of reading is by far the most effective way to study.

Richard, Duke of Gloucester

(Richard III) was the son of Richard, Duke of York, killed at Wakefield in 1460. They were two different people! Richard of Gloucester is called Gloucester until he becomes king, then he's called Richard

The range of motives suggested by historians to explain Richard's actions



Analysing Richard's motives

Ambition for power as king (developed immediately Edward IV died in early April)

■ Where would you place this motive on the Certainty line?

Many writers have assumed that Richard was motivated by ambition for power but it's unlikely that he wanted the crown as soon as he heard of Edward IV's death. If he had wanted the crown from the beginning then he'd probably have taken action to become king far sooner than mid-June. Instead, events unfolded slowly. The Council appointed Richard as Protector. The administration of government continued normally with few changes in personnel. Edward IV's household men (headed by Hastings) supported Richard as Protector. It was 'government as before' through May and into June, with six whole weeks between the arrest of Rivers on 30 April and

How certain can we be about why Richard III took the crown?

the execution of Hastings on 13 June – six weeks with no sign of Richard’s wanting the crown. This strongly suggests that Richard was not ambitious for power the moment Edward IV died.

A reminder: who were the Woodvilles?

(See the Woodville family tree on page 00.)

They were the family of Elizabeth Woodville, Edward IV’s queen and Edward V’s mother. In 1483 the leading family members were the Marquis of Dorset (her elder son by her first marriage) and her brothers, Anthony, Earl Rivers and Sir Edward Woodville, an admiral who took his ships to sea when he heard Richard had arrested Rivers. The Woodvilles were influential, thanks to Elizabeth being Queen and their dominating Edward V’s council when he was Prince of Wales, but they were not powerful, lacking large numbers of retainers to fight for them. This made them vulnerable to Richard’s armed support.

Fear of attack by the Woodvilles

Richard twice said his actions were driven by Woodville threats to his life and power. He justified the arrest of Rivers and Grey by claiming they were plotting to stop him taking a leading part in the young king’s council. Then on 10 June he wrote to the city of York:

Right trusty and well-beloved ... we heartily pray you to come unto us in London as speedily as possible after the sight of this letter with as many well-armed men as possible, to aid and assist us against the Queen, her blood and other adherents and affinity who intend to murder and utterly destroy us and our cousin, the Duke of Buckingham and the old royal blood of this realm.

Was Richard really threatened by the Woodvilles or was this a cover story, a plea of self-defence, aiming to win support by pinning the blame on the Woodvilles?



◁ This illustration shows Anthony, Earl Rivers presenting a copy of the *Dictes of the Philosophers*, which he had translated, to Edward IV. To the right of the King are Queen Elizabeth Woodville and Prince Edward, later Edward V

First, did the Woodvilles want to stop Richard playing a leading role in the council? Almost certainly, yes. The best evidence comes from the *Crowland Chronicle's* history of the Yorkist kings written early in 1486. We don't know the name of that writer but the details included suggest he was a well-informed government official, often an eye-witness to events. He wrote how 'the more foresighted members of the Council ... thought that the Queen's family should be absolutely forbidden to have control of the young king until he came of age.' This implies that the Woodvilles wanted to dominate Edward V's government instead of there being a broad council including Richard.

So the Woodvilles threatened Richard's place at the centre of power, even if it's unlikely they threatened his life or lands at this first stage. There was no previous hostility between them. A month earlier Rivers had asked Richard to arbitrate in a legal dispute. Rivers really was taken by surprise when arrested by a man he thought was a friend. It is possible, however, that Richard was heavily influenced by Buckingham and Hastings. They were both in contact with him in April and Hastings in particular had rivalries with members of the Woodville family.

■ Where would you place this motive on the Certainty line?

Second, did the Woodvilles plan to 'murder and utterly destroy' Richard? If they did, we must look at Richard's his own actions: arresting Rivers and later, as Protector, taking many of the Woodvilles' lands and positions and giving much of their wealth to Buckingham. These actions created a real enmity between Richard and the Woodvilles, symbolised by Elizabeth Woodville and her children (except Edward V) living in sanctuary in Westminster Abbey. By early June Richard must have realised the significance of this. He could be Protector for only four years at most. Then Edward V would rule and almost certainly recall his Woodville relatives to positions of power from which they could take revenge on Richard. His strike for the crown in June was probably more prompted by what the Woodvilles might do in the future, in revenge for his actions, than by fear of what they were doing at that time, especially as in 1483 they had far less armed power and support than Richard.

