Thomas Penn: Richard III (1483)

We're on the Strand in London for Episode 4 of Season 2 of *Travels Through Time*, the podcast made in partnership with *History Today*, the world's leading serious history magazine.

[Intro music]

Peter Moore: Hello, I'm Peter Moore. Welcome to *Travels Through Time.* Today, we're going back to one of the most notorious years of all, 1483, to look at an act of ruthlessness, almost unmatched in all English history.

The rise and fall of the House of York remains one of the most compelling and controversial stories in all of English history. It's the central thread of the violent episodes that we remember today as the Wars of the Roses. They were really a desperate struggle in the late 15th century between the Houses of Lancaster and York; a struggle for Edward the Confessor's ancient crown of solid jewel-encrusted gold. These were years of battles, betrayals and beheadings when, as Thomas Penn puts it in his astonishing new book on the subject, 'necessity knew no law'. Today, we're going to be talking about the blackest year of them all, 1483; the year the House of York started to consume itself. Today's guest, Thomas Penn, holds a PhD in medieval history from Clare College in Cambridge. His bestselling biography of Henry VII, the first Tudor king, *The Winter King* won the HW Fisher Prize. Now he's back with a prequel of sorts. *The Brothers York* tells the story of the House of York between 1461 and 1485. I met up with Tom the other day in Central London. I hope you enjoy our conversation.

Welcome to *Travels Through Time,* Tom.

Thomas Penn: Thank you very, very much, Peter. Thanks for having me.

Peter Moore: It's a pleasure. It's a wonderful book. Let's get into the history. I said that this story really focuses on the years between 1461 and 1485, which really is the period between the two great battles of Towton and Bosworth. How can we characterise this quarter of a century?

Thomas Penn: It's a very good question and it's a question that historians have been wrestling with pretty much ever since Bosworth was fought. In the public imagination, we see this period as a great struggle between two houses, as you say; between the House of York, the white rose, and the House of Lancaster, the red rose. We still, to some extent, drink the Tudor Kool-Aid. We believe that the Tudors, in winning the Battle of Bosworth, Henry Tudor (Henry VII, as he became) united these two warring houses in a new dynasty, the Tudors. To symbolise that, Henry VII came up with a new device, the Tudor Rose, which combined these two roses into the rose of both red and white. This story, I think, still remains the most enduring myth of all. We have ceased to believe in much so-called Tudor propaganda about the period but we still do believe, to some extent, that the Tudors united these two houses but what I would contend really is that it wasn't so much a case of Henry Tudor winning Bosworth as the Yorkist family imploding and destroying itself.

Peter Moore: I think I just want to talk very briefly about Edward IV because even though he doesn't appear centrally in the scenes we're going to talk about today, he's a great force in the period. Probably the easiest way to describe him, and this is maybe a caricature but there's a lot of truth in it, is that he's almost Henry VIII before Henry VIII. Everything that we think about

Henry VIII, as a king, being very powerful, charismatic, good-looking, a big drinker, loved the women and loved the joust were all things that were Edward IV before they were Henry VIII. Is that right?

Thomas Penn: Do you know? I think it is and perhaps that sounds surprising because, of course, Edward IV was Henry VIII's maternal grandfather. People who look at Henry VIII now would certainly recognise Edward IV in him because he had many of the same physical attributes. He was six foot four inches in his stocking feet. He was a magnetic and virile, charismatic war leader. He was a boy who had seized the throne at the age of 18 in 1461, having already won his great defining battles of Mortimer's Cross and Towton. He has absolutely a magnetic personality but he resembles Henry VIII in another way too in that he has a compulsive nature and perhaps even more than Henry VIII, he's the consummate narcissist. There's a much darker side to Edward IV and perhaps it's a side to him that we haven't fully understood. His compulsion, his narcissism, fuels everything that he does. He's a great administrator and a great governor. You can see his signature all over the documents of the period. He's a great war leader, as we've said, but he's also a great guzzler and stuffer. He doesn't know when to stop at table and it horrifies his doctors and his counsellors. He's a great womaniser and a complete sexual narcissist. Of course, as he gets older, he becomes like the old Henry VIII as well because he can't stop. You see it in these two pictures of the period. One is 'this great, fine king; the most beautiful prince my eyes ever beheld,' says the French chronicler, Philippe de Commines. One is at the end of the period where he's got multiple chins and he clearly has become this great, bloated figure and chroniclers at the time use this word and say he's 'gross'. When he dies in 1483, aged 40 (a premature death), people couldn't work out what had happened to him at the time. Maybe he had a stroke or perhaps it was a result of the malaria that he may have picked up when campaigning in France in 1475. Perhaps it was simply that he ate and drank himself to death. Who knows?

