

Information Pack 4: The debate about where and how to rebury Richard III

The decision to rebury Richard III in the Anglican Leicester Cathedral sparked questions about the rites which his remains would be accorded as a Catholic king who had lived before the Reformation, and whether it was appropriate to be reburying them in a cathedral whose denomination would not have been recognised in his own lifetime. Opposition was also voiced with respect to Richard's history: reburial in an Anglican church was considered by some to be particularly inappropriate due to the consequences of Richard's death which enabled Henry Tudor to seize the English throne and whose son, Henry VIII, later initiated the creation of the Church of England through the sixteenth-century Reformation. As Dr John Ashdown-Hill, a Catholic himself, stated: "If Richard III had not died, maybe the Anglican Church would have never existed". For some Catholics the decision to rebury Richard III's remains in an Anglican setting, in a service led by the Archbishop of Canterbury, represented a clear reflection of their current standing in society, a "triumphal demonstration of how firmly in place still is the anti-Catholic ascendancy that Bosworth made possible".

Burial in a Catholic or an Anglican church

Calls for Richard III to be buried in a Catholic church emerged soon after the confirmation of the identity of his remains in February 2013. Although overshadowed by the popular debate between rivals Leicester and York as appropriate sites for Richard's reburial, petitions and media also reveal substantial support for another alternative; his reburial at a Catholic site, and according to Catholic rites. The argument put forward by those insisting upon a Catholic reburial site for the former monarch's remains was simple, but emotive. In issuing the exhumation licence in September 2012, it was believed that the Ministry of Justice had failed to consider Richard's own faith when agreeing to his reburial in Leicester Cathedral. Concerns were also raised about whether Richard III's remains would be interred in Catholic consecrated ground, especially since Leicester's cathedral had only been granted that status in 1927. As a result, the website acatholicland.org called for Richard to be reburied at Leicester's Dominican priory of the Holy Cross or St. Wilfrid's Church in York. These suggestions reflected the concern that Richard had been moved from once Catholic consecrated ground, and would be reinterred in an inappropriate post-reformation Anglican setting that would profoundly disrespect his beliefs.

In response to these concerns, the University of Leicester issued a statement seeking to clarify the issues surrounding consecrated ground and the reinterment of remains. The university pointed out that Richard would not have recognised either the Church of England or the modern Roman Catholic Church. It was also stressed that consecrated ground is the same for both Churches, with many Catholics buried in the pre-Reformation era now lying in Anglican churches and cathedrals. Richard's beliefs in life, the University of Leicester argued, should therefore have no effect upon his reinterment in what had been a medieval parish church and which had since become a modern cathedral. In a letter to *The Catholic Universe*, the Very Rev. David Monteith, Dean of Leicester Cathedral, explained that the Church of England is "the legal successor to the national Church to which Richard belonged", and as such he believed it to be wholly appropriate that the former monarch be buried in Leicester Cathedral. This was supported by the Rt. Rev. Tim Stevens, Bishop of Leicester, who expressed his delight that both the Archbishop of Canterbury and Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster would attend the reburial ceremony, with the cardinal's presence marking "the continuity between the Catholic faith in this country and the Church of England".

The Question of Religious Rites

A call for Richard's remains to be reinterred according to Catholic rites ran parallel to the request that he be reburied in a Catholic church. The author of a blog, "Not So Fast Leicester – Richard was a Catholic" for *The Tablet*, an international Catholic news site, emphasized the belief that the appropriate procedure "would surely be a Catholic funeral with a full requiem mass" as a fundamental and necessary show of respect to the former monarch. This sentiment was also later expressed by the leader of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, Cardinal Vincent Nichols, during Richard's 'Reburial Week', when he explained that the requiem mass for Richard was "a profound and essential Christian duty". Requiem masses are perceived as being vital for members of the Catholic community, who believe that prayers should be said on behalf of the dead for the repose of their souls and their safe passage to heaven. It is for this reason that medieval monarchs founded chantries, such as that which Richard probably established at York Minster between 1483 and 1485. Subsequently, Catholics expressed their concern for the afterlife of one whom they considered to have shared their beliefs in the hope that requiem masses would be performed for Richard III at the time of his reburial.

