

# Richard II and Cheshire

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**R**ICHARD II is best known to most people by two plays, Shakespeare's *Richard II* and the modern *Richard of Bordeaux*, but the former deals only with the last few years of his life. It may be well, therefore, to outline his reign and say something about his very complex and interesting character before we come to Chester.

The son of the Black Prince, who died before his father, Edward III, Richard was only 11 years old when he ascended the throne. Naturally he had to be guided by his ministers at first, but after nine years came an explosion. It seems that the young king had chosen his ministers from his circle of friends, excluding his uncles, and had heaped presents upon them. He was a most extravagant young man, as his father had been, but unlike his father he was no fighter and did not wish to continue the Hundred Years War which was in being when he came to the throne. This was intolerable to a man like Thomas of Woodstock, Duke of Gloucester, the youngest of the uncles, and in 1386 there was something in the nature of a *coup d'etat*. Power was placed in the hands of a commission of ten, the Lords Appellant, headed by two uncles, Gloucester and York, and the "Merciless Parliament" lived up to its name by condemning to death six of the king's friends, including Sir Simon Burley, the young king's tutor. They acted, wrote Bishop Stubbs "with excessive and vindictive cruelty" and the young king never forgot it. For the time being he bowed before the storm and when a year later he told his uncles he was now of age—he was actually 23—he ruled constitutionally and appeared to have learned his lesson. This period lasted from 1389 to 1395, during which he made the expedition to Ireland which brings Chester into the picture. In the latter year he suddenly took his revenge on the Lords Appellant and had Gloucester, Arundel and Warwick all arrested. Gloucester was sent off to Calais where he was murdered, Arundel was tried and beheaded on Tower Hill and Warwick was banished to the Isle of Man. Archbishop Arundel was also banished. In all this Richard had the support of an obsequious parliament, rendered all the more obsequious by the presence of 4,000 Cheshire archers in the courtyard of Westminster Hall, ready to let fly their arrows at a moment's notice. From now on Richard ruled despotically and it is difficult not to think that his mind had become unhinged. "Escorted by his faithful archers from Cheshire," writes Sir Winston Churchill, "he sped about the kingdom, beguiling the weeks with feats and tournaments." It was a mad act, for example, to stop the fight between Henry Bolingbroke and Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk.

It is at this point that Shakespeare begins his play. To stop the fight at the last minute when the lists had been prepared at Coventry and all the nobility had assembled to see the fun was the most unpopular thing he could have done, equivalent

to our Queen stopping the final Cup Tie at Wembley. It was still a madder act to seize the Lancaster estates on the death of John of Gaunt, although he had promised Bolingbroke that he should have them. As a result every nobleman in the land felt himself insecure. And then to go to Ireland and leave the coast clear for Bolingbroke—or the Duke of Lancaster, as he was now—to return to this country and claim his estates . . .!

We must now see where Chester figures in all this. In September 1394 Richard decided to lead an expedition to Ireland, and took the precaution to take his uncle Gloucester in his train. As a preliminary measure he ordered Sir Baldwin de Raddington and Sir John Stanley to go ahead to Ireland and make preparations for his coming. Sir Baldwin was the Controller of the Royal Household and a trusted friend of the King; he was also a nephew of the late Sir Simon Burley. Two years before this (1392) Richard had made him Keeper of the City of London in place of the mayor whom he had dismissed. For this he was being paid 100 marks a year for life from the customs of the Port of London and a tun of wine “because he is retained to stay with the king for life,”—the king’s bosom friend in fact. With him was Sir John Stanley, a good Cheshire name. He was the younger son of William de Stanley of Storeton, Chief Forester of Wirral, and he had married Isobel, heiress of Latham and Knowsley, thus founding the line of the Earls of Derby. In 1389 he was Justiciary of Ireland and was granted 100 marks for life, “having been retained by the king as his knight to serve him above all others”—evidently another bosom friend. I do not know in what his duties as Justiciary consisted, but they could not have been very arduous, for in 1391 he obtained leave of absence from Ireland for twelve years. And now in this year (1394) he had been appointed Chief Justice of the Palatinate of Cheshire. Presumably he was living at this time at his wife’s house at Knowsley.