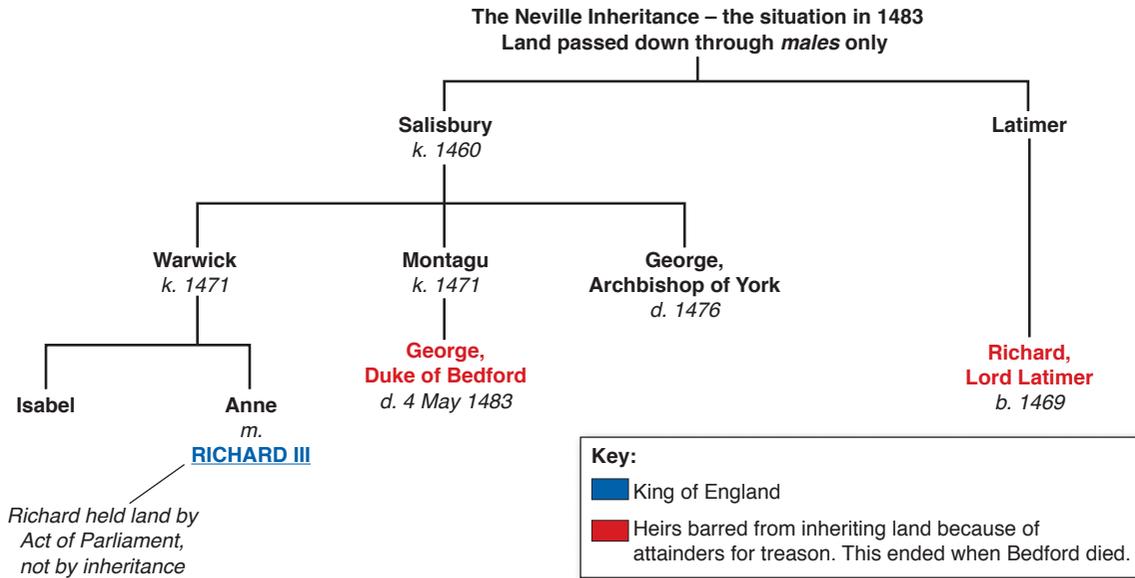
Fear of losing his northern lands

No contemporary writer mentions this motive and it wasn't one that Richard could give in public but it may have been important. It's a motive deduced by historians who have pieced together individual pieces of information. Richard's possession of his vast northern territory wasn't permanently secure. It had been granted to Richard by his brother, Edward IV, and could be taken away. In particular his hold on parts of the former Neville family land was vulnerable. The 'real' heir to these Neville lands was George, Duke of Bedford (see family tree) but Bedford couldn't inherit because his father had been attainted for treason. While Bedford (and any children of his) were alive, the attainder stayed in force, Richard kept the lands and could pass them on to his son. But on 4 May 1483 Bedford died without children, ending the attainder and changing Richard's hold on this land. He would keep it until he died but then it would go to the next heir, one of the Latimers, not to Richard's son.

■ Where would you place this motive on the Certainty line? What links can you suggest between this and other possible motives?

What could Richard do about this? He could safeguard his lands while he was Protector but his Protectorate would end in four years at most. Then the Woodvilles would be back in power. Then he could well lose much

How certain can we be about why Richard III took the crown?



or all of his land by order of the young Woodville-dominated King. So was Richard motivated to take the crown to safeguard his lands? Without Richard's own words we have no evidence for this but it's a possible motive at least. It would become more probable if Richard hadn't heard of Bedford's death until late May or early June; this would make sense of the sudden rush of events and his ruthless execution of Hastings.

