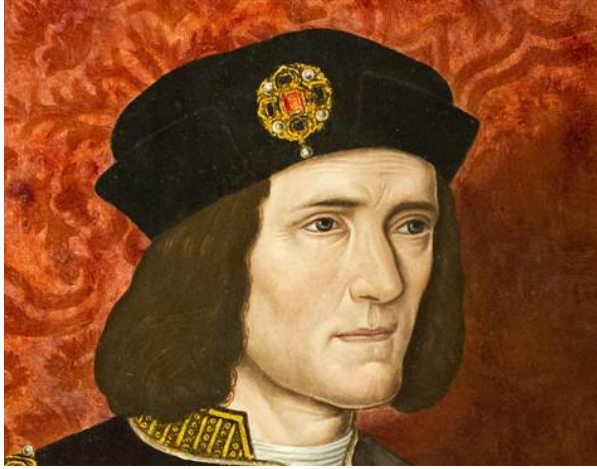


Richard III search: archaeologists 'tantalisingly close' to finding king's body

Richard III was once here at Gainsborough Old Hall in October 1483



Over 500 years since he was killed in battle, archaeologists believe they have finally found the skeleton of King Richard III, buried deep beneath a council car park.

For the past two weeks, archaeologists led by Richard Buckley, co-director of University of Leicester Archaeological Services, have been excavating a car park in Greyfriars, close to Leicester Cathedral. The dig was organised by the Richard III Society, in partnership with the university and the city council.

Philippa Langley, from the society, is the driving force behind the project.

Experts said a fully intact skeleton matched much about what they knew about the medieval king, and are hoping that DNA tests will put their beliefs beyond doubt.

The remains were found three weeks into an archaeological dig by a team from Leicester University, which recently pinpointed the site of the ancient Grey Friars church, where Richard was believed to be buried after being killed in the Battle of Bosworth in August 1485, and which was razed to the ground in 1538 during the Dissolution of the Monasteries ordered by Henry VIII.

On Sept. 7, the archaeologists announced they had found medieval paving stones that may belong to a garden built in tribute to the king by Robert Herrick, a mayor of Leicester. The garden, and a mansion, was supposedly built over the church where Richard III was buried. In 1612, Christopher Wren, father of the famous architect, recorded seeing a 3-foot (1-meter) stone pillar in Herrick's garden memorializing the king. The pillar held the inscription: "Here lies the body of Richard III sometime King of England."



The spot (circled in red) where archaeologists believe they may have found the remains of King Richard III. The remains were found under a council car park of New St in the centre of Leicester.

Five key aspects underlined their belief that appears to have ended a decade-long search for his remains.

1. The skeleton was an adult male, who appeared fit and strong.
2. He had suffered significant trauma to the head where a blade had cut away part of the back of his skull; an injury consistent with battle. The only known account of Richard's death is in a poem which states he was "poleaxed to the head".
3. A barbed arrow head was found lodged between vertebrae in his upper back, and spinal abnormalities pointed to the fact that he had severe scoliosis, a form of spinal curvature. This would have made his right shoulder appear visibly higher than his left, which is consistent with contemporary accounts of Richard's appearance.
4. Richard's two year reign was the subject of one of William Shakespeare's most famous plays, which portrayed him as an evil, ugly hunchback, and which helped cement the public perception of him.
5. The remains were found in the Choir area of the church, again consistent with historical record of where he was buried.

Little has ever been known about Richard III's death, other than he died on the battlefield and was supposedly taken on horseback by his vanquisher, Henry Tudor, who later became King Henry VII. He remains the last King of England to die in battle. He was the last of the Plantagenet dynasty and his death was decisive in the War of the Roses.

DNA tests are expected to take 12 weeks, and Turi King, from the university's department of genetics, said that if they were not able to extract DNA or if tests proved inconclusive, they were unlikely to be any other avenues to prove conclusively the skeleton was the King's.

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DNA has been taken from the furniture maker, whose mother was the 16th generation niece of Richard III, and this will now be compared to samples taken from the skeleton. The bones will now undergo laboratory analyses. The results could then be compared to those of a direct descendant of Richard's sister, who was uncovered by John Ashdown-Hill, author of "The Last Days of Richard III."

There has been widespread interest in the project, which is being filmed for a Channel 4 documentary. The dig is being filmed by Darlow Smithson Productions for a forthcoming Channel 4 documentary to be aired later this year.

Researchers have said if the king was found, one option would be for his remains to be interred at Leicester possibly the Cathedral.

If proved genuine, the findings will have profound ramifications for our understanding and appreciation of this much maligned king.

We await the results with great interest.