These were the two men sent on ahead to collect food and to find quarters in Ireland for the king and his magnates—a sort of glorified billeting party, “with power to imprison contrarians.” Of the five officers mentioned as coming with him, four of them were members of the royal household. So in July, 1394, Baldwin and his party set out for Ireland *via* Chester. Actually he did not reach Ireland until early September, for on 20 August he and Stanley received an order “to arest in England as many fishermen with their boats as will suffice for catching fish at sea for the use of the household during the present expedition to Ireland and put them in the King’s service at his charges.” Sir Baldwin therefore spent at least two months in Cheshire on his way to Ireland and during that time he attacked and took possession of St. Werburgh’s Abbey, and held it for five days. The story of this extraordinary escapade is contained in the report of the jury empowered to inquire into “the divers assaults done within the late abbey.” It is recorded in the Pentice Chartulary (f.66) a book into which various manuscripts have been copied in a sixteenth century hand and which is preserved in the City archives. It is evidently a very literal translation from the original Latin. The spelling and punctuation have here been modernised.

“The jury says that Baldwyn of Radington, knight, John Hert, William Herte, William Lapham, Gruff Reynald, Roger of Hall with all their households came with force and arms, with swords, bucklers, bows and arrows and other arms the Friday next before the feast of St. James the Apostle [24 July, 1394] in the year of the reign of King Richard II the 18th to the Abbey of Chester. And the door of the cellar called the wine cellar, the door of the inner hall, the door of the chamber of the parson of Astbury and many other divers doors of the chambers of the abbots of Chester within the Abbey aforesaid by strong hand and against the peace of our sovereign lord the King with swords and formes and ladders wickedly and maliciously they broke. Three tuns of Gascon wines there found they took and wasted, as also the household beds and many other things riotously of the men and servants of the same Abbot in their chambers being, by force and arms they put out and cast out, and many other quelnesses, hurts and grievous damage there [for] four days they committed and did: that is to say, John of Dokenton and Thomas Banester, glover, they have taken and by force and arms in sure keeping within the said Abbey, without cause reasonable, they imprisoned, “hauntinge” [i.e., practising] by the time aforesaid many extortions, oppressions and griefs in breaking [into] many houses and closes, and [out] of the same by force and arms taking capons, pullets, herbs for household and their victuals without their licences and wills and nothing sparing. The ministers of our sovereign lord the King and others, [they] charged and menaced to carry and bear with horses their victuals to the said Abbey and elsewhere others to beat and violate.

And when knowledge come (*sic*) to John Larmerer, Mayor of Chester, that the aforesaid John of Dokington and Thomas Banester were so imprisoned, he went to the said Abbey for his deliverance. And while the said Mayor being within the said Abbey to intreat with the said Baldwin for his deliverance, by and by the whole household of the said Baldwin did rise with breastplates, basnets and other armour in divers manner of war armed. And when the said evil doers were so armed, one malicious person, whose name and person is unknown, imagining discord and dissension to be made, lifted up a clamour and noise in all the City, making a common voice that the Mayor of Chester was stricken within the said Abbey and in peril of death, by occasion of which clamour the common bell was rung. And upon that the commons of the said City went to the said Abbey to the intent to know in what state and peril the Mayor was and stood, and required the deliverance of their Mayor.

And in the meantime by force and arms the aforesaid Baldwin with all his household in manner of war—the said Baldwin come (*sic*) and arrested Thomas Pygott, [and] the other Sheriff of the said City upon his breast struck and did wound and illtreat, insomuch that he was in despair of his life.

Also the said jury say that John Hoo, esquier, came by force and arms and with a naked sword made assault to the said Sheriff and many others standing about. And so in the beginning and assault only of the said John Hoo he was slain, by whom the said jury know not. And soon after the said Mayor was sent out of the said Abbey the said commons brought the said Mayor home and so went every man to his house.<sup>1</sup>

And after the Thursday next before the Feast of Saint Peter ad vincula [30 July] in the 18th year aforesaid, the aforesaid Baldwin did imagine how he might destroy and hurt the commons of Chester. He gathered together by four days John of Stanley, knight, and the greatest multitude of men armed and archers of the county of Lancaster to the number of 800, rising and riding in manner of war against the peace of our sovereign lord the King with basnets and spears within the county of Chester by 5 leagues from the City aforesaid into the fear of the people and contempt of our sovereign lord the King.”

There the report of the jury ends, but Randle Holme has a marginal note at the end—“An assault by Sir John Stanley, 18 R.2, against the City, but quashed.”

