

Richard III

It has undoubtedly been one of the news stories of the year, and certainly the biggest archaeological scoop since the Staffordshire Hoard. The discovery of the body of Richard III under a Leicester car park put the East Midlands city at the centre of the world's attention.

Only the French appeared unimpressed, unveiling (surely as a spoiler) the freshly authenticated head of Henri IV. Dead kings, it seems, are busting out all over.

But if the exhumation of the last Plantagenet king of England was not excitement enough, there was more to follow. A few days later, Dr Philip Shaw, a member of the University of Leicester's English Department, had an even more shattering revelation to share with the world. Richard III, he announced, had a Brummie accent.

That, at least, was what the press made of it. "My kingbrum for a horse, yow lot," said The Sun, and the other tabloids followed in similar vein. A couple of the newspapers in India directly linked Richard's voice to the incomprehensible accent that members of their ex-pat community have picked up over here.

However, not all the media spoke with the same voice. NBC, accepting that their audience would more likely associate Birmingham with Alabama, chose to claim a more generic West Midland accent. The BBC opted for Dudley instead. Evidently the age-old confusion between what is a Black Country accent, and what is a Brummie, has not been dispelled.

I played my students Dr Shaw's recording of what he believed Richard's voice to sound like, and they thought he was Scottish. I explained to them that the pronunciation pre-dated the Great Vowel Shift, a technicality not explored in the press coverage. Whatever a West Midland accent sounded like in the 14th Century, it did not resemble Noddy Holder.

At the heart of Dr Shaw's analysis were two letters signed by Richard, one from 1469 as Duke of Gloucester, and the other shortly after his ascent to the throne in 1483. Each had a postscript in Richard's own hand, and with spelling that reflected the king's own pronunciation. The identification with the West Midlands largely rested upon one word. Richard spelt the word "will" as "wull", a characteristic of (though not, I think, unique to) the West Midlands dialect.

By 1483, incidentally, the king had switched to the more conventional "wyll".

There was no hint, Philip Shaw cruelly went on, of a Yorkshire accent in the king's speech. Not only had the Tykes lost the battle for Richard's body, they had lost his voice as well.

The question as to how Richard might have picked up such an accent was considerably murkier. The suggestion was that he might have adopted it whilst he was briefly based in Ludlow. I'm not convinced that this is much more credible than the thought that Richard developed an East Midlands accent from being buried in a Leicester car park for 400 years.

Sadly, I think we need a lot more evidence before we award him a star in the pavement of Broad Street as an honorary Brummie.

Nevertheless, one of England's least successful, but undoubtedly most infamous kings, has a few interesting West Midlands connections, not least in his DNA.

One of the key pieces of evidence that the bones in the car park belonged to Richard comes from his mitochondrial DNA, passed down from Richard's mother - Cecily, Duchess of York - through to his sister and her female descendants. Mitochondrial DNA is inherited only through the female line.

By the 18th Century the Yorkist DNA had found its way into the West Midlands in the shape of Barbara Calthorpe, sister to the first Lord Calthorpe, and then on to her daughter Barbara Gough-Calthorpe. Forget Leicester Cathedral; on the basis of this we could argue for a tomb somewhere on the Calthorpe Estate.

A generation later and the DNA had headed somewhere even more interesting. The genes were inherited by Barbara Anne Spooner, the daughter of the prominent Birmingham banker, Isaac Spooner, who lived at Elmdon Hall. This Barbara married (in 1797) none other than William Wilberforce, the Abolitionist MP, and moved (as chance would have it) to Yorkshire.

However, it is in the nature of mitochondrial DNA to get married, and that inevitably takes it all over the place.

Is there anything else to connect us to the ill-starred monarch ? As it happens, there is.

In the dining-hall at Coughton Court in Warwickshire, among its many souvenirs of unfortunate sovereigns, is a chair, upholstered in golden velvet, the frame of which is said to be made from the wood of the camp-bed Richard III occupied the night before Bosworth Field. Sit here (though it's probably discouraged) and you might have those self-same dreams that tormented Richard in Shakespeare's play.

Alternatively, you could opt for a large lunch in the cafe, and let that sit heavy on your soul instead.

The West Midlands had plenty of opportunity to take one last look at King Richard, before that fateful August day in 1485. He spent a few weeks in May and June at Kenilworth Castle, and also popped across to see the Corpus Christi celebrations at Coventry. It's likely that he was entertained at St Mary's

Guildhall.

Then in early June the king set forth for the East Midlands, and so to his impending date with destiny and Henry Tudor. And there we lose sight of him, at least for 527 years.