△ The Neville inheritance: the situation in 1483. Land passed down through males only. This family tree shows the links between George, Duke of Bedford and the Latimers

Belief that he was the rightful king by inheritance

In 1484 Parliament approved Richard's right to be king in a document called *Titulus Regius*:

At the time of the contract of the marriage [between Edward IV and Elizabeth Woodville] King Edward was and stood married and troth-pledged to one Dame Eleanor Butler, daughter of the old Earl of Shrewsbury, with whom King Edward had made a pre-contract of marriage ... it follows evidently that King Edward and Elizabeth lived together sinfully and damnably in adultery and that all children of King Edward are bastards unable to inherit ...

This was the justification circulated by Richard in June 1483. He said that he was the rightful king because everyone more closely related to Edward IV was barred from the throne, either by illegitimacy (Edward's children) or by Act of Attainder for treason (Clarence's son).

Did Richard believe that his nephews were illegitimate, and so believe that he was rightfully king, or had he faked the story as a legal excuse for taking the crown? There are strong arguments for its being fake. Its appearance out of the blue at an extraordinarily convenient moment raises suspicion. More importantly, bastardy need not have stopped Edward V becoming king because the coronation would have wiped out illegitimacy

(as it did later with Queen Elizabeth I). Richard ignored this possibility, which suggests his priority was his own power and position. Finally, people's reactions suggest widespread doubt about the story. The best informed contemporary writer of the *Crowland Chronicle* clearly didn't believe a word:

Where would you place this motive on the Certainty line?

Richard, the protector, claimed the kingdom for himself. The pretext for this was ... put forward in a certain parchment roll that King Edward's sons were bastards because he had been pre-contracted to a certain Lady Eleanor Butler before he married Queen Elizabeth ... It was put about then that this roll originated in the north whence so many people came to London although there was no one who did not know the identity of the author (who was in London all the time) of such sedition and infamy

Look at his choice of words; 'pretext' meaning pretence or alleged reason and 'sedition and infamy' meaning treason and evil. It's true the author often shows hostility to Richard but that's because he believed that Richard had no justification for taking the crown. He was not the only person. Later in 1483 many gentry rebelled against Richard because they did not believe in his right to be king. Richard did not convince them at the time. It's hard to see why he should convince us today, but equally we cannot be certain the story is untrue. Without access to Richard's thoughts we can't know for sure.

Belief that England needed him

Where would you place this motive on the Certainty line?

Another motive suggested by historians (not mentioned by contemporaries) is that Richard may have been motivated by a sense of duty. Back in the 1450s, his father the Duke of York had been convinced England needed him to end the political crisis. Perhaps Richard also saw himself as the man for a crisis, guiding England through the potential problems of Edward V's minority, using his experience as a general, as a powerful landowner and as Edward IV's trusted brother. His own published claim to the throne emphasised his devotion to the common good and to righting past failures. Such a sense of duty (see page 00) would fit with his deep religious faith and serious approach to government as king. It may help explain his determination to be Protector and perhaps his decision to take the crown. Equally he must have known that deposing Edward V would lead to instability and perhaps rebellion, the very opposite of the stability England needed.

Ambition for power as king (developed late May or early June)

Where would you place this motive on the Certainty line? What links can you suggest between this and other possible motives?

It seems that Richard had decided to take the crown by 10 June, when he wrote to the city of York for armed support, but did he make this decision simply out of the desire to be king? Richard has often been portrayed as motivated by power because of the ruthlessness with which he seized the crown. William, Lord Hastings, Edward IV's closest friend and utterly loyal to Edward's son, would not countenance Richard becoming king. On 13 June Richard had Hastings arrested and executed without trial, all in a matter of

hours. A fortnight later Rivers and Grey were executed, again without proper trial. The shock of this violence silenced potential opposition. It certainly looked as if he were solely interested in power, but behind these actions probably lay either fear of Woodville revenge and the loss of his northern lands or the belief that he was the rightful king and a sense of duty.

Why is certainty so difficult?

We have identified a range of motives but it is very difficult to be certain about which ones dominated Richard's thinking. Why is it so difficult?