<sup>1</sup>The account of this incident in the Cooper MSS., Vol. II, 159, (Chester City Record Office) adds—“The Rioters, seeing themselves over-powered, escaped through the cale-yard postern and fled into Lancashire.” Perhaps by this time the other City gates had been shut.

All this is fact. What follows is fancy, that is to say an imaginative reconstruction of what happened. We can imagine Sir Baldwin arriving in Cheshire with his friends and their retainers, intending to set sail for Ireland in due course. But first there was work to be done in England, buying up stores of food and impressing fishermen and their boats, not very exciting work for men who thought they had come to fight. We can go on to imagine considerable grumbling among the troops who would be sleeping in tents and finding it difficult to feed themselves properly on their pay of 2d. a day. What more likely than that they should cast envious eyes on the monastery where board and lodging might be had for nothing? And so one day they persuaded Sir Baldwin to allow them to march in and occupy the building, or at any rate the servants' quarters, for we do not hear of them interfering with the abbot or with any of the monks. The first place they made for was the wine cellar, and then they broke into the rooms occupied by the servants, and ate up the food they found there, supplementing it with capons and pullets stolen from the houses round about. This went on for four days before the mayor took any action. There was no love lost between the city and monastery and the mayor did not feel called upon to defend people who did not recognise his jurisdiction. But when he heard that two citizens had been captured and imprisoned within the abbey the case was altered, and he and the two sheriffs boldly ventured in and asked for an interview with Sir Baldwin. Unfortunately their arrival caused his followers to fly to arms as a precautionary measure, but still nothing would have happened had not some "malicious person" in the city cried out that the mayor was in danger and rung the alarm bell. At once the citizens surged into the abbey and a general *melée* took place, during which one of the sheriffs was badly wounded and one of Baldwin's men—John Hoo—was killed. Eventually numbers told, and the invaders had to beat a retreat. Exit by the abbey gateway being barred to them, they escaped down what is now Abbey Street and through the caleyard postern gate.

Naturally Sir Baldwin was furious at being treated in such an undignified manner and vowed that he would have his revenge. So he sent to his colleague, Sir John Stanley, who was living at his home in Lancashire and with his help managed in four days to raise a force of 800 retainers whom he led against the city. But there was no surprise on this occasion, and the gates were shut in time.

The whole incident throws a lurid light on the attitude of Richard II towards his loving subjects at the end of his reign and helps to explain the ease with which Henry Bolingbroke drove him from the throne. But we must not judge him by one instance, and it was not long before Chester had evidence of another side of his character. In 1398 he sent the sheriff of the county 3,000 marks of gold to be distributed amongst the people of Cheshire who had suffered in the King's service in the battle at Radcot Bridge and until this could be done the money was entrusted to "the Abbot and Convent of Chester" for safe keeping. The skirmish at Radcot Bridge in 1387 had resulted in the defeat of the king's favourite, De Vere, whose forces were drawn chiefly from Cheshire.

We have said that the king embarked at Milford Haven on his way to Ireland.

That is an established historical fact and there was not time for him to make a detour to Chester from Hereford, which was the nearest he got to Chester on his way to the coast. How comes it then that Dr. Cooper's MS has the following explicit statement which Ormerod has included in his chronicle of events under the year 1394:

"In the month of September the king, attended by the duke of Gloucester, and the earls of March, Salisbury, Arundel, Nottingham and Rutland, was entertained in Chester on his way to Ireland."

This seems to show that Dr. Cooper's historical notes must be accepted with reserve, and this applies especially to another statement about King Richard under the year 1398, as follows:—

"This year in September King Richard was present in the Cathedral Church at Chester, at the installation of John Brughill to that Bishopric; there were likewise present the Archbishops of Canterbury, York and Dublin besides several Bishops and many of the prime nobility, all which company together with the magistracy of the City were splendidly entertained at the King's expense at the Episcopal Palace, near to the Cathedral of St. John's."

In those days the Bishop of Lichfield still retained the title of Bishop of Chester and St. John's Church was apparently still called a cathedral, but what makes Cooper's statement hard to believe is that Bishop Brughill had already been enthroned in Lichfield Cathedral *when the king was present*. Is it likely that he would have come all the way to Chester to repeat the performance?<sup>2</sup> And the two archbishops also?

