

Background information

Edward IV of the House of York won the struggle against the House of Lancaster (known as the Wars of the Roses) to establish himself as King in 1461. In his first years as King he was challenged by a strong alliance formed of his own brother George, the powerful Earl of Warwick, and the defeated Henry VI's wife Margaret of Anjou. He upset the Earl of Warwick by refusing to marry a foreign princess and instead marrying a commoner, Elizabeth Woodville, in secret. Edward was forced to flee to the Netherlands, but with the support of his other brother, Richard, did eventually return to reclaim the throne in 1471.

Edward IV loved to have a good time – he liked hunting, drinking eating and dancing. After a particularly large meal in April 1483 he was so full he went to bed for hours! He caught a fever and died!

His eldest son, also called Edward, travelled to London to be crowned with his younger brother Richard. Edward was only 12 and Richard was 10. The two boys stayed in the Tower of London, a royal residence, while they waited for the coronation. The boys' uncle, Richard, was asked to look after them and to help support Edward as a boy king until he could rule the country alone.

In the meantime a rumour started in London. People were saying Edward IV wasn't legally married to the boys' mother, Elizabeth Woodville, which meant that the young Edward couldn't be King. Two weeks later the boys' uncle Richard III was crowned King instead of Edward.

In the summer of 1483 the boys were seen playing in the grounds of the Tower, but day by day they were seen less and less until they stopped appearing altogether. What happened to them? Were they sent abroad? Did they fall ill? Were they murdered? You decide!

Task

Working in your group, your task is to solve the mystery of the princes in the tower – what do you think happened to them, and why?

To help develop your theory you have:

- a pack of evidence cards.
- four suspect cards

You will need to work out a process to make your judgement. You could start by grouping together evidence to support a range of theories, then debating which is the strongest case. There may be times when you disagree with each other – try to resolve disagreements by using the evidence.

Suspect cards

Suspect 1: Henry VII

Henry VII became the first Tudor King after defeating Richard III in 1485 at the Battle of Bosworth Field. There is no evidence to connect Henry directly to the death of the two boys.

If the boys lived Henry's claim to the throne was weak. If the boys disappeared Henry had a much stronger claim to the throne.

Does this make him a prime suspect?

Suspect 2: Richard III

History has painted Richard as the wicked uncle who killed his own nephews to secure his path to the throne. Many of the 'facts' about Richard were written during the reign of the Tudors who needed to justify their claim to the throne.

However Richard had shown extraordinary family loyalty supporting his elder brother Edward IV through thick and thin.

Was he the wicked uncle blinded by the possibility of power or did he remain loyal to the end?

Suspect 3: Henry Stafford, Duke of Buckingham

Henry was Richard III's brother-in-law and cousin to Henry VII. He publicly supported Richard's claim to the throne but secretly plotted with Henry.

Did he kill the boys to frame Richard?

Did he follow the orders of Richard to kill the boys?

Suspect 4: James Tyrell

James is one of History's shady characters who enjoyed plotting and underhand dealings!

In 1502 he was in prison for treason against Henry VII. Under torture Tyrell confessed to killing the boys though he supplied no information as to why or whose orders he was following.

The true murderer or not?

Evidence cards

Did the princes really die?

In 1491 a young man named Perkin Warbeck claimed he was Richard, the youngest son of Edward IV. Henry VII defeated Warbeck, had him thrown in prison and later executed.

Richard III put the princes in the Tower of London for protection. It was not a prison at this time but was still used as a royal residence. By putting the boys here Richard hadn't arrested them or put them in prison.

Richard III had declared that the boys were illegitimate. Their father had been promised to marry another before he married the boys' mother, Elizabeth Woodville.

The customs of the time meant that a prior arrangement of marriage could have made Edward's marriage to Elizabeth unlawful and any children illegitimate.

The Queen, Elizabeth Woodville was very unpopular at the time and Richard could have easily have gathered support against her and possibly her children.

The princes were seen regularly playing on Tower Green or 'taking the air' around the walls until Easter 1484 when they dropped out of sight.

Rumours began to circulate that the princes had been murdered. Richard was aware of them but did nothing to deny it nor did he show the boys in public to disprove the rumours.

In 1647 workmen found two skeletons underneath a staircase while they were clearing rubble for some rebuilding work on the Tower.



