SIR JAMES TYRELL
HERO OR VILLAIN?

By Tracy Bryce January 1999
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The great mystery surrounding the Princes in the Tower not only blackened the name of King Richard III, but also that of the man accused of perpetrating the "foul deed", Sir James Tyrell. Single-handedly, Sir Thomas More condemns Sir James to infamy in his History of King Richard III, portraying him as, in the scornful words of Paul Murray Kendall, "a malcontent desperado". Through the passage of time, Sir James' loyalties and actions have lost the ability to speak for themselves, allowing us to now indulge in some reasoned speculation.

Life and Career

…Sir James Tyrell, who was a man of right goodly personage and, for nature's gifts, worthy to have served a much better Prince, if he well served God and by grace obtained as much truth and good will as he had strength and wit.
Sir Thomas More The History of King Richard III (p 104)

Very little is known of the early life of James Tyrell. Born about 1445, he was the eldest son of Sir William Tyrell of Gipping, near Stowmarket in Suffolk, and Margaret Darcy of Maldon. Sir William was Sheriff of Norfolk and Suffolk under King Henry VI, and most decidedly a Lancastrian, executed in February 1462 for treason against Edward IV. In spite of this, there is no indication that Sir James' loyalty lay anywhere but with the House of York.

Sources indicate Sir James served as elector for Suffolk in 1467 and was called esquire by 1469. In this same year, he married Anne, the heiress of Sir John Arundell of Cornwall. The Tyrells seemed to have postponed any additions to the family tree until after 1475, but eventually there were four children: Thomas, James, William and Anne. Quite possibly in these early years, James Tyrell assumed various minor duties for the John de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk, brother-in-law to Edward IV, whose principal seat was not 10 miles away from Gipping.

He first became noteworthy when he was knighted by Edward IV on the battlefield at Tewkesbury in May 1471. Shortly afterwards, he entered the service of the 20-year-old Duke of Gloucester, who entrusted him, in June of 1473, to escort his widowed mother-in-law, the Countess of Warwick, north to Middleham from sanctuary at Beaulieu Abbey.

In 1474 he was one of the challengers at the tournament held at the creation of Edward's infant son, Richard, as Duke of York. The following year, he was with the King's army during the abortive war in France, very likely in the retinue of the Duke of Gloucester. His star continued to rise with appointments as a commissioner in Suffolk in 1475-6, Sheriff of Glamorgan in the fall of 1477 and member of Parliament for Cornwall in 1478.

In a letter to Sir William Stoner, his cousin by marriage, Sir James stated he had persuaded his lord of Gloucester to excuse Stoner's brother for some unnamed fault. Evidently, Richard thought well enough of Tyrell to grant this personal favour. Sir James was made knight-banneret by Gloucester during the Scottish campaign in July 1482, and in November, with Sir William Parr