- Accounts written by others are of limited value as they couldn't see into Richard's mind.
- Richard's own explanations have to be questioned because he needed to present the explanation most likely to win support.
- Motives change over time. Three months of dramatic events may have seen Richard's motives change. We all know from our own experience, when making up our minds about something complicated, that different factors jostle for dominance in our minds and swap around in significance.
- We don't know whether he was thinking rationally throughout or whether he panicked at times, taking one bad decision (the arrest of Rivers) before stumbling into an even worse one (taking the crown).

In addition, explanations of Richard's motives will be affected by our view of:

- Richard's career as a whole. If we focus on his loyalty to his brother then we're more likely to accept that he believed in the illegitimacy story; if we focus on his ruthlessness we're more likely to emphasise ambition for power and defence of his northern lands.
- Richard's character. Was Richard a natural leader, the driving force behind events or, as Professor Christine Carpenter has suggested, a born second-in-command who could be manipulated, first by Hastings, then by Buckingham?
- The period as a whole. If we see the fifteenth century as a time when actions were primarily motivated by ambition then Richard's motives will fit that pattern, but if we identify idealism as a possible motive then perhaps Richard was at least partly driven by a sense of duty.

We could spend many more pages discussing this issue, without altering the fact that we don't know exactly what motivated Richard. You may wonder why we've spent so long on a topic where there's such lack of certainty, but that's the whole point. Too often people assume that History is all about finding the 'right' answer, when most of the time we actually identify only degrees of certainty, with probabilities and possibilities rather than complete certainty. Hopefully this enquiry will have helped deepen your understanding of these issues and you've realised the fascination of uncertainty!

■ Concluding your enquiry

Review the positions of each motive on your Certainty line and then revise your original hypothesis in answer to the enquiry question.

Why was Richard able to take the crown?

Why Richard took the crown isn't the only question to ask about these events. Equally important is why he was able to become king. Plenty of people later rebelled against him, so why didn't anyone stop him in June 1483? There isn't space to explore this question in detail so the diagram opposite sums up the reasons why Richard was able to take the crown.

At the heart of the explanation is that Richard's strike for the crown took everyone by surprise. Even on 16 June, three days after Hastings' execution, Elizabeth Woodville sent her second son to join his brother, Edward V, preparing for Edward's coronation in the royal apartments in the Tower. This seems totally inexplicable if she had the faintest idea that Richard intended to take the crown. Both Rivers and Hastings had also been taken completely by surprise. Richard's actions were continually beyond anyone's expectations.

Powerful support was also critical to Richard's success. Hastings' support (or at least his opposition to the Woodvilles) made it much easier for Richard to become Protector, the stepping-stone to the crown. Richard also had continual support from Buckingham and probably from John, Lord Howard. Howard had hoped to inherit lands from the Duke of Norfolk but Edward IV intended them to go to his younger son. This may have led Howard to back Richard for the crown. As soon as Richard was king he made Howard Duke of Norfolk. And, in the critical weeks in June, Richard was strongly backed by the threat of force. News of his summoning a northern 'army' on 10 June spread round London. By the time the northerners arrived, the crown was Richard's but the threat of their arrival had played its part.

The impending **arrival of Richard's northerners** must have sparked memories of the threat from Margaret of Anjou's northerners in 1461. See page 00

■ Read your other books to build up a detailed answer to the question in the heading, using the diagram as a guide.

Fig 17_05

△ These signatures, Edward V, Richard of Gloucester and the Duke of Buckingham, were apparently jotted down during Edward V's journey to London. Above Richard's signature is his motto 'Loyaulte me lie' (Loyalty binds me). Richard's emphasis on loyalty is used by some to argue that he must have believed that Edward was illegitimate or he would not have deposed his brother's son. But amidst the fast-moving events of mid-June such ideals may have taken second place to fear and the need to react to events.

SURPRISE

■ Richard's past loyalty to Edward IV

In 1470 he had joined Edward in exile when Clarence sided with Warwick. Since 1471 Richard had been completely loyal, leading Edward's army against Scotland and controlling the north of England. No one, least of all Rivers and Hastings, expected him to depose his brother's son.

■ His moderate actions in May and early June

Until mid-June Richard took every opportunity to stress his loyalty to Edward V. As Protector he gave no sign of wanting greater power.

