

Richard's bad rap

DEIRDRE DRYSDALE

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THOSE who paid attention in history lessons at secondary school will need little reminding that the English king Richard III living in the 15th century was the last king of the House of York and the last of the Plantagenets.

Even those, whose minds were on last week's rugby game, may remember that this monarch had something to do with the incarceration and possibly murder of two princes (his nephews) in the Tower of London – a mystery that still captures the attention of history buffs today.

Although Featherston's Deirdre Drysdale may not call herself a history buff, she has long held a fascination for this 15th century king and one day hopes to understand further why this strong and able monarch has suffered such 'bad press'.

Some 19 years ago Deirdre learned that there were many other like minded enquirers world wide, and also in New Zealand. In fact there was a Richard III Society based in Britain but also with branches throughout the world, including this country.

"Currently I'm the Chairperson of the New Zealand branch of the Richard III Society," Deirdre explains. "We have just over 30 members, some are members of the British group while others are attached members - they are interested only in the New Zealand group's activities. We draw our membership from different parts of the country, but there's quite a strong membership from the Hutt, Wellington and Wairarapa area. We meet every second month over in Lower Hutt to share personal reading and research material and to enjoy debates or presentations by members or

Was English king Richard III really a bad guy who had his nephews murdered? Members of the Richard III Society says it's the last century to Phillipa Novak just why they believe it

ew princes murdered, or has he just had really bad press down latter and one member, Deirdre Drysdale of Featherston, explains the king's reputation should be restored.



RICHARD III

special guests. The more distant members share in these activities via our newsletter the 'Ricardian Times'."

Deirdre says their branch of the society has a social get-together at the start of each year at the home of Secretary Robert Smith in Greytown and they hold their annual dinner on or near October 2nd to celebrate the king's birthday. On very special occasions members dress in medieval garb and sit down to a traditional banquet which closely mirrors the celebratory fare found in King Richard's day.

"Next year we are hosting the Australasian convention, it being the 21st anniversary of our New Zealand group's existence," she says. "We will certainly be dressing up for the banquet that will be held during the week-end of the convention."

This is a definitely interesting and serious society and even Deirdre finds it somewhat difficult to put into words the reasons why members are caught up in an interest that is somewhat unusual.

She suggests that a quote from the quarterly bulletin of the parent society, which details the aims of the society, may explain what it is that captures people's interest. The society was founded in 1924 in the belief that many features of the traditional accounts of the character and career of Richard the third are neither supported by sufficient evidence nor are reasonably tenable. The society aims to promote in every possible way research into the life and times of Richard the third and to secure a reassessment of the material relating to this period and the role in English history of this monarch.

One could ask why Richard the third is worthy of such an enquiry when there have been much more flamboyant monarchs that have flitted across the pages of our history books - such as Henry the eighth. Does Henry have a devoted following who are out to prove that he was also a controversial fig-

ure?

Deirdre suggests that on the surface of things Henry may not deserve such a devoted following. She says: "Henry was a Tudor and it was the Tudors who were responsible for ousting Richard from the throne. Henry's father, Henry the seventh was the monarch who succeeded Richard.

"The reason that there is such a fascination with Richard's life is because there has been a great deal of manipulation over the centuries of the true facts concerning his life," she explains.

Often portrayed as a ruthless tyrant with a murderous demand for power and depicted by Tudor artists as physically ugly with a hunched back and a withered arm, Richard became an item of interest for William Shakespeare in his writings. In his now famous work Richard the Third, Shakespeare discredited this monarch who ascended the throne in 1483 amidst the greatest power battles in English history and saw him as a power-hungry despot. Most of the bad press that his life elicited occurred after his death and was initiated by those Tudors who had an axe to grind and later this also included English statesman and scholar Sir Thomas Moore (1478 - 1535) working on second hand information.

The Richard III Society is dedicated to reclaiming the reputation of this monarch who died over 500 years ago. "There were some very questionable actions following Richard's death in battle in 1485. Richard's army was defeated by Henry Tudor's troops at the battle of Bosworth Field in Leicestershire, making him the last English king to die on the battlefield," Deirdre says. "The public's perception of Richard after his death does cause us to question the reliability of the histories written and often manipulated by people who wished to please the Tudor monarch Henry V11. These so called 'histories' were obviously believed by Shakespeare and upon these he wrote his play.

"Of course nobody will ever truly be sure about the true facts surrounding Richard III, but he is still popularly known for being involved with the murder of his nephews in the Tower of London. However, it seems to most of our members that it is very unlikely that Richard did in fact do away with his nephews."

The princes were the sons of Richard's elder brother, Edward IV who had been pre-contracted before his marriage to Elizabeth Woodville. After Edward's death, Richard

was appointed Protector of the two boys, but before the older boy was crowned Bishop Stillington claimed that all Edward's children were in fact illegitimate, being the product of a pre-contract that in medieval times was seen as binding as a and made the following marriage bigamous. This made the princes ineligible for the throne. As the younger brother of Edward IV, Richard was endorsed by Parliamentary Act (Titulus Regius) as the true heir.

"Once Richard was crowned and his nephews declared bastards some historians suggest that they could no longer be seen as a threat to the throne. However, their disappearance led to great controversy and the worst accusations by rumour before his death and by accusations after were levelled at Richard."

Deirdre recalls that many searches have been made for evidence that could suggest a murder had been carried out. In the 17th century the bones of two children of appropriate age were found under a staircase in the Tower of London and were interred in an urn in Westminster Abbey on the assumption that they were in fact the two princes.

"However, the more recent discovery of the tomb of Anne Mowbray who had been betrothed as a child to the younger of the two boys and is a cousin, has led to appeals for DNA testing of the bones in the Abbey. As yet, the Dean of Westminster has refused to allow this enquiry to go ahead.

Deirdre says it's the ongoing mysteries and newly discovered facts that motivates her interest in this long dead monarch. Membership of the Richard III Society involves a tremendous amount of reading, some travel to conferences both here and overseas and a meeting of like minds.

She says, "I'm well aware that some people may see me as 'a bit of a crank', but I feel that one of the results of belonging to an organisation like this, with the ideas that it provokes, makes you a determined questioner of the facts. So many people appear to unquestionably believe most of what they read and it's not necessarily facts - it may be third or fourth hand information, or someone's opinion!

This strong interest in one of England's more notorious kings who died so long ago may or may not make me a crank, but I like to think if I'm going to be seen as a 'crank' I can be seen as an interesting one!"

Interested? - for further details - secretary@richard3nz.org