Richard's second journey to Ireland, to which reference has already been made, took place in May, 1399, and on 4 July Henry Bolingbroke landed in Yorkshire and was welcomed by the whole country.

Richard's council fled from London to Bristol to meet Richard, whom they urged to return at once. The latter was badly advised and divided his army, sending one half of it under the Earl of Salisbury to North Wales and following himself with the other half on 27 July to Milford Haven. Here he failed to raise any reinforcements and disbanded what army he had and made his way north to join Salisbury only to find that Salisbury on a rumour that Richard was dead had allowed his army to scatter and was ensconced in Conway castle with 100 men only.

We turn now to Henry. Bristol surrendered to him on 29th July whence he set out for Chester. We are fortunate in having an eye-witness's account of his march, for Adam of Usk, a monk and also a chronicler, accompanied his army and has left the following record.

<sup>2</sup>Richard would not have had to come all the way from London for "Richard preferred to live in the Midlands. He spent Christmas 1398 at Lichfield with his old confessor, bishop Brughill, amusing himself with tournaments and feasts of extraordinary magnificence." T. F. Tout, *Chapters in the Administrative History of Medieval England*, Vol. IV, p. 34.



“Then, passing through Shrewsbury, the duke tarried there two days; where he made proclamation that the host should march on Chester, but should spare the people and the country, because by mediation they had submitted themselves to him. Wherefore many who coveted that land for plunder departed for their homes. But little good did the proclamation do for the country as will be seen. The reasons why the duke decided to invade that country were: because, abetting the king, as has been said, it ceased not to molest the realm for the space of two whole years with murders, adulteries, thefts, pillage and other unbearable wrongs; and because it had risen up against the will of the said duke and against his coming, threatening to destroy him. Another cause was on account of the right of exemption of that country, wherein the inhabitants, however criminal elsewhere and others entangled in debt or crime, were wont to be harboured, as in a nest of wickedness; so that the whole realm cried vengeance on them.

On the eighth day of August the duke, with his host, entered the county of Chester, and there, in the parish of Coddington and other neighbouring parishes, taking up his camping ground and pitching his tents, nor sparing meadow nor cornfield, pillaging all the country around and keeping strict watch against the wiles of the men of Chester, he passed the night. And I, the writer of this chronical, spent a not uncheerful night in the tent of the lord of Powis. Many in neighbouring places, drinking of the poisoned cups given to them by the people of Chester, perished. There also, from divers water-cisterns, which the men probed with spears, and from other hiding places, vessels and much other goods were drawn forth and taken for plunder, I being present with the finders.

On the morrow which was the eve of Saint Lawrence I went in the morning to the church of Coddington, to celebrate mass; but I found nothing, for everything was carried off and doors and chests broken open.

On the same day the duke of Lancaster with his host reached Chester. But first he mustered his troops in a large and fair field wherein was a crop of standing corn, some three miles from the city, on its eastern side, marshalling their ranks to the number of one hundred thousand fighting men. And it may be truly said that the hills shone again with their shields. And thus he entered the castle of Chester; and there he remained for twelve days, he and his men, using king Richard’s wine which was found there in good store, laying waste fields, pillaging houses, and, in short, taking as their own everything they wanted for use or food, or which in any way could be turned to account.

On the third day of his arrival there he caused the head of Perkin de Lye, who was reckoned a great evildoer, to be struck off and fixed on a stake beyond the eastern gate. This Perkin, who as chief warden of the royal forest of Delamere, and by authority of that office, had oppressed and ground down the country people, was taken in a monk’s garb; and because, as it was said, he had done many wrongs in that disguise, he deservedly passed away out of the world in that dress. One thing I know, that no man grieved for his death.”

NOTES: Coddington is nine miles south of Chester. The “large and fair field,” three miles east of the city, must have been near Rowton. It would have to be a very large one to accommodate “one hundred thousand fighting men.”

Meanwhile Richard was sitting securely inside Conway castle which was too strong to be taken by force and had access to the sea. He had therefore to be extracted by guile and the Duke of Northumberland and Archbishop Arundel were sent to negotiate with him. Terms were agreed upon: Henry was to have his Lancastrian estates restored to him and Richard was to retain his royal dignity and power. Trusting to the oath which Northumberland swore in the chapel of Conway castle Richard left the castle and was ambushed on a spot where the road ran in a defile

between rocks, and taken to Flint castle. On 22nd August Henry came out from Chester to secure his victim. Here again we have an eyewitness' account. He is Jean Croton, a Frenchman, who not only wrote a chronicle but also illustrated it in colour.

