



Digging for Richard: How Archaeology Found the King, Mike Pitts
(London: Thames and Hudson, 2014).

Review by:
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Digging for Richard: how archaeology found the king. By Mike Pitts. London: Thames and Hudson, 2014. 9780500252000. 208 pp. £18.95.

The story of Richard III is as gripping as any in royal biography. From dutiful brother (his motto: “Loyalty Me Binds”); fighting side-by-side with Edward IV and George, Duke of Clarence, in the field at Tewkesbury in 1471; to the tragedies of his short reign, 1483-85 – his tale is as dramatic as it gets. And it is as a *dramatis persona* that, even now, four hundred years since Shakespeare’s play was first performed, he is best remembered. Of course, the whole Richard III obsession of modern times, since Horace Walpole expressed his “historic doubts” (*Historic Doubts on the Life and Reign of Richard III*. 1768), is entirely to do with unravelling the fact from the fiction. Thus Mike Pitts lays out his account of the discovery and interpretation of Richard’s remains in the form of a play – a drama with a prologue in place of a preface, acts in place of chapters, and an epilogue in place of a conclusion. Whether or not Ricardian investigations of this kind are of any great importance in advancing our knowledge and understanding of the past, they are great fun and Pitts’ book is certainly entertaining.

In “Act I” Pitts explores the making of the legend and provides a conventional version of the historical narrative that underpins it. This book however is not a history of a king, but a history of an archaeological excavation and its aftermath, written by an expert in that field, albeit one more commonly associated with prehistory – notably the remains of early humans (*homo heidelbergensis*) discovered in a quarry at Boxgrove in Sussex, and the Neolithic and Bronze Age archaeology of the Stonehenge-Avebury World Heritage Site complex. For several years he has been the editor of ‘British Archaeology’, the much admired publication of the Council for British Archaeology. That this particular excavation should, ultimately, warrant anything much being written about it, let alone this 200 page book, would have seemed most unlikely to Pitts and the rest of the archaeological community, including those who were commissioned by the writer and doyenne of the Richard III Society, Philippa Langley, to undertake it. After all, she believed she had found a lost king’s grave in a car park in Leicester beside a lone surviving wall believed to be a remnant of Greyfriars friary, because, when she stood there, “I had goose bumps so badly I was actually freezing cold to my bones” (51). The extraordinary thing is she was absolutely right and the bones – subsequently found to be, almost certainly, Richard’s – were discovered on the very first day of the excavation.

Of course, Langley had done her historical homework and the archaeologists had searched every record in developing their understanding of

the Greyfriars context. Together, with little reward, they had engaged in a geophysical survey of the site. Confident they would gain much from the excavation but pretty convinced the Ricardians would be frustrated in their very particular quest, the archaeologists from the University of Leicester, directed by Matthew Morris, started digging in August 2012. In the event, everyone was delighted with the results: Matthew Morris found a church and Philippa Langley had her king. Channel 4, which filmed it all, had a thrilling programme to broadcast. The DNA testing and full autopsy followed, no doubt tempering Ricardian celebrations with the uncomfortable truth that not everything Shakespeare wrote was a pack of lies – whatever else he may have been in life, Richard III had a severely twisted spine that very likely gave him a misshapen appearance, his right shoulder blade rising notably higher than his left, his chest enlarged. He was a man of squat stature who, but for his scoliosis, would have been considerably taller.

Pitts has written a concise record of events that sheds as much light upon ourselves as our ancestors in its commentary on the personalities and motivations of those involved in the project, as well as the broader media and public interest in it all. Beyond this he has succeeded in pulling off that hardest of tricks for the writer of popular histories: even though we already know how the story ends, this remains a gripping account. Francis Pryor's remarks on the back sleeve – "It's a real page-turner", "I couldn't put it down" etc. – may have a whiff of hyperbole but, in fact, they come pretty close to the mark. Like Pryor in his *Britain AD: a quest for Arthur, England and the Anglo-Saxons* (2004), Pitts has demonstrated here great skill in weaving together a discussion of our perceptions of heritage and the history and archaeology upon which they are based.

Digging for Richard is copiously illustrated with images from medieval manuscripts, portraits, and photographs. The "Epilogue" includes an interesting, though brief, summary of the equally fascinating advance in recent Ricardian studies – the relocation of the Bosworth battlefield following intensive archaeological survey. It predates, but anticipates, the furore unleashed by the debate regarding the burial of Richard's remains: something that might usefully be added to a second edition.

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