and Sir James Harrington, he was appointed to exercise, as vice-Constable, Gloucester's office of Constable of England. After the summary execution of Lord Hastings, and the arrest of the suspected co-conspirators, Richard temporarily placed Archbishop Rotherham in Sir James' custody.
He is listed among the knights at the coronation of Richard and Anne in 1483, and was made Master of the Horse, replacing Sir John Cheyney, and Master of the King's Henchmen. In November 1483, Sir James evidently played a role in securing the rebel Duke of Buckingham and conducting him to Salisbury for execution. Three days later, he was made commissioner of array for Wales, and before year end was appointed Steward of the Duchy of Cornwall for life. When Anne Tyrell's half-brother Thomas Arundell was attainted after Buckingham's rebellion, Richard's Parliament awarded his property to the Tyrells. In February 1484, Sir James was granted the stewardship of Buelt in South Wales, also for life, and in September he was made one of the Chamberlains of the Exchequer.
Towards the end of 1484, according to Harleian MSS 433, the docket book of Richard's Privy Seal, this "right trusty knight for our body and counsaillour" was sent "over the See into the parties of Flaundres for diverse maters concernying gretely oure wele". No further explanation is offered about this mission.
In January of 1485, Sir James assumed command of the garrison at Guisnes Castle, one of two fortresses guarding Calais, replacing the ailing and unreliable Lord Mountjoy. In June, he was made Constable of Tintagel Castle. In spite of the anticipated invasion of Henry Tudor, and the fact that Sir James was commissioner of array for Wales, Richard did not recall him to England in the spring and summer of that year. Instead, Sir James remained at his post at Guisnes, even as the Yorkist dynasty ended at Bosworth Field.
Surprisingly, for one so worthy of Richard's trust and preferments, Sir James suffered very little under the new king. As he was not at Bosworth, he was not attainted by Henry's Parliament, but he lost the sheriffdom of Glamorgan and Morgannok, as well as many of his other offices in Wales. Henry seemed content to allow him to continue his command at Guisnes. None of the sources I consulted made mention that Sir James was invited to attend Henry's coronation in October 1485. In January 1486, he returned to England when summoned as a witness in a dispute concerning the Countess of Oxford's lands, allegedly coerced from her by Richard. In February, he was restored as Sheriff of Glamorgan and appointed Constable of Cardiff Castle.
A singular event occurred in the summer of 1486. Henry granted Sir James a pardon for unspecified offences on 16th June, and then issued a second one—exactly one month later—on 16th July. Various historians have put various interpretations on this event: Audrey Williamson In The Mystery of the Princes considered it of little import, claiming it wasn't that unusual an occurrence. Sir Clements Markham went to the opposite extreme, theorizing Sir James was indeed responsible for the murders of the princes, and he did it on Henry's orders during that month-long period. One pardon is understandable—it "wiped the slate clean" for those capable and valued officials who had served the previous government. Apparently the documents themselves do not specify the reasons for the pardons. Could it be possible that the second one was an administrative error, or issued because the original "paperwork" had been misplaced? As Bertram Fields points out in his book, Royal Blood, the second pardon could have been "for some entirely different and unrelated act."
Sir James continued to rise in Henry's favour, and was officially restored to his post as Lieutenant of Guisnes in December, 1486. That same month, he was sent from Guisnes on an embassy on behalf of King Henry to Maximilian, King of the Romans. He attended the

coronation of Elizabeth of York in November 1487. He fought at the battle of Dixmude in 1489, and as Captain of Guisnes, took part in the negotiations leading to the Peace of Etaples in June 1492. He participated in the tournament celebrating the creation of Prince Henry as Duke of York in 1494, and during the festivities marking the arrival of Katherine of Aragon in England in 1501. In all, the evidence suggests Sir James was well-liked and respected, considered to be a trustworthy, honourable man.

His Yorkist sympathies proved to be his downfall. In 1501, he harboured the Yorkist heir, Edmund de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk, who had fled to Guisnes to escape criminal charges and foment opposition to Henry. This news reached Henry, who demanded Sir James return to England. Evidently Sir James decided it was safer to stay where he was, and a stalemate ensued. Henry sent troops to besiege the castle. Lured out by promise of safe passage, guaranteed by the Privy Seal, Sir James was arrested and his son Thomas forced to surrender the castle.

Sir James, his eldest son Thomas, a Tyrell retainer named Christopher Wellesbourne, Sir John Wyndham and "an unnamed sailor", were charged with treason. Sir James and Sir John were tried at the Guildhall, convicted and beheaded on May 6, 1502. According to sources, he was not allowed, or declined, to make the customary final speech from the scaffold. Thomas Tyrell and Wellesbourne were imprisoned, and the poor unnamed sailor was hanged, drawn and quartered.

Sir James' body was taken from Tower Hill and interred in the church of the Austin Friars in London--also the final resting place of Perkin Warbeck.

Thomas Tyrell eventually received a King's pardon in April 1504. Sir James was officially attainted by the Parliament of 1504 of treason on account of his connection with Edmund de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk, and his lands were forfeit to the King. Three years later, Thomas successfully appealed the attainder, and was restored his estates at Gipping.

Sir James Tyrell and the Mystery of the Princes

The first reference made to Sir James' role in the disappearance of the Princes occurred in The Great Chronicle of London, written about 1512:

"…But howsoever they were put to death, certain it was that before that day they were departed from this world, of which cruel deed Sir James Tyrell was reported to be the doer, but others put that weight upon an old servant of King Richard's named **_______** "(name left blank).

The Great Chronicle of London (pp. 236-7)

Polydore Vergil, writing his Anglica Historia some four years later, also identifies Sir James as the assassin, but an unwilling one—riding "sorrowfully" into London to do the dirty deed. But then he goes on to say, "with what kind of death these sely (innocent) children were executed, it is not certainly known".

