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King Richard's Tomb at Leicester

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It is well known that ten years after Bosworth, a tomb was erected in the Greyfriars church at Leicester, at the expense of Henry VII. An eighteenth century transcript (original now lost) of a household account book 1491-5 notes a payment in September 1495, to James Keyley, of £10.1s. for King Richard's tomb.¹ There is no indication whether Keyley was a tomb-maker, or merely some gentleman to whom the organisation had been assigned.²

John Nichols, the eighteenth century historian of Leicestershire, described the tomb as having been of 'mingle coloured marble'. It had a highly moral Latin inscription, guaranteed to weigh heavier on the occupant than any load of marble.³ It was destroyed at the time of the Reformation. The term 'marble' probably means alabaster.

However, this tomb appears to have been only the end of a complicated story. The wonder is that it was delivered to the Greyfriars church at all.

In the Public Record Office Early Chancery Proceedings series is a case concerning a tomb for King Richard.⁴ It consists of a plea by Ralph Hill of Nottingham, grocer, against Walter Hylton of Nottingham, alabasterman. The document is at best difficult to decipher (even under ultra-violet reader) and is isolated, as is common with existing Chancery Proceedings of this date, without any accompanying counter-proceedings or adjudication. Also, it is hard to date. As the plea is addressed to the Chancellor, the Cardinal Archbishop of Canterbury, it must have been presented between 1493 and 1500, when John Morton was Cardinal. On the reverse of the document, difficult to read, is '1 July 11 Henry VII', i.e. 1496.

Initially, it appears that Sir Reynold Bray and Sir Thomas Lovell, King Henry's Commissioners, drew up a contract with a Nottingham alabasterman for the manufacture of a tomb for King Richard. The case states that this was done about a twelve-month before, i.e. about July 1495. The contractor was Walter Hylton, a prominent Nottingham citizen, alderman and J.P. He had been in the alabaster trade from before 1480 until his death just before 1503.⁵ He was presumably one of those whose products included the heads of St. John the Baptist so characteristic of Nottingham work. He also undertook contracts for church furnishings, for example, a tabernacle of St. Philip and a mantletree in St. Peter's church.⁶

However important a citizen of Nottingham Walter Hylton may have been, he landed himself in expensive legal trouble over King Richard's tomb, both with his fellow citizens and with King Henry's Commissioners, Bray and Lovell.

The contract for making the tomb was drawn up in quadrupartite, i.e. four parties and four copies of the document. They were: 1. Bray and Lovell, 2. Walter Hylton, 3. Ralph Hill, 4. a party unnamed. Here the trouble began, as Ralph Hill stated that his name had been used without his knowledge, and a stranger (the 4th party) involved, by Hylton, a man of 'an untrue and subtile

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mind'. This quarrel of Hill and Hylton is irrelevant here, and nothing more can be found about the episode.

The case does tell us that Walter Hylton contracted to make the tomb for a sum almost unreadable in the document, possibly £50, a sum five times that disbursed by Henry VII to James Keyley in 1495. Two possibilities are open here. Hylton, as the plea states, was to be paid in two instalments, £20 initially, and the residue when the 'Tombe were set up and fynysshed in the Church aforeseid'. The church was named first in error as the 'Newark' which was then crossed out and 'of Friers' substituted. Could the payment to Keyley be part of Hylton's first instalment?

Alternatively, it is possible that a new contractor may have been found, willing to do a cut-price job, to which Keyley's £10 refers. Printed extracts from Nottingham Borough Records contain no information on anyone called Keyley, so it seems likely that he was not a citizen.

Some indication of comparative costs may be of interest. An account of the expenses of the magnificent funeral of Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland (1489) has been printed.⁷ This does not tell us the cost of Percy's tomb in Beverley Minster, but it is evident that the chief expenses were in candle wax and in the assembling of as impressive a funeral procession as possible. For example, wax candles on the hearse alone amounted to £26 13s.4d. and 400 torches to £53 6s.8d. Dole to poor persons swelling the procession (2d. each) was £123 6s.8d. The total amounted to nearly £700. The cost of Edward IV's funeral, six years before, had been £1,496.⁸

NOTES AND REFERENCES

This note was first published in *The Ricardian*, Vol. III, No. 50, (September 1975), pp. 8-9.

1. British Museum Additional MS. 7099 f. 129.
2. No other mention of him as a craftsman was found by John Harvey, *English Medieval Architects*, (London 1954), p. 154.
3. John Nichols, *History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester (1795-1811)*, Vol. I, Part 2, p. 298.
4. PRO: C1/206/69.
5. W. Stevenson (ed.), *Records of the Borough of Nottingham*, Vol. 3, 1485-1547, pp. 296, 401, 434.
6. *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, 1399-1485, pp. 332-3, 419.
7. Francis Peck, *Desiderata Curiosa*, Vol. 2, (1779), pp. 246-7.
8. F.R.H. Du Boulay, Registrum Thome Bourghier 1454-86, *The Canterbury and York Society*, Vol. 54, (1956), p. 54.

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