

The investigation into king richard as a potential murderer

[Sociology](#), [Violence](#)



During the midsummer's heat, Richard, son of the Duke of York and younger brother to the late Edward IV, became King of England. The year was 1483 and the beginning of Richard's active, but brief, 2 year reign. A famous incident also marks the summer of 1483. It is a mystery that has been argued and puzzled over for centuries and probably will continue to be for many more to come. It surrounds the disappearance of Richard's two nephews, the sons of Edward IV. Prince Edward, previously titled Edward V before his uncle's assumption to the throne, and his younger brother Richard, the little Duke of York, were last seen playing outside of the Tower before their disappearance. The faint suspicion of 'murder' that lingered in the hearts' of the English people was finally confirmed when the Duke of Buckingham declared "-that the sons of King Edward had been put to death, none knew how." Thus starts a rebellion against Richard that would end almost as quickly as it began. But what of Buckingham's claim? Did Richard III really murder his nephews or was he falsely accused? We must examine the obscure, often inadequate, evidence of this case before making a final verdict.

Let us begin this investigation by hearing the prosecutor's side of the case first. Richard III is accused of the murder of his two nephews on the grounds that he had the motive, means, and opportunity to commit the crime. How he went about it is described by Sir Thomas More as summarized: During Richard's summer progress of 1483, he spontaneously decided that he must kill the Princes in order to secure his position as King. After unsuccessfully commanding Sir Robert Brackenbury, Constable of the Tower, by letter to do the deed, Richard dispatched James Tyrell, an ambitious servant, with

another letter to Brackenbury. The letter demanded that the keys of the Tower be delivered to Tyrell for one night. Tyrell then choose two assassins to commit the act, Miles Forest, one of the guards of the Princes, and John Dighton. In the dead of the night, after all the attendants were sent away, they smothered the sleeping Princes in their sleep. The bodies were then buried at Tyrell's behest " at the stair foot, meetly deep in the ground under a great heap of stones." But when informed of the crude burial, Richard requested they be buried elsewhere. So an anonymous priest soon thereafter buried the Princes in an unknown location. Thus is the story most widely accepted as to how the Princes were murdered. It is even confirmed by the confession of James Tyrell himself during the reign of Henry VII. Though other historians of the time give different, or simplified versions, of the same story, all undoubtedly agree that Tyrell was put to the task by Richard. Incidentally, two small children's skeletons were also discovered within the White Tower in 1674. The skeletons appeared to be one of a child 12-13 years old and the other one of a 10 year old. If these are indeed the accurate ages, the skeletons would match the age of the Princes around the time of their supposed death—in the summer of 1483. Furthermore, a stain was found on one of the skeleton's head which confirms the probability that they were smothered to death.

Coming back to Richard's motive, means, and opportunity, one cannot deny that all these contribute to Richard as a prime suspect. Before Richard became king, he was only the protector of his nephew—Edward V. But after finding out that the child was most likely illegitimate, he let himself be

swayed by ambition and the encouragement of Henry Stafford, the conniving Duke of Buckingham. Richard, with Parliament and Buckingham at his back, then proceeded to declare that Edward V, and all of Edward IV's children, were illegitimate. Only he, the last son of the Duke of York, had true right to the crown. The people accepted him, fearing a minority rule, and he was coroneted Richard the III July 6th, 1483. But the Princes remained an obstacle in his desire of total security. Their mother, Elizabeth Woodville, and indeed all the much-hated Woodvilles, would stop at nothing to put Edward back on the throne. So with fear and ambition as his motive, Richard had the Princes secretly put to death. And being the King, he had the perfect means and opportunity to do this. Alas, the Princes' fate was sealed.

Or so it seemed. Before we can condemn Richard as the culprit, such as More has done, we must next hear the case in Richard's defense. Much of the information given above cannot be taken at face-value and needs to be examined once again. Firstly, Thomas More's account of the murder is filled with holes. Richard needed the utmost confidentiality in this matter, and yet he carelessly dispatched letters which could have been easily traced if discovered. Moreover, Brackenbury does not appropriately fit in this story. He refused to kill the Princes, but surrendered the keys of the Tower to Tyrell without a second thought the following week. Would a man so noble and fearless, who refused the king himself, simply have given the keys away without suspecting the intent of their use? It seems highly improbable. As so far observed, neither the men mentioned nor how the murder took place seem based off reliable facts or testimony. While Thomas More is a highly

