From “Richard III: The Road to Leicester” Amberley, 2014

Prologue [1]

22 August, 1485

They found him amid the marshes. He lay crumpled, encircled by the footprints of his enemies. Scavenging hands had stripped his limbs white; they lay lifeless, growing colder, streaked with blood and dirt. In the final struggle, his helmet had been cut loose, with its symbolic gold coronet. Without it, there had been little to prevent the halberds of the Welsh troops from finding their mark. The fatal blow had bitten deep into the base of the skull, yet apart from a cheek wound, his face was curiously untouched. The eyes stared up glassily into the sky, devoid of emotion, unable to see the rough hands that lifted him out of the mud.

He was thrown across the back of a horse. Someone bound his wrists, as if there was any chance that he could try and escape now! They did not attempt to cover him, laughing at his nakedness as his body lay vulnerable and exposed to the fading August sun. He was their prize now, their puppet; their jokes flew over his head as the victors began the slow tramp back into Leicester.

“Call yourself a king”, they asked, “where is your crown now?”

Their eyes hardened in hatred and release; one spat in his direction, another drew a dagger from his belt. He was perhaps a farmer or a butcher, but for a moment, he paused, blade in hand. Some vestige of respect held him back, some sacred barrier between commoner and royalty, imbibed over centuries of feudal life. Then a primitive energy arose in his stomach, the old association of conqueror and victim, the rush of unexpected power. With a swift, low blow, the unnamed soldier thrust his knife into the flesh of the King’s buttock. His companions let out a yell, half disbelief, half delight.

Someone had brought them wine. They drank it dry as they crossed back over Bow Bridge into the town, voices raised in raucous laughter. The man on the horse had lost his novelty; it went almost unnoticed when he struck his temple against the stones. But word was spreading. Through the streets, people came out to watch the army pass, to see for themselves whether the rumours were true, recalling the regal figure they had seen set off for battle only forty eight hours before. Their faces betrayed a mixture of emotions; many subdued and respectful, others relieved that it was over. Most would have wondered what the coming months and years would hold. The dead body was lain out on display, with the congealed blood about his ears already turning black; the cold earthly remnants of England’s last Plantagenet King. The soldiers went away.

Two days later he was carried into the Church of the Grey Friars Convent. The heavy stones in the choir had been hurriedly lifted and stacked one size, to reveal a little space, into which they would put their Lord. There may have been prayers but there was little other ceremony; he was not given a shroud or a coffin. His hands were not untied. When they lifted him down, placing him on the earth, his head hung forward, jaw open. There was no time now to extend the pit, he would be buried hunched, almost sitting up in expectation. Then the slabs were replaced over his head and Richard III was consigned to history.