Kendall notes that Sir James was in London the first week of September 1483 to collect a large quantity of raiment from the Wardrobe, including cloth for himself and the King's Henchmen. On Richard's orders he was to take it to York in preparation for the investiture of the Prince of Wales on September 8th. Neither More nor Vergil offer this explanation for Sir James' trip to London, but this information was readily accessible in the Wardrobe accounts. Instead they attribute a more nefarious reason for the expedition.

Vergil later goes on to say that is was generally reported and believed, "that the sons of Edward IV were still alive, having been conveyed secretly away, and obscurely concealed in some distant region." In the 17th century, Sir Francis Bacon reiterates this same rumour. Could it have arisen from the fact that Henry, once he became king, made no attempt to investigate or even publicly refer to the disappearance of the princes?

A most interesting revelation from Audrey Williamson, is a Tyrell family tradition which had been passed down through the generations. This story, related to Williamson by Mrs. Kathleen Margaret Drewe, a descendent of a Tyrell son adopted into the family in the 18th century, states that "the princes and their mother Elizabeth Woodville lived in the hall by permission of the uncle". The hall would be Gipping in Suffolk, and the uncle would be Richard III. As there is no evidence that Elizabeth and her children ever visited Gipping while Edward was alive, (in which case they wouldn't need the permission of "the uncle"), this sojourn would have occurred during Richard's reign.

Paul Murray Kendall, in his biography of Richard, explains that just after Easter 1484, Elizabeth and her daughters came out of sanctuary at Westminster, putting themselves under the King's protection. Elizabeth was granted an income of 700 marks and allowed to retire--presumably with her children--to a country manor. Could it have been Gipping? It was conveniently located—within a comfortable riding distance of London without being too close to the City, but not so far away as to require days of tiresome travel. It was also close to the coast, which would have been an attractive feature for Richard, having experienced two hasty escapes to the Low Countries. And, it was not as obvious a place to sequester the family as Richard's own properties.

The Great Chronicle of London reports that, "After Easter (of 1484) much whispering was among the people that the King had put the children of King Edward to death." That could well be possible, if the boys—and the girls—had been spirited away for safe-keeping. It may well be a rumour that Richard did not choose to scotch, (unlike the one accusing him of marital designs on Elizabeth of York over a year later).

Then there's that intriguing entry in Harleian MSS 433, referring to a journey to Flanders undertaken by Sir James on Richard's behalf late in 1484. Williamson speculates that Sir James could have visited Margaret of Burgundy to prepare the way for, or even escort, one or both of the princes out of the country, with, of course, the knowledge of their mother. If the princes had been sent overseas, it would not be possible to produce them to satisfy the curiosity of the idle. However, the daughters of King Edward *were* displayed at the Christmas festivities of that year. England not being subject to Salic Law, Edward's daughters **were** eligible to assume the throne, if Parliament had wished to legislate their legitimacy. Evidently Richard did not feel this possibility threatened his position enough to hide them away. Why? Perhaps because their brothers had prior claim anyway, should their illegitimacy be reversed.

Harleian MSS 433 also records a sum of £3,000, calculated to be the equivalent of the annual royal budget, was paid out to Sir James at Calais upon assuming his post as commander of Guisnes in January 1485. This seems like a sum of money far more than was necessary to pay the garrison. And besides, would not the record identify this payment as being for that purpose? One theory suggests that Sir James was delivering the money to Brittany to pay for the arrest and return of Henry Tudor, but Tudor had escaped to France by September 1484, so Richard would not have received a return on his investment.

Another reference in the Harleian manuscript mentions a document authorizing entry permits for messengers from the Duchess of Burgundy, one of them "without any Serche". Why should Richard specify, in writing, that one of the messengers from his sister the Duchess be allowed to enter the county without his belongings or person being searched?

Late in 1486, a royal pretender threatened Henry's reign. Lambert Simnell was first identified as the Earl of Warwick, but then was acclaimed in Ireland as Edward VI. Supporting his cause was John, Earl of Lincoln, Richard's heir, Margaret, Duchess of Burgundy, and surprisingly, a strong Woodville faction. After the battle of Stoke in June, the captured Lambert was exposed as a

young boy of about ten, clearly too young to be one of the missing princes. But why would Elizabeth Woodville and her family support a rebellion intent on overthrowing her daughter's husband and preventing the succession of her children? Bertram Fields suggests Lambert Simnell, and the more credible Perkin Warbeck after him, were both "stalking-horses" meant to prepare the way for one of the true princes to assume the throne without the inherent danger of leading an invasion. Was it for her support of Simnell's claims that Elizabeth was suddenly confined to Bermondsey Abbey in February 1487, and the Marquis of Dorset imprisoned? Henry gave out it was Elizabeth's 1484 agreement to put her daughters under the care of Richard III, but would he have admitted his mother-in-law sought his downfall? And why should she do that--unless it was to put one of her own sons on the throne?