recognized scholar, this particular piece of literature was written when he was young and inexperienced. Hence, he used more imagination based off rumor than accurate references to write his account. Even more importantly, he was completely under the influence of Tudor propaganda at the time. He even grew up in the home of one of Richard's most formidable enemies, Bishop John Morton. So it can be said without out a doubt that More's view against Richard was biased. But even if More's account is inaccurate, many say that the confession of James Tyrell and skeletons found within the White Tower are undeniable proof that the central part of More's story is true. However, these can be countered as well. Tyrell's 'confession' was 'given out' after his execution by Henry VII in 1502. This should have given a clear picture for More and other historians of the demise of the Princes. Yet, surprisingly, Tyrell confessed nothing that we do not already know. In fact, this 'confession' was so vague that Polydore Vergil, Henry VII's historian, does not even mention it in his own account. One must wonder why Henry VII, who gained the most politically by blackening the reputation of Richard, would not exploit the murder through Tyrell's confession. It is certainly baffling, if not suspicious, on Henry's part. Continuing on, we finally reach the skeletons of the Princes. Now this may seem like hard-concrete evidence, but it has one major catch. These skeletons may actually not be the skeletons of the Princes. Despite the closeness of age and other factors, there is absolutely no proof that they are the remains of Prince Edward and Richard. In fact, they may not even be male skeletons! In any case, many children's skeletons have been discovered within the Tower, so there is a

reasonable possibility that skeletons found in 1674 are not the young Princes.

The last case to be made in Richard's defense surrounds his character and the actions of Elizabeth Woodville. As we have read, Richard does indeed possess the motive, means, and opportunity to murder the Princes. But his proclivity is another matter. First, one must know that Richard dearly loved his older brother, Edward IV. He served him faithfully all his life, even when his brother George and his uncle turned against him. Even when Edward secretly married Elizabeth Woodville and filled the court with her greedy family, Richard still stood loyally at his side. Would such a brother really kill his nephews? Secondly, documents have been found mentioning the care of young Princes dated 1484-85, a year or two after their supposed death. Not only do such documents refer to the two Princes, but also to Richard's other nephew, the Earl of Warwick, George's son. Notably, Richard never so much as laid a finger on Warwick throughout his entire kingship. It seems strange that a man so fearfully desperate for the throne, enough to murder his nephews, would not murder the young Warwick as well, who possessed a higher claim to the throne. Secondly, there are the mysterious actions of Elizabeth Woodville, the widowed queen of Edward IV and the mother of the two Princes. One must remember that it was Richard who stole the throne away from her oldest son. In the beginning, she fervently fought to return that position to Edward, but to no avail. Other members of her family carried on against Richard as well, supporting Henry Tudor instead, who was to become Henry VII. Elizabeth herself made an agreement with Henry,

promising her oldest daughter's hand in marriage. This satisfied both parties; Henry would have a loophole to the crown he so ambitiously desired and the Woodvilles would become a royal family once again. But despite this agreement, Elizabeth proceeded to do something unthinkable. She surrendered all her daughters, including her oldest, to the care of Richard, the man who took her status as queen away, who declared her children illegitimate, and who most likely killed her only two sons. What could have possessed her to do such a thing? She had freely given a trump card to Richard: the custody of the daughter who was to marry Henry. Though he did not use it, Elizabeth had given Richard, her bitter enemy, the ability to marry her daughter to another man. Though many historians have puzzled over this uncharacteristic action, none can find a satisfactory answer to explain it. However, one thing can be certain: Elizabeth Woodville would not have given custody of her daughters to Richard knowing that he murdered her sons.

Now that we know the arguments from both sides, we must come to a conclusion. The case against Richard has strong evidence in favor of Richard's guilt, pointing out that he did have a substantial motive, means, and opportunity to execute the act. However, none of the evidence against him is absolute. They are merely theories and assumptions based off obscure historical accounts and the remains of children, not certain to be the Princes. While one can say that the evidence in favor of Richard's innocence is likewise, there is more evidence testifying to his innocence than to his guilt. And is Richard the only suspect to this heinous crime? No, the Duke of Buckingham and Henry VII are also prime suspects if you take into account

their suspicious actions and greed for the crown. With that being said, the popular belief that Richard murdered his royal nephews must be cast in serious doubt. Truthfully, no one knows what really happened to the Princes that fateful midsummer of 1483. But if this case were to be viewed in a court room today, Richard would surely be found innocent of the crime which society has branded him.