Peter Moore: You write that he was 'the sun in whom warmth the subjects basked and around which even his greatest lords revolved.' It's a really important picture and I think this just sets the scene for us in 1483, which we're going to talk about now. If you take the sun out of the universe, then there's a great problem of arrangement, isn't there? There's a great vacuum that needs to be filled. So let's get on to 1483 straight away and things that we need to cover. This is the decline of Edward IV. He's an old - well, not old in years but in his physical sense and in spirit maybe, he seems old. He dies around Easter of that year.

Thomas Penn: He does and his decline is very rapid. People know that Edward IV is not in good physical shape. He's supposed to have led an army to Scotland, twice, in fact. The first time, he completely gives up. He arrives at Oxford and starts drinking and keeps drinking, as far as we can make out, and he never actually makes it north. He sends Richard, Duke of Gloucester, his youngest brother, in his place. The second time, he makes it as far as the great family home of Fotheringhay in Lincolnshire and again, he gives up in 1482 and says to Richard, 'You lead the army. You can be the war leader.' It's almost a handing over, if you like, of the mantle of war leader. So Richard goes to Scotland and spends loads of money trying to seize the Scottish government, if you like, but it doesn't work out and he comes back. In 1483, there's a political hammer blow for Edward because for the last few years, he's been trying to arrange the map of northern Europe in favour of his family by the time-honoured expedient of marrying his kids off into the families of Burgundy in France. Essentially, what happens is in early 1483, they come to an arrangement without him and they lock him out. For him, it's an absolute disaster and he's furious. Some commentators thought, at the time, that it was this that helped precipitate this decline. Along with the gluttony, guzzling and all the rest of it, he is becoming depressed as well. It's not just a question of him being gross but of being depressed. As you say, he has been

this great king and he has been the great centrifugal force for English politics. He's been the king that's held everything together and he's still a magnificent king. So when he dies, it catches everybody on the hop.

Peter Moore: You rightly point out the difficulties that people were spotting. He's in poor health and there are these problems with regards to his foreign policy, in particular, but in other senses, there's quite a lot of reason for optimism. You talk about the Christmas before in 1482 and there's a great display of family unity and especially, there is a clear succession because he's got a 12-year-old son, Edward, who seems very capable. He's being primed and he's being readied for his role as the next monarch. There's an heir and there's a spare because then there's Richard, his younger brother, so that's fine. The other thing you alluded to as well, in your last description, is something that maybe the people with keener eyes might have spotted. There's a very, very powerful brother, Richard, Duke of Gloucester, who you describe in the book as being 'one of the most powerful noblemen since the Norman conquest.' Edward has heaped all of this power on him in terms of land and power and he's reigning with a lot of authority in the north.

Thomas Penn: That's right.

Peter Moore: That's the dynamic.

Thomas Penn: That is the dynamic and you're right, there is a lot of cause for optimism. The boy, Edward V (we mustn't confuse our Edwards), is the oldest son of Edward's marriage to Elizabeth Woodville and is absolutely being primed to take the throne. Of that, there is no doubt. I suppose that the problem is that when a great king dies, whatever the situation with his succession, it leaves a vacuum. It does throughout all history. We see this repeated time and again. Even when there's a successor who is ready to step into his shoes, there is a readjustment. All the pieces are thrown up in the air but with Edward V, the problem is that he's a minor. He's 12 years old.

Peter Moore: He's just a little bit too young, isn't he?

Thomas Penn: He's just a little bit too young and it's the worst situation of all in a way because when Henry VI comes to the throne, in his infancy, on Henry V's death in 1422, that's kind of easy because he's an infant and so people know what to do. They put in place mechanisms for government and they carry on but this situation is not so clear cut. For the ruling emergency council, who gather after Edward IV's death, they say, 'What are we going to do? Will he be crowned? Will he start to rule immediately or does he need a bit of a helping hand, in fact, because he is still a boy? He can't really rule himself. To reign is not necessarily to rule. He's going to need mechanisms in place.' Of course, one of those tried and tested mechanisms is that of a protector.

Peter Moore: I'm going to leave you there because I think we're perfectly primed for our scenes. As you say, just a bit of chronology here; so it's the early hours of Wednesday 9th April that Edward dies. He was a few weeks short of his 41st birthday and so he's quite young, I suppose. You've picked Northampton and the night of April 29th/30th. Richard and Buckingham are there. What's going on? Can you describe this scene? Let's do the descriptive history before we do the analytical history. Where is Northampton for our American listeners, I should say?

Thomas Penn: Northampton is one of the towns seen to be in the centre of the kingdom. It's a town, which I guess is 100 or so miles north of London. It's on the Great North Road. It's on the road that heads north and this is a road that's extremely well travelled because the North is perenially a problem for English kings and so they all lead their armies up and down the Great North Road. It's a useful meeting place because it's a communications hub and lots of other roads go through it as well. I was talking earlier about the council that gathers after Edward IV's death and one of the things they want to do is to preserve unity. When the king that holds it altogether dies, then factions begin to emerge. Things begin to buckle and splinter and it's quite difficult to keep that unity together. One of these fault lines is between the queen's family, the family of Elizabeth Woodville, Edward IV's widow now, who basically rule the new young king. Elizabeth Woodville's brother, Anthony Woodville, is the governor of the new young king. He's responsible for his education and his upbringing. In this King's Council are Woodvilles, basically, and their hangers-on after the death of Edward IV. Many people are caught on the hop. People aren't all in London. You have Richard, Duke of Gloucester, in the North in his Yorkshire seat of Middleham. You have another great lord of royal blood, Henry, Duke of Buckingham, who is away in Wales. You have the young king and his maternal uncle, Anthony Woodville, in Ludlow in the Welsh Marches. One of the things that the council tries to do is balance out these conflicting interests and so they say, 'Why don't you all come to London together. Let's have a level playing field. You'll all bring a respectable but not excessive number of armed retainers.' What happens is it's agreed that Richard, Duke of Gloucester, and the young king and his entourage, commanded by Anthony Woodville, will meet in Northampton and together they'll go to London. They'll arrive on May Day which, of course, is the great day of renewal and rebirth. What perfect symbolism for this new, young king to inherit the crown of England and to enter his capital.

Peter Moore: What happens in Northampton that makes you want to go back to this particular moment?

Thomas Penn: What happens in Northampton is on that night, 29th/30th April, there is a dinner. They're south of Northampton, incidentally, in Stony Stratford, a town and communications hub on the Great North Road a bit further towards London. The king and his entourage ride over to Northampton and they have dinner with Richard and the Duke of Buckingham, who has just arrived. It's very convivial and it's very merry. Everybody is very happy with the arrangements for the new government under Edward V. Most of them go to bed but Richard and Buckingham don't and stay up.

Peter Moore: Buckingham is a very important noble with a bit of a chip on his shoulder.

Thomas Penn: He's got a great chip on his shoulder. As I mentioned, he's a nobleman of Lancastrian royal blood. His grandfather is killed in battle in 1460 and his father died before that and so basically, he becomes a ward of the Yorkist court. He is brought up as a Yorkist and he's married into the queen's family and he has a lot of prestige. He has all the prestige that should accrue to him as a great nobleman of royal blood but he has none of the power. Basically, Edward IV doesn't like him very much. He becomes this great, glittering courtly bauble but he's locked out of power completely and so he's an incredibly frustrated guy and when Edward IV dies, he sees an opportunity.

Peter Moore: I think you mention as well, earlier in the book, that he's a childhood friend of Richard's, isn't he? They spent time together when they were younger.

Thomas Penn: Yeah.

Peter Moore: In a sense, you've got these two people; one who is very powerful and one who is seeking a bit more power with an old acquaintance and sitting up having a chat.

Thomas Penn: Sitting up having a chat but they have been in touch beforehand. This is the other thing. When Buckingham, away in Wales, hears news of Edward IV's death, he sends a messenger across the country to Richard, saying, 'In this new world, I'm at your service and I'm placing my men at your service as well.' What this service is, who knows? The thing that they discuss, clearly, is seizing power. As we've said, Richard, the youngest brother of Edward IV and uncle to the new, young king, has been a model of loyalty. He's been impeccable and he's fought for Edward during the earlier battles in the civil wars. He is Edward's right-hand man. He's led Edward's armies to Scotland. There is nothing to suggest that he will do anything other than be loyal to Edward V. In fact, he's pledged his loyalty to the council and to Queen Elizabeth just recently and so why does he want to seize power and why does Buckingham want to help him? He knows that as the great nobleman of the blood he should have power. All precedents suggest that he should be the man to head up the government. If there is going to be a protector and if there is going to be a chief counsellor, it should be him. Apparently, Edward IV, in his will, which we don't have because it has not survived, has promised Richard that he will have the protectorship.

Peter Moore: It's an incredibly vivid scene. Obviously, it's so powerfully charged with narrative tension because you've got this coming together of two very, very dynamic and powerful people. It's vivid to the eye as well because we have the Shakespearean picture of Richard, rightly or wrongly, staying up late after a merry evening in 1483 discussing what essentially is the coup, which I think happens the next day. Is that right?

Thomas Penn: That's absolutely right. One of the things that is concerning Richard is how the new government is going to be arranged. The people around Edward V, this boy, as prince, are his maternal relatives and if that model around him is transferred, lock stock and barrel, onto the house of the new, young king, then clearly those relatives are going to dominate him. They're going to dominate his relationships with the rest of the political elite. They're going to dominate the way that he hands out favour. Clearly, that's something that Richard has come to fear. One of the people we haven't yet mentioned is a man called William, Lord Hastings. Now William, Lord Hastings is Edward IV's chamberlain. He's a man who is extremely close to court and he's the most influential and powerful figure around the late king. He represents that body of opinion of those household men around Edward who have fought for him, protected him, done his bidding and who owe everything they own, all their wealth and power, to him. Hastings is the supreme example of that. Hastings does not get on with the Woodvilles, historically, and there is not much in the record to show this but there's enough for us to know that when Edward IV dies, he's very opposed to the Woodvilles having the custody of Edward V. He's very opposed. He's vocally opposed. He says, 'If this happens, I'm going to take my men and I'm going to go off to Calais.' Calais is an extraordinary place because it's England's only foothold on the northern European coast. It's a very financially powerful place but it's also very militarily powerful and it has a standing garrison. Saying you're going to go to Calais is a threat. Hastings is the man at court and Richard, when Edward IV dies, is hundreds of miles north and so he's relying for information on what's happening. Clearly, one of the things that's happening is that Hastings is sending messengers and communication north saying, 'This is what the Woodvilles are planning to do.' It's not just Richard and Buckingham. It's also the information provided by Hastings and Hastings isn't there. He's not in Northampton on 29th/30th April.

Peter Moore: But his influence is.

Thomas Penn: But his influence is.

Peter Moore: These are very clearly the factions which have developed. On one side, you have these three characters of different personalities and profiles. On the other, you have the maternal family of the young, uncrowned King Edward, the Woodvilles. I suppose what makes it all the more tantalising is that they're so close to London and all they've got to do is get him down another 60 miles or so and then they can set up shop and go on with the coronation. As soon as the coronation has been carried out, there you go. That's the job done.

Thomas Penn: Absolutely. Absolutely right.

Peter Moore: So this is last chance saloon, in a way, for Richard. If they want to act, this is the moment.

Thomas Penn: This is the only way. One of the interesting things about Richard's thinking as well is that although he's very afraid, it's also a great moment of opportunity, as you say. A lot of the political atmosphere and the political mentality of the last 30 years has been about these twin impulses of fear, of trying to protect himself in a situation of extreme political uncertainty, and opportunism. He's thinking, 'If all the cards are up in the air, how can I arrange them when they fall to suit myself, as well as the country, of course?' Richard wants what is best for the country. Let's not forget that.

Peter Moore: You've described that perfectly. I just wanted to touch on something you write about in the book. It's a sentence which clarifies the situation perfectly. You say that 'possession of the king is nine-tenths of the law.'

Thomas Penn: That's right.

Peter Moore: This is something we know from what happened with Henry VI before. He was always passed between...

Thomas Penn: Absolutely.

Peter Moore: So this is like the trump card and whoever holds it. That's what happens, isn't it? The next day, they storm in and say, 'Hang on. We're here to protect you from your malevolent in-laws.'

Thomas Penn: Indeed and just to go back to what you were saying about the physical geography, Stony Stratford is 15 miles south of Northampton. It's on this vast road, the Great North Road, to London. It's one of the reasons why Anthony Woodville, the boy king's governor has chosen Stony Stratford. It's very close to the Woodville estates at Grafton Regis but it also gives them a headstart. The problem is he's walked into this trap in Northampton. He's ridden over 15 miles to Northampton to have dinner with Richard and it's Richard's job, that fateful night, not only to confirm with Buckingham what they're going to do but how they're going to do it. This is where Hastings comes in again because Hastings, the man who's not there, may not be there but his men are. One of the things about Hastings, he's the man at court. He's the man who knows everything about how the chamber and households work but he's also one of the most influential players in Northamptonshire. His chief lawyer, a man called William Catesby, is second-in-command in Northamptonshire. Catesby is a local big man. His son-in-law is the Sheriff of Northamptonshire, the man responsible for local law enforcement, a man called

Roger Wake. Hastings and Catesby have this situation sewn up and it's their men whose local intelligence allows Richard to seal off Northampton to make sure that nobody can get out of Northampton and to make sure that no information can get to Stony Stratford and tip the boy king off to tell him to hightail it to London before Uncle Richard gets there. So the following day, Richard and Buckingham turn up to Stony Stratford and tell the boy king, 'Your maternal relatives, the Woodvilles, are no good. They're no good for you and no good for the kingdom and we (Richard and Buckingham) are going to take charge.'

Peter Moore: It's a dramatic set-piece scene. In a way, it brings together so many of the elements that we think of. You can't really improve on that. Let's go to your second scene which picks up the story in about a month's time. It's Friday 13th June. We're actually in the Tower of London and so that doesn't need too much description from me. I'm sure people can imagine. What happens on 13th June 1483 in the Tower of London?

Thomas Penn: What happens on Friday 13th June is a council meeting. It's a select group of the council, actually. It's not the whole council. It's a select group of hand-picked people who Richard has ordered to come and meet him. The rest of the council is meeting in Westminster, downriver, discussing the preparations for the young king's coronation. As I say, this is a comparatively small gathering and it consists of people like William, Lord Hastings, who we've already talked about; a man called John Morton, who is one of the great government officials of Edward IV's reign; William, Lord Stanley, who is another extremely influential household official under Edward IV and he's a very influential figure in the northwest of England and various others. They meet around 9 o'clock in the morning and walk into the council chamber. Richard is very pleasant and he greets Morton and says, 'I hear you have fine strawberries in your garden at Holborn. I pray you, let me have a mess of them.' These are Thomas More's words transposed.

Peter Moore: So this is kind of 15th-century small talk.

Thomas Penn: This is 15th-century small talk. Everybody is milling around and then they sit down at their allotted places around the council table and business begins. Richard's demeanour changes and suddenly, he starts getting very serious. He's a great gnawer of his bottom lip, apparently, and he chews on his bottom lip as a kind of sign of stress. He says to the assembled councillors, 'Something has been going on. Those Woodvilles, who are now in prison and the queen is in sanctuary in Westminster, and their followers are trying to destroy me by witchcraft. I'm going to show you what's happening. My body is falling away. My body is failing me.' Of course, with the sensational discovery of Richard's skeleton, we now know that he did have scoliosis. One of the effects of scoliosis is to make one shoulder higher than the other. Richard puts his hands on the council table and one of those arms is shorter than the other because of this out of kilter physiology produced by the scoliosis. He says, 'This is a result of sorcery.' He then rounds on Hastings and he says, 'The queen is guilty of treason. What would you do if the queen was found guilty of treason? She must be guilty. The Woodvilles must be guilty.' Hastings says, 'If she's found guilty, my Lord, then, of course, she'll receive the appropriate punishment.' Richard asked the question again and says, 'But what if she's guilty?' Hastings says, 'If she's found guilty, then clearly she must be punished.' Richard says, 'But your guilty as well.' This is an incredible moment because William, Lord Hastings, is the establishment man. He's a man who has smoothed Richard's path to power and whose presence in Richard's coup has dissipated any concerns about the move that people might have had because they look at Hastings and they think, 'You're loyal to the princes. You're loyal to the memory of Edward IV. Therefore, everything must be alright.' Now, Richard is accusing Hastings of treason.

Peter Moore: It's an astonishing confrontation. Absolutely astonishing. You write that after they arrive in London in May, 'Hastings is bursting with joy. He's the happiest man in town.'

Thomas Penn: He is.

Peter Moore: He looked like he was going to be subservient to these Woodvilles again, which was going to be bad news for him. All of a sudden, his friendly Lord from the North is control of everything. This moment is almost cinematic.

Thomas Penn: It is cinematic.

Peter Moore: The pointing of the finger almost feels a bit cliched but it happened, didn't it?

Thomas Penn: It did happen. We know that it happens because a number of different chroniclers from different backgrounds write about it. This isn't Tudor propaganda. This happened. As you say, the irony is extreme. There's Hastings, after the first coup, swanning about London and saying, 'This transference of power to Richard was achieved without so much blood spilt from a cut finger.' He's saying it's been so smooth and then suddenly, here we are. Hastings is given no time to defend himself. When people are accused of treason, generally, there is a process. It's a pretty uneven process but there is a special court for treason trials. Now Hastings isn't even given that privilege. Richard's men burst into the council chamber and they set about them. Lord Stanley, apparently, ducks under a table and is cut on the head by a flailing sword. Hastings himself is seized, dragged out of the council chamber, dragged out of the White Tower and onto the adjacent tower green. A priest from the nearby Chapel of St. Peter ad Vincula is summoned out to shrive him and to give him the last rites. His head is put on the block and he's beheaded like that.

Peter Moore: This was an age of ruthlessness, wasn't it? If I was to make a tally of the beheadings as I was going through your book, I think we'd be well into the teens and 20s or maybe 100. I don't know. In particular, there is something particularly brutal about this. You say the lack of due process, the status of the person and there's the setting in the tower but also, it seems to me, that what happened at the end of April was really disturbing. The uncrowned king has been taken possession of by Richard but this just escalates things to a higher level. Something you said then, I just want to pick up on. You said 'to be accused of treason' but isn't treason plotting against the king's person? Isn't the implication in this that Richard is considering himself as king?

Thomas Penn: Absolutely. It's worth saying that there's been a degree of slippage between Richard's seizure of power at Stony Stratford and the scene in the Tower. Richard has been a traditional protector. He's been a chief councillor, like a chief executive, but he is bound by the council. All the time, he's trying to push the envelope. One of the reasons why people like Hastings and Morton are concerned is that they believe that Richard is trying to arrange the government so that he will actually be king himself and that he never actually wants this coronation to happen. The thing that should be stressed is that Hastings and other Yorkists are faithful to the House of York, to Edward IV, to the princes, to the Yorkist succession and they begin to get concerned. They begin to think, 'We didn't want this. The protectorate and Richard's seizure of power that we approved, we only approved it is a protectorate. We didn't mean that the line of succession should change.' They are Yorkist loyalists and they want Edward V to succeed but it's quite clear, at this point, that Richard, for one reason or another, has no intention of letting that happen.

Peter Moore: Let's leave that there because I don't think we can improve on your description there. You have this confrontation followed by a summary execution in the yard. I suppose people just start to look at things quite differently now. Hang on, while Edward V is perhaps being cared for in the Tower one moment but then if you start to look at it now, it seems like maybe perhaps he's a prisoner. We know that a lot of the Woodvilles have dispersed or they've gone into sanctuary in Westminster. The king's mother is in there with the younger brother. We know that Richard then tempts the younger brother to join his elder brother in the Tower and so you have two princes in the Tower, which might be a familiar phrase to some people.

Thomas Penn: Indeed so.

Peter Moore: There's a sense of slippage again with their situation because they're seen, one moment, playing in the palace grounds, firing bows and arrows and just being kids, and they're suddenly seen through windows and then they're not seen at all.

Thomas Penn: That's right.

Peter Moore: The narrative is changing still and, at this point, with more enemies eliminated, Richard just starts to style himself as king. He has this coronation of his own planned. It's a kind of boiling the frog thing when people don't really see but on the street, it must have been quite a story.

Thomas Penn: Hastings' execution polarises the situation in another way too. The queen's family or the Woodvilles, as they become, are seen as political pariahs and that's fine. People think, 'We can deal with that,' but with the execution of Hastings, a man himself opposed to the Woodvilles, brings into play another kind of dynamic because suddenly, people are starting to make a different kind of choice. We have to stress again that all the people loyal to Edward IV and to the Yorkist succession are thinking, 'Who do I support? Do I support the boys in the Tower? Missing and presumed dead. Or do I support Richard?' Richard III, as he becomes. This starts to become very much a conflict between two factions of one family and with Hastings' execution, this is made very, very clear.

Peter Moore: I think you've set that up perfectly. These are the sentiments which are probably being played out within council chambers but also by the common person on the street because they've seen the processions. One minute you have one person and another minute, you have another. In the book, you describe this sense, over the late summer, of Richard losing control of the narrative, which might sound a bit Fox Newsy if we talk about it in that sense but that's really what's happening, isn't it? There are whispers, aren't there?

Thomas Penn: There are whispers and as you said, the whispers are because around the time of Richard's coronation, the princes disappear from view completely and people are very concerned. People loyal to the princes are very concerned. In early July, Richard goes on progress to show himself to his new kingdom. He's a king who believes himself to be an ideal king. He's read a lot about kingship in books and he knows what kingship means. He thinks that he can be the ideal king. He's going to be the great peace giver, the great lawgiver, the great warrior, the strong man who can protect England from its foes and he's going on progress, as new kings always do. Once he's out of town, something happens.

Peter Moore: Let's go from that then to the third scene. I think we're all poised and the political landscape has been sketched really, really well. You mentioned the geography of it there

as well because geography was always really important in the 15th century where who was where at a particular moment.

Thomas Penn: Absolutely.

Peter Moore: *[Laughter]*. Shall we say, where is Richard on Sunday 12th October 1483? What does he hear about on that day?

Thomas Penn: Richard is at Lincoln.

Peter Moore: So he's been on his progress.

Thomas Penn: He's been on his progress and he's gone North in his ducal heartlands. He's the great Lord of the North, of course. At York, he has what is, in effect, a second coronation. He's coming back down South now to London and he stops off in stages and gets to Lincoln. He's already heard that his great ally, the Duke of Buckingham, the man who has facilitated his seizure of power and with whom he's formed a kind of duumvirate, in a way, is on the move against him. He's rebelling against him. He's leading an army out of Wales against him; the man who he has put on the throne and now, months later, he's seeking to depose Richard.

Peter Moore: I spoke before about the fact that there was something particularly nasty about the beheading of Hastings. There's something even more peculiar in the context of rebellions of this time or, what shall we say, betrayals. This is a particularly bad betrayal, isn't it? I mean this alliance between them is only really a few months old.

Thomas Penn: It is!

Peter Moore: All of a sudden, here comes another army.

Thomas Penn: That's it and Richard has given Buckingham everything. He writes this extraordinary note, actually. One of the things he does at Lincoln is to write back to London to ask for the Great Seal. The Great Seal is the supreme expression of royal authority and what it enables the king to do is to raise troops. When people see this great wax mould of the seal, they know that it means the king's word. He writes back to London. This is done by a clerk. In the period, you have these warrants which are copied out by the king's secretariat but Richard adds a note of his own. He's got this crabby hand - quite a neat hand - and he scribbles and it's covered with smudges and inkblots. He writes below the clerk's message and then he turns it 90 degrees because he's run out of space and he scribbles again in the margin. He asks the chancellor, John Russell, for the Great Seal and then he talks about Buckingham and he kind of slides into this incredulous rage. He says, 'Buckingham is the most untrue creature living. I have given him everything. Why is he being unfaithful to me, the king?' One of the things that's happening in the intervening period is that Buckingham and Richard have had a bit of a spat and, of course, Buckingham and Richard come to power together. As I've said before, they are something of a duumvirate but, of course, Richard is now king and Buckingham is his greatest subject but he is his subject. Buckingham is asking for more and more ancestral lands and Richard slaps him down.

Peter Moore: Is the answer to the obvious question why, greed? Buckingham, over the summer, he's enjoying the splendours and the power and he's just being carried away and transported by his imagination that he can have so much more.

Thomas Penn: It's partly that and it's partly something else as well. What happens over the summer is that this concern about the disappeared princes, which, of course, is a concern among those Yorkists loyal to the memory of Edward IV and the princes, develops into a full-blown conspiracy. It involves not just servants of the late king but it involves Henry Tudor, who is an exile - a fugitive exile, a Lancastrian exile in Brittany where he's been for the previous 12 years - and it involves Buckingham. One of the people who persuades Buckingham to turn against the man that he's got on the throne is this figure of John Morton. He's an extraordinary figure. He's a Lancastrian turned Yorkist and, of course, he becomes the great éminence grise of Henry VII, the first Tudor king. He's the architect of Tudor power, if you like, but he's very much, first and foremost, a servant of the late King Edward IV. He's a prisoner of Buckingham and this is the extraordinary scene. He's held prisoner in Buckingham's castle of Brecon and he works Buckingham. John Morton is an extremely experienced political player and he's extremely persuasive. He persuades Buckingham that he's owed more than Richard has given him, he's a great nobleman of the blood and says, 'Richard hasn't done well by you. What has Richard done? Richard seized power and he's a usurper. The people are against Richard. Do you think it is wise for you still to be aligned with Richard? There is an opportunity for you here, so why don't you seize it?' The thing is he makes Buckingham think that this is all his own idea.

Peter Moore: Buckingham has had this horse whispering in Brecon from Morton and Richard hears about it on the 12th. I suppose I'll put this question to you. One of the reasons why you might want to see Richard on that day at that time is maybe to see his reaction because, in a way, he's known to history as the person who betrayed his own family. Regicide is the worst thing imaginable, maybe, but this is someone who has betrayed him. It's to watch his reaction to this news and to see him writing that document that you described so vividly before.

Thomas Penn: I think that's the extraordinary thing, isn't it? Even by the standards of the age and by the standards of the previous extraordinary 30 years of instability when people are very used to very extreme things happening, people are shocked at what Richard does. He doesn't equate that at all with what Buckingham has now done to him.

Peter Moore: If we bring these three scenes together, what they become, in a way, is a personality sketch of Richard because we see him as a powerful lord willing to take the chance at the end of April. We see him as the ruthless protector who is willing to do anything but then we also see perhaps a bit of myopia from him; someone who doesn't see where his actions are leading him. Of course, this isn't just Buckingham who revolts. There are all sorts of different rebellions in different parts of the country. You talk about Kent and then in the South, there are many more localised uprisings and Richard has to use all of his energy and quite clever organisation to put these down.

