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## ADAM WAKELIN DELVES INTO THE PAST AS HE GOES LOOKING FOR RICHARD

It is a mystery, an enigma – is the last king of England to die in battle really under a Leicester bridge? Popular legend has it that the body of Richard III is somewhere in the ink-black depths of the River Soar.

Half a century after his death in 1485 on the blood-sodden fields of Bosworth, the king's remains are said to have been ripped from his tomb in Greyfriars and hurled from the old Bow Bridge by a frenzied mob – never to be seen again?

At least three skulls have been pulled from the river and claimed to be the head of England's lost king, the only monarch to have perished on home soil whose remains lie unmarked by a gravestone.

Yet even these bones of contention raise more questions than they answer. One was taken from a city museum a century ago. Another is owned by a collector whose identity remains a secret.

Joe Goddard, of Newton Harcourt, has the third. The grisly family heirloom was found by Mr Goddard's great-great-grandfather, Henry Goddard, a builder and architect, while working on a replacement Bow Bridge in the early 19th century.

### MUDDYING THE WATERS

"It isn't Richard III, I can tell you that," said Mr Goddard. "Tests at Oxford University three years ago revealed it was that of a ninth century Saxon. I was quite relieved, to be honest."

"My great-great-grandfather donated another skull to Leicester Museum in the 1830s. That one was even more interesting as it had a gash across the cranium. Could that have been a sword wound?"

Modern medical and forensic science could, in theory, prove whether this or the third skull is Richard's. The problem is no-one seems to know where they are.

Muddying the waters further is the fact that the Soar is likely to be teeming with skeletal remains, according to Peter Liddell.

The keeper of archaeology for Leicestershire Museums Service said it was common for skulls to be dropped into rivers in prehistoric times.

An Augustinian friary once stood close to Bow Bridge and the river, which may have changed course repeatedly during the past 500 years, is likely to have swallowed up corpses once buried in its grounds.

"There could have been quite a few which seeped out at the edges. You could have a mass watery grave down there," said Mr Liddell.

It would be possible to find out, said Ben Dempsey, a researcher for Channel 4 archaeology show, Time Team.

His experience is that bodies on riverbeds can be well preserved.

Dredging the Soar is not impractical but, he said: "If Richard was chucked off the bridge, the likelihood is that he has been carried miles downstream over the past half a millennium or so."

"He might not have. It all depends on just how forcefully he



MYSTERY: Bow Bridge replaced an earlier crossing from which Richard III's body is said to have been thrown in the 16th century

# Is there a king under this bridge?

was put there. I would love to have a crack at it with Time Team, but the chances of finding anything conclusive are probably too slim for us to take it on."

Historian David Baldwin has grave doubts whether Richard is even in the Soar.

The University of Leicester expert argues it is far more likely his remains lie somewhere close to the former NatWest bank in Greyfriars Lane, the site of his original tomb.

Greyfriars monastery was sacked in 1538 as Henry VIII split from Rome, but would our forefathers have really desecrated the tomb of a king?

Mr Baldwin thinks not, believing the story to be propaganda spread by the Tudor dynasty which succeeded Richard.

"There is nothing to suggest that the people of Leicester had such animosity to their former ruler," he said.

"Indeed, his successors were by no means universally popular."

The first record of the body being thrown into the Soar is from 70 years after it was supposed to have taken place.

Christopher Wren, the father of the architect, seemed to have no knowledge of the matter in 1612, when he was working as a tutor for the family which had

bought the ruined friary and built a large house and garden on the site.

Wren wrote that he was shown a 3ft stone pillar in the garden – put up by the house's owner – which had the inscription: "Here lies Richard III, sometime king of England."

"It is my opinion that he is still there, somewhere under those well trodden streets towards St Martins," said Mr Baldwin.

"We will never be certain, of course, unless we excavate the whole area."

"I don't think there is much prospect of finding him, but you never know. Stranger things have happened."



CHALLENGE: Richard III

## Can DNA unlock the mystery?

FORENSIC techniques used to catch today's killers could cut through the fog of time and give us the keys to unlock the age-old mystery of Richard III.

If we could find one of the two missing skulls, archaeological human bones specialist Dr Jenny Wakely, of the University of Leicester, would be able to say whether it was a man or woman, an adult or child and even tell its age to within 10 or 15 years.

"I couldn't prove it was the king," she explains. "But I could prove it wasn't by looking at its features. Male and female skulls are distinctively different shapes, for example. Men tend to have more angular features, whereas women's heads are made up of rounder curves."

The next step would be to use nitrogen isotope analysis to determine whether traces of diet locked into the very fabric of bone matched those experts would expect to find in the skeleton of a 15th century king. Should a skull still be in the royal running, the final step would be a DNA test to see if it matched Richard's known relations.

Obtaining DNA from a 500-year-old skull is difficult but not out of the question, according to Annette Cashmore, head of genetics at the University of Leicester.

It would involve mashing up a small slice of bone and adding various chemicals to get rid of other components and leave purified DNA.

DNA could then be extracted from Richard's brother Edward IV, entombed in St George's Chapel, Windsor, or given by surviving descendants, to see if there is a genetic family link.

"Whether the DNA would be a good enough quality to do all that is dubious," says Dr Cashmore.

Do you know the whereabouts of the skulls? Call Adam Wakelin on 0116 222 4236.



HEAD: Joe Goddard with a skull from the River Soar claimed to be that of Richard III but now dated to the Saxon period

FOCUS TOMORROW: SUFFERING FOR THEIR ART - THE STREET PERFORMERS RUNNING THE GAUNTLET OF THIEVES AND LOOTS

(See JAH article - DNA)