All of this presupposes the princes were removed from England for their safe-keeping, on Richard's instructions. But how does this reconcile with More's vivid depiction of the deaths of the princes, taken from the confession of Sir James Tyrell?

The Confession

More's The History of King Richard III, composed about 1513, was the first to claim that Sir James, and one of his accomplices, John Dighton, both confessed to the crime while imprisoned at the same time:

Very truth it is and well known that at such time as Sir James Tyrell was in the Tower, for treason committed against the most famous prince King Henry the Seventh, both Dighton and he were examined, and confessed the murder in manner above-written, but whither the bodies were removed they could nothing tell.

Sir Thomas More The History of King Richard III (p. 106)

However, there is no record of a John Dighton being arrested or imprisoned in the Tower, not in 1502 nor ever. Even More goes on to admit Dighton was alive and free at the time of his writing, certainly a highly improbable event for the confessed murderer of two royal princes.

According to Sir Francis Bacon, many years after his execution, Henry "gave out" that Sir James had confessed to murdering the Princes on Richard's orders. But Polydore Vergil makes no mention of a confession. And surely the man responsible for documenting the glorious history of England, and the illustrious career of Henry VII would have access to, or at least be aware of, a confession for such a "crime of the century"? Similarly, Bernard André, Henry's personal biographer and tutor to his sons, was writing his biography of the king at the time of Sir James' alleged confession. Why then, does he not record this apocryphal event? He doesn't even accuse Sir James of involvement in any murders, laying that burden on King Richard.

A murder confession extracted from Sir James would have been a publicity coup for Henry. It would effectively squelch the ambitions of any future princely imposters. Also, with the death of Prince Arthur the previous month, the Tudor succession was suddenly at risk. Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain had to be assured, before they betrothed their daughter Katherine to Prince Henry, that the Tudors were firmly ensconced on the throne. Henry needed to tie up the loose ends left by the disappearance of the princes, and the arrest and execution of Sir James, a recognized adherent of the previous regime, was an opportunity too good to pass up. Even if Henry was responsible for the boys' deaths, whether or not Tyrell was involved, Henry still could have manufactured a confession to implicate Sir James and King Richard. At that time, most of those who would know, or suspect, otherwise—Elizabeth Woodville, Cardinal Morton, Cecily Neville, Bishop Rotherham, and Edward V's tutor, John Alcock—were dead.

But none of this happened. Sir James was attainted in 1504 for the lesser crime of associating with Edmund de la Pole. It would seem More created the Tyrell confession to lend veracity to his horrific and imaginative description of the murders of the princes.
But in what looks like an attempt to redeem Sir Thomas' reputation, Richard Marius, in his biography of More, puts forward a theory that Sir James was Henry's agent, who murdered the princes to clear the way for Henry's claim. His subsequent honours and appointments would indicate that Henry had approved of both the crime and the criminal. Sir James' association with the Yorkist heir would have mobilized Henry to dispose of this liability as quickly and quietly as possible. Henry could not afford to be tainted by regicide, so any confession by Sir James, particularly one that implicated Henry, would have to be suppressed.

"Dem Bones"

The two skeletons found in 1674, upon the demolition of a staircase leading to the White Tower, has engendered great scholarly controversy. As yet, there is no unassailable evidence to prove they are the remains of the princes. The arguments against them being the boys are very convincing in their logic—and beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say, the alleged bones of the sons of Edward IV, cannot attest any guilt on the part of Sir James Tyrell.
Were the princes in the Tower murdered? I like to think there is compelling evidence that they were not. What was Sir James Tyrell's role in all of this? The facts are inconclusive, but the romantic in me likes to think he had a hand in spiriting the boys away to Flanders, and accepting a voluntary exile at Guisnes to watch over them on Richard's behalf. I could find no reference to any involvement on his part in either the Lambert Simnell or Perkin Warbeck rebellions, and evidently Henry didn't suspect him of complicity—but that doesn't mean he wasn't somehow involved. His aid to Edmund de la Pole suggests, in spite of years of exemplary service to Henry, he was still a Yorkist at heart. To my mind, that makes him a hero.

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