■ The violence of his actions in mid-June

On 13 June Hastings was executed. Other potential opponents were arrested and imprisoned. This unexpected violence paralysed potential opposition. Only days earlier, Hastings had been saying how well things were going, that the overthrow of the Woodvilles had been achieved 'with only as much bloodshed as would come from a cut finger'.

■ The speed of events in mid-June

After six weeks of calm came ten days of frantic action, at the end of which government went quiet while everyone waited for Richard to be crowned. There was no time to organise effective opposition.



STRENGTHS

■ Support from significant noblemen

Hastings played a critical part in Richard's becoming Protector. Buckingham and Howard backed his claim to be king, adding credibility and perhaps making potential opponents hesitate.

■ His northern support

Rumours of the arrival of Richard's northern army alarmed Londoners and intimidated potential opponents.

■ The weakness of potential opponents

The Woodvilles had little power. The arrest of Rivers killed any chance of their leading opposition to Richard. Other major nobles were too preoccupied with their own concerns over their positions under a child-king that they did not unite against Richard.

UNCERTAINTIES OF POTENTIAL OPPOSITION

■ A justification for becoming king

The story of the illegitimacy of Edward's children probably made many potential opponents pause. Was it true? Before they decided, Richard was king. This claim also gave waverers an excuse for supporting him.

■ Memories of the minority of Henry VI

People remembered the bad days of Henry VI and many blamed this on his long minority, unaware that problems had begun only once Henry began ruling. Therefore, uncertainty over what might happen under another boy king perhaps played into Richard's hands.

■ Confusion

A letter from Simon Stallworth to Sir William Stonor, written in London on 21 June, sums up the confusion. Amongst the news he says, 'there is much trouble and every man doubts the other ...' This confusion about what was really happening made it difficult to rally opposition to Richard.

'The most untrue creature living'

Grantham, Lincolnshire, 12 October 1483

Richard III had been king for only three months but already a major rebellion was developing across the south of England. The letter opposite gives us a remarkable glimpse into Richard's mind as he planned how to deal with the rebels. Richard was not surprised by the rebellion, as his informers had been very efficient, but he was shocked by the involvement of the Duke of Buckingham, his closest supporter when he'd taken the crown.

What's remarkable about the letter is the message in the larger handwriting, Richard III's own handwriting. The core letter, written by his secretary, asks the Chancellor, Bishop Russell, to send the Great Seal to Richard so he can use it to authenticate his orders. Then Richard picked up a pen himself. He writes a few lines, urging Russell to send the Great Seal as swiftly as possible, and then his anger at Buckingham bursts out, beginning near the end of the penultimate line below the original letter. In modernised spelling it reads:

Here, loved be God, is all well and truly determined and for to resist the malice of him that had best cause to be true the Duke of Buckingham the most untrue creature living, whom with God's grace we shall not be long till that we will be in those parts and subdue his malice. We assure you was never false traitor better purveyed for, as the bearer, **Gloucester** shall show you.

Gloucester was
Richard's herald

Richard sounds confident that Buckingham's fate is sealed, 'never was false traitor better purveyed [provided] for', but you can feel the intensity of his anger at Buckingham in the words 'him that had best cause to be true' and in his description of Buckingham as 'the most untrue creature living'.

Henry Stafford, Duke of Buckingham (1455–83)

Buckingham is a mystery. He married one of Elizabeth Woodville's sisters, Catherine, but after he returned early from Edward's IV's French campaign in 1475 he played no part in political life. Edward gave him no responsibilities, which suggests Edward didn't trust or rate him. Then Buckingham suddenly re-appeared in 1483, constantly alongside Richard of Gloucester as he became Richard III. What was Buckingham's motive? Was he bitter about being married off to a Woodville when he may have hoped to marry one of Warwick's daughters who would have brought him more land? Was he bitter about being left out of politics? Richard gave him huge areas of land and authority in Wales, the west Midlands and the south west, far more than is logical for a man Edward IV hadn't rated. But then Buckingham joined the rebellion against Richard. Why? Had he wanted even more reward? Was he involved, as some rumours said, in the deaths of the Princes? Did he think that he could become king? We don't know. Buckingham is very much a mystery.

