

Information Pack 2: Online Petitions and the Richard III Reburial Debate

Following the announcement by the University of Leicester Archaeological Services in September 2012 that the human remains found on the first day of the excavation of the Greyfriars site may well have been those of the lost Richard III, questions were immediately asked about the consequences of such a find. Given the unique nature of the discovery, questions arose as to where, how and according to what religious rites the former monarch should be buried. In the media, journalists and historians voiced the arguments for and against a variety of potential locations for Richard III's reinterment, and considered the implications of an Anglican or Catholic ceremony. However, online petitions emerged as a vital forum for people across the country and internationally to impart their views on these crucial issues, and even influence the decisions made.

What is an E-petition?

Online or e-petitions exist in two formats. The first of these are petitions linked directly to the Parliamentary Petitions Committee. These can be created and signed by any British citizen and resident of the United Kingdom, and once their contents have been checked by the Committee to determine their suitability for government consideration, they are made public to be signed. If a parliamentary petition reaches 10,000 signatures, it receives a response from the government, and if it reaches 100,000 signatures the issue concerned is debated in parliament, though in special cases this may occur even before the petition reaches this number. The second category of e-petitions are found in unofficial, third-party websites such as www.change.org and www.avaaz.org. The government is not bound to respond to these in the same manner as Parliamentary petitions, and they can be signed by anyone internationally. Once they have gathered a significant number of signatures, these third-party petitions can be sent to the authorities concerned as a show of the global interest in the relevant issue.

What issues did the e-petitions raise?

Once the remains had been positively identified as belonging to Richard III through a mitochondrial DNA match with his descendants on 4th February 2013, dozens of petitions

and polls emerged urging authorities to support a variety of perspectives regarding the location of his reburial and how this should take place. As many as thirty-nine petitions regarding Richard III appear in the Parliamentary Petitions Committee's archive, and more can be found on the change.org and avaaz.org website. These petitions reflect the varied concerns that the discovery of Richard III's remains provoked, as well as the considerable interest members of the public expressed in this unique historical moment. Two petitions received over 30,000 signatures each, four more received more than 1,000 and a further eight over 100.

Unsurprisingly, many petitions addressed the question of where Richard III should be reinterred. In this respect, they added an extra dimension to the historical and legal arguments which characterised this debate by providing an indication of where the public hoped this would take place. The key contenders were the cities of Leicester and York, and the cases for each of these cities were galvanised by groups who were passionate about their respective cause. On the one hand, the Plantagenet Alliance created a petition to give voice to the demand that Richard be reburied in York, "as the last King of the House of York", while on the other Leicester's local newspaper, the *Leicester Mercury*, campaigned extensively to encourage the city's inhabitants to sign a rival petition favouring Leicester as the site for Richard's reinterment. When these petitions were closed in the autumn of 2013, that calling for Richard to be reburied in York Minster had received 31,350 signatures, while the one in favour of Leicester Cathedral had reached 34,479.

The arguments in favour of either Leicester and York were not the only ones to be represented through petitions. Petitions were also put forward for a variety of other locations which had been connected to Richard III in his lifetime, such as:

- Westminster Abbey, where Richard had been crowned and where his wife Anne, had been buried – 80 signatures.
- Windsor Castle, where Richard's predecessors Henry VI and Edward IV had been buried – 7 signatures.
- Fotheringhay Castle, as Richard's birthplace and the site of his family's mausoleum – 32 signatures
- Gloucester Cathedral, as the king had before his coronation been the Duke of Gloucester – 52 signatures.

Other ideas included the Roman Catholic Arundel Cathedral, owing to its Gothic architecture, and even Lancaster, as "the county town of the King's Duchy of Lancaster". Nevertheless, none of these petitions reached the levels of support enjoyed by York Minster

and Leicester Cathedral, indicating just how important the publicity of this particular debate was to encouraging public participation in these petitions.

Besides these predominant concerns about *where* Richard should be buried, 1,228 people stressed the fundamental importance of the king's religious beliefs by signing a petition calling for his remains to be reinterred at a "Catholic burial site". These concerns about the respect due to Richard's faith were also raised by the 'Looking for Richard' team, who strongly believed that his remains should be coffined "in a holy place, not as a scientific specimen". Subsequently, they also launched an online petition which received 2,198 signatures. The worries about the necessary respect due to Richard's remains, as those belonging both to a former king and a human being, were further echoed through a petition set up by Dr John Ashdown-Hill, who called for an end to further scientific testing on the remains following their identification so that Richard could await reburial "in an appropriate place of peace and sanctity". The petition on avaaz.org received 333 signatures from as far afield as Canada, and a corresponding parliamentary petition received 195 signatures. These petitions reveal just how widespread religious and ethical concerns were to members of the public, beyond the more publicised debate between Leicester and York.

How effective were the petitions?

While revealing the wide variety of concerns members of the public raised in reaction to the discovery of Richard III's remains, the petitions also had an impact upon the decisions made by those institutions responsible for Richard's eventual reburial, namely the University of Leicester and Leicester Cathedral. Firstly, the petitions supporting reburial in either York or Leicester were noted by Justice Haddon-Cave as part of his justification for the granting of a Judicial Review considering the Plantagenet Alliance's appeal for wider consultation in July 2013. These petitions were later acknowledged in the Approved Judgement of the judicial review in May 2014, though this ultimately concluded that there was "no sensible basis for imposing a requirement for a general public consultation" upon the decision to rebury Richard in Leicester, despite "leaflets, online petitions [and] publicity campaigns". As both petitions had received over 10,000 signatures, they received identical responses from the government in 2013, but this statement simply stated that the judicial review's conclusions should be given before further action could be taken.

Despite the limited impact of these petitions in the Judicial Review's final decision, others were more successful in influencing events. The Looking for Richard team's online petition to have Richard's remains coffined in a prayerful environment prior to his reinterment assisted

in securing a compromise between the team and the University of Leicester, supported by another petition conducted by Mrs Mary Jepson which received 3,000 signatures from Catholic congregations in January 2015. As a result of this combined effort, Richard's remains were confined "at a location within the University of Leicester which was itself formerly a chapel, with the presence, and the prayers, of a Catholic chaplain", as opposed to within one of the university's laboratories. During the coffining service, the former chapel would be transferred back to its original designation as a place of religion.

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