"I shall treat in this part of the afflictions and sorrows of King Richard in the Castle of Flint, when he waited for the coming of the Duke of Lancaster; who set out from the City of Chester on Tuesday the 22nd day of August, in the year of the Incarnation of our Lord 1399, with the whole of his force; which I heard estimated by many knights and squires at upwards of one hundred thousand men, marshalled in battle array, marching along the sea-shore with great joy and satisfaction, and eager also to take their rightful and natural lord, King Richard; who, early in the morning of the said Tuesday, arose, attended by sorrows, sadness, afflictions, mourning, weeping, and lamentations; he heard mass most devoutly, like a true Catholic, with his good friends, the Earl of Salisbury, the Bishop of Carlisle, Sir Stephen Scroope, and another knight, named Ferriby, who for no adversity, nor any disaster that befel the King, would desert him . . . King Richard, having heard mass, went upon the walls of the Castle, which are large and wide on the inside, beholding the Duke of Lancaster as he came along the sea-shore with all his host . . . They saw a great number of persons quit the host, pricking their horses hard towards the Castle to know what King Richard was doing. In this first company was the Archbishop of Canterbury . . . The Archbishop entered first, and the others after him; they went up to the donjon. Then the King came down from the walls, to whom they made very great obeisance, kneeling on the ground. The King caused them to rise, and drew the Archbishop aside; and they talked together a very long while. What they said I know not; but the earl of Salisbury afterwards told me, that he had comforted the King in a very gentle manner, telling him not to be alarmed, and that no harm should happen to his person . . . While he thus spake, the host approached the Castle, and entirely surrounded it, even to the sea, in very fair array. Then the Earl of Northumberland went to Duke Henry, who was drawn up with his men at the foot of the mountains. They talked together rather a long while, and concluded that he should not enter the Castle till such time as the King had dined, because he was fasting . . . The King was a very long time at table; not for anything he ate; but because he well knew that so soon as he had dined, the Duke would come for him, to carry him off, or put him to death. After he had dined, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Earl of Northumberland went in search of the Duke of Lancaster. He quitted his men, who were drawn up in a very fair array before the Castle, and with nine or eleven of the greatest lords who were with him, came to the King . . . The Duke entered the Castle, armed at all points, except his basinet . . . Then they made the King, who had dined in the donjon, come down to meet Duke Henry, who, as soon as he perceived him at a distance, bowed to the ground; and as they approached each other he bowed a second time; with his cap in his hand; and then the King took off his bonnet, and spake first in this manner: 'Fair cousin of Lancaster, you be right welcome.' Then Duke Henry replied, bowing to the ground, 'My lord, I come sooner than you sent for me; and I will tell you why I did so. The common report of your people is, that you have, for the space of twenty, or two-and-twenty years, governed them very badly and very rigorously, and in so much that they are not well contented therewith. But if it please our Lord, I will help you to govern them better than they have been governed in time past.' King Richard then answered him, 'Fair cousin, since it pleaseth you, it pleaseth us well.' And be assured that these are the very words that they two spake together, without taking away or adding anything: for I heard and understood them very well. . . .

The said Duke Henry called aloud with a stern and savage voice, "Bring out the king's horses;" and then they brought him two little horses that were not worth forty francs; the king mounted one and the Earl of Salisbury the other. Everyone got on horseback, and we set out from the said castle of Flint, about two hours after midday.

In form and manner as you have heard, did Duke Henry take King Richard, his Lord; and he brought him with great joy and satisfaction to Chester, which place he had quitted in the morning; and know that with great difficulty could the thunder of heaven have been heard for the loud noise of their instruments, horns, buisines and trumpets; insomuch that they made the sea-shore resound with them.

Thus the Duke entered the city of Chester to whom the common people paid great reverence, praising our Lord, and shouting after their king, as it were in mockery. The Duke led him straight to the castle which is right fair and strong and caused him to be lodged in the donjon (keep).

That was the last that the citizens of Chester saw of their king, for after he had abdicated he was imprisoned in Pontefract castle where he “disappeared.”