

St Mary's Church Barnard Castle

Richard III



Richard III and St. Mary's, Barnard Castle.

Barnard Castle is the proud possessor of a strong connection to the last Plantagenet king, King Richard III.

Before his accession to the throne Richard III, formerly Duke of Gloucester, had great and numerous connections with the north of England. His mother, Cecily, was brought up in nearby **Raby Castle**, and Richard himself spent the formative years of his childhood learning his knightly training in the household of his cousin, Richard Neville, the 'Kingmaker', living at **Middleham Castle**. This was where he met his future wife, Anne Neville, daughter of the Kingmaker.

At the age of only 19, Richard was sent by his brother, Edward IV, to keep order in the north of England. Richard made the castles of Sheriff Hutton (between Malton and York) and Sandal (near Wakefield) his headquarters for his Council of the North, with York as his regional capital. Through his wife Anne, Richard inherited Middleham Castle and this was where he made his home. He was later named as viceroy in the north and is regarded as the only 'northern' English king.

Richard acquired the Lordship of **Barnard Castle** through parliamentary act in 1474 following his marriage to Anne Neville and from then on he had close dealings and association with the town. The castle was one of his chief residences during 1476 -78 and during his lordship he became a great benefactor to the church.

From 1477 until his death in 1485 Richard, then Duke of Gloucester, carried out extensive alterations in the church with the aid of a contribution of forty pounds. The North and South Aisles were widened and the North Porch added (now a storage room, previously used to store the town fire-engine and at one time the town arsenal). The walls of both arcades were heightened together with that of the South Aisle where the present windows were inserted. A chancel arch was installed and a newel staircase, which served the newly set up Rood loft. A vestry was built, with a chamber above for a priest. The chancel arch is decorated with Yorkist roses and the portrait heads at left and right are believed to be those of Edward IV on the left, and his brother, the benefactor, Richard Duke of Gloucester on the right.

In the north transept of the church is a carved sculpture thought to be C14th, of St. Anthony of Egypt. He is depicted grasping his crozier in his right hand, a book in his left, with supporting boars at either side. The association of St. Anthony with swine derives from a legend that a boar protected him from danger in the wilderness, driving away all beasts that threatened him. The boar came to symbolise St. Anthony's own ascetic virtue and his rejection of pleasures of the flesh.

It is intriguing that this sculpture (originally situated elsewhere in the town) is positioned in a church so closely connected with Richard III. Richard's own emblem was the 'blancsanglier', the white boar, so chosen, it is thought, as a pun on 'Eboracum' the Latin name for York, Richard being of the House of York.

Richard was also devoted to St. Anthony; it has been suggested that Richard's initial acquaintance with the saint, could possibly have derived this from the practice of calling the last and smallest pig in a litter 'the Tantony Pig', and hence smallest and youngest children too earned this epithet: Richard was the last surviving child of Cecily Neville.

Outside the church Richard's badge, the Boar Passant, is carved to the left of the exterior of the East window of the South Transept.

Richard had even greater plans for St. Mary's, Barnard Castle. On 21st February 1478 Richard obtained permission for licences to found and endow two collegiate chapels (in the style of St. George's, Windsor) at Middleham and at Barnard Castle. These were to serve as perpetual chantries in which prayers would be offered for the souls of himself, the King and Queen, his brothers and sisters, his father, wife and son. The intention was that six priests serve the college at Middleham, but that the college at Barnard Castle be on a far grander scale, with twelve priests. In a private bill of the 1478 parliament the church at Barnard Castle was to be granted 400 marks per annum, against 200 per annum for Middleham; together this amount was almost equivalent to the income of a lesser baron! As King, Richard was to plan for an even grander collegiate establishment in York (with 100 priests).

Clearly Richard was devoted to St. Mary's, Barnard Castle and to its development. The College at Barnard Castle was never to materialise, Richard's death at Bosworth brought plans to a halt, but the College at St. Alkelda's, Middleham was established and continued until 1856.

Today the **Richard III Society**, founded to promote research and a reassessment of King Richard, plays a part in the continuing development and life of St. Mary's, by generous donations towards projects, and by many welcome visits to a church Richard both knew and loved.