In response to these concerns, Leicester Cathedral sought to prepare a ceremony “which both recognizes tradition and Richard’s faith, but also speaks to the modern world”. Throughout the ‘Reburial Week’ in March 2015, both the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Rev. Justin Welby, and the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Vincent Nichols, actively led events in Richard’s memory. On Sunday, 22nd March Cardinal Nichols preached a sermon upon receiving Richard’s remains in a compline service at Leicester Cathedral, before leading a Requiem Mass the following day in the nearby Catholic Holy Cross Church. The following Tuesday, the Dominican Friars of Holy Cross took part in a procession through central Leicester to the cathedral before singing vespers in the presence of Richard’s remains. Likewise, on the Monday Leicester’s Sikh community organised an event to celebrate Richard’s life “from under a Sikh lens”, demonstrating how the multicultural approach envisioned by the reburial week’s organisers enabled not only a balance between Catholic and Anglican views, but also presented Leicester’s “proudly diverse” communities with an opportunity to participate in this national and historic moment. Finally, on Thursday 26th March, Richard III was reinterred in a ceremony led by Archbishop Welby in the presence of Cardinal Nichols. Requiem masses were also hosted by Catholic congregations throughout England on the day of Richard’s reburial, most notably at St Wilfrid’s, York and St Catherine’s in Leyland, Lancashire. Subsequently, the universal message that Leicester Cathedral sought to impart enabled a variety of faiths to join together to celebrate Richard III’s life, demonstrating the ties between the past and modern multicultural British society.

Coffining in a Religious Environment

Although the Looking for Richard project team had hoped that Richard’s remains would be kept in a prayerful environment before their reburial, after the confirmation of Richard’s identity the University of Leicester made clear that as the holders of the exhumation licence they did not have the legal authority to confer his remains to another location. This in turn raised particular concerns among Catholics and non-Catholics alike when it was announced that, due to these restrictions, Richard’s remains would not be coffined at a holy site, along with the rites of his faith, but in one of the university’s laboratories. In particular, Dr. Ashdown-Hill was worried that the coffining process may set an “unfortunate precedent” for future discoveries according to which they would be “coffined as scientific specimens with no recognition of their beliefs and burial rites”. The matter sparked two petitions, organised by Mrs Mary Jepson and the Looking for Richard project, requesting that Richard’s remains be

coffined at a holy site, and which were later received by Cardinal Nichols. The local newspaper, the *Leicester Mercury*, also invited its readership to respond to a poll asking “Should Richard III lay in a Catholic chapel before he is reinterred at Leicester Cathedral?”, with 55% of respondents stating that he should.

Those who signed the petitions had a clear idea of how they believed the remains of a former monarch, and a Catholic, should be treated, but the religious bodies were at pains to indicate that this desire for respect may not in fact be doctrinally sound. Leicester Cathedral and the Catholic Diocese of Nottingham (which includes the city of Leicester) issued a joint statement in response to the announcement of the petitions in January 2015. The two bodies described these frustrations as “fundamentally misplaced”, and explained that “there is no requirement in the Catholic tradition for prayers to be said at the coffining of human remains, including those of a monarch”. Fortunately, both sides of this debate were able to reach a compromise. On 16th March 2015 the remains were carefully placed, “as if articulated”, within their coffin at a site on the University of Leicester’s campus which was formerly a chapel, with the presence and prayers of the university’s Catholic chaplain. As such, the university satisfied its legal concerns as the guardian of the remains by keeping them on-site and in the hands of archaeologists, while those seeking to ensure Richard’s beliefs were respected appreciated his coffining in a religious environment.

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