The skeletons were small enough to suggest they were the bones of two young adults. The instant assumption was made that these were the bones of the missing princes.

There have been several attempts to reexamine the skeletons to try to determine if they were indeed the bones of the princes. There have been no definite answers to the identity of the skeletons.

In 1933 two doctors examined the bones. They said the skeletons were incomplete. The bones belonged to two children about the ages of 10 and 12. A stain on one of the skulls suggests they may have been suffocated. The bones could have been there since 1100.

In 1955 other doctors looked at the report made in 1933. They weren't allowed to look at the skeletons so used photographs instead. They said the bones were actually from two boys younger than the princes were when they disappeared. The stain on the skull was not caused by suffocation.

There is no definite proof that the princes were murdered. All we know is that they disappeared. It has been assumed they were murdered.

The princes' mother, Elizabeth Woodville, never accused Richard of killing them, but it was Henry VII who sent her to a nunnery.

Cardinal John Morton was one of King Richard's greatest enemies.

The princes were aged 10 and 12 when they disappeared.

On 25 June 1483, Parliament declared the two little princes illegitimate and, as next in line to the throne, their uncle and Protector, Richard, Duke of Gloucester, was declared the true King. The two little princes were never seen again.

After his coronation, Richard III headed north and spent the remainder of the summer on his lands with his wife and son. By the end of that summer, the two young princes were never to be seen alive again.

Henry VII gave important jobs and lands to a lot of people when he became King including James Tyrell.

James Tyrell confessed to murdering the princes whilst under torture. He also claimed they had smuggled the boys abroad to protect them.

Some historians believe Richard had no reason to kill them, but Henry VII did. Henry was quite a character and some thought he was capable of murder.

If the princes were alive in 1485, and they could have been, they would have been a great embarrassment to Henry, and Henry had as much to gain as Richard by the death of the young boys.

Cardinal John Morton claimed that James Tyrell had murdered the boys. He said Tyrell was a great friend of Richard & that he had suffocated the boys in their room in the tower and buried the bodies at the bottom of the stairs under a great pile of stones.

When Henry gained the throne he immediately accused Richard of cruelty but strangely did not mention the murder of the little princes. Henry did not announce that the boys had been murdered until July 1486, nearly a year after Richard's death.

In Richard's absence, the boys were left in the care of Henry Stafford, Duke of Buckingham. He was the only one who had motive and opportunity to dispose of the princes.

On 6 July 1483 Richard III was crowned King of England at Westminster Abbey. At that time, the young princes were still alive and living in the Tower.

King Henry VII of England was undoubtedly a ruthless man who was capable of anything. Henry married the princes' eldest sister, Elizabeth of York, to reinforce his hold on the throne. However, Elizabeth's right to inherit the throne depended on both her brothers being already dead.

The Duke of Buckingham was Richard's right-hand man. Many regard Buckingham as the likeliest suspect: his execution, after rebelling against Richard in October 1483, might suggest that he and the king had fallen out because Buckingham had taken it upon himself, for whatever reason, to get rid of the princes.

Teaching notes

This lesson would fit well at the end of a sequence on the Wars of the Roses but could equally well act as a stand-alone mystery for a one-off lesson on the nature of History, difficulties with evidence, subsequent interpretations etc. The background information should be sufficient to allow students to delve in meaningfully!

Tasks

Starter:

Either individually or as a class, read through the background information on p.1. It may take some digesting, so you could ask students to condense it into five key sentences. Understanding of the background information can be checked using the interactive Yes/No activity called 'Princes in the tower fact check' which can be opened by subscribers from teachithistory.co.uk.

Main tasks:

1. Divide students into groups of three/four, aiming for mixed ability groupings. Provide each group with a set of evidence cards from pp.3-5. Depending on time available and student ability you may wish students to just look at the evidence cards to begin with and to generate initial theories. The four suspect cards from p. 2 could then be added to help narrow in on a judgement. Alternatively you may wish to give both sets of cards out together. Allow students enough time to formulate their opinion and insist that it is backed with evidence.
2. Ask each group to explain its opinion and allow other groups to challenge their conclusions.

Plenary:

As a class, consider the pictures on the separate PDF called 'picture sheet' and discuss the questions beneath.

You might finish with some broad discussion about what the activity reveals about the nature of History, the limitations of evidence, and difficulty of unpicking subsequent interpretations.