Thomas Penn: Absolutely. In a way, it's the law of unintended consequences. As I said earlier, we don't really know what was in Richard's mind on that night of 29th/30th April. Did he already have the idea that he might want to seize the throne? Maybe it wasn't even obvious to him but there is this sense of slippage. I think one of the things that we need to take away from this is that Richard was a man who thought in black and white and was very idealistic. One of his reactions, from a young age, to this extraordinary unstable situation that he finds himself in is to reach for ideas for order. He craves order and clarity. He finds this in books and he finds it in his own role under Edward IV when he heads up the Constables' Court - the Treason Court - and he hands down sentences with absolute implacability. As a subject of Edward IV, that kind of loyalty serves him very well but as king, it serves him badly because of all this idealism he has as king. As I say earlier, he seizes power because he thinks he's the right man for the job. He thinks he can be the right king because he knows how to do it but his ideals disintegrate on contact

with reality. He has very little sense of realpolitik. He has very little sense of flexibility, of give and take or of understanding how people tick. This, ultimately, is one of the reasons why Richard's reign disintegrates so rapidly.

Peter Moore: The last thing I'll say about this scene before we leave it, because we can imagine him there in Lincoln, maybe confounded by the situation as it's developing but there's just this tantalising detail that we have to touch on because, at the same time, there's Henry Tudor sailing towards - this isn't a successful invasion from his point of view but it's the sense of a small story which is going to become a bigger story. This is going to be the foundation of the greatest dynasty in English history, the Tudors. They're just there, just on the side of the stage at this point. He manages to fend them off for now but they're going to be back and they're going to be back in a couple of years.

Thomas Penn: They're going to be back. Perhaps I can conclude with this. Herny Tudor sails to join this rebellion which is already failing in the autumn of 1483. He runs into a storm and his ships turn back. Only two ships make it to the Dorset coast and one of them is his but they have to turn back as well. He goes back to Brittany where he's been in exile for 12 years and he thinks he's failed. He's blown his chance. The rebellion has failed as well but the point about the rebellion failing is that all these Yorkist exiles, who are loyal to the memory of the princes - and they think it's the memory of the princes because by common report, as you said earlier, people believe the princes now to be dead - they flee to Brittany. For them, now, this extraordinary situation occurs because a Lancastrian fugitive, a man who has very little claim to the throne, has a vanishingly small amount of royal blood and who people never ever think of as a king, suddenly becomes the only game in town for a bunch of Yorkist exiles. Of course, that leads us to Bosworth in two years' time in which these Yorkist exiles, headed up by Henry Tudor, beat and kill Richard III in brutal circumstances on the battlefield and they hope to turn the clock back to the reign of Edward IV. Of course, Henry Tudor has other ideas.

Peter Moore: We'll leave you suspending your history and your story just there. Just some last thoughts from me. I'll emphasise that this book is a wonderful work of scholarship but full of lucid writing and I was thinking, 'How do I characterise your writing? How do I characterise this work?' In the Middle Ages, we have birds of prey being really potent symbols, like falcons, hawks, hen harriers and this what I was thinking about when I was reading your work. We can instantly conjure up the vision of a local lord out hunting rabbits with his falcon. As I was reading through *The Brothers York*, I thought, 'This is what it's like. You're high up. You're wheeling in the sky over these events but then, just occasionally, you'll swoop down onto a scene and give us something very dramatic, very quickly and very close up.' It's history on a grand scale but it's also history up close and full of dramatic tension. It's a wonderful book. Many congratulations on it but I want to ask you a final question before we conclude this episode of *Travels Through Time*. If you could bring one memento back to have in your writing room in London from the year 1483, is there anything you'd like to choose?

Thomas Penn: I think there is and I think it's a piece of material culture that would nicely clarify for us exactly whatever the portent tensions were for Richard. It might help to address that moment right at the beginning of Richard's seizure of power. That is Edward IV's will, in which he was supposed to have laid out his plans for the government of his young son and his younger brother, Richard, Duke of Gloucester's place in that government.

Peter Moore: Wow! It's a tantalising thought to think what might be contained in that. We'll give it to you now. Thank you very much, Tom.

Thomas Penn: Thank you very much.

Peter Moore: It's been a pleasure.

Thomas Penn: Peter, thank you for having me.

Peter Moore: It's a tantalising thought indeed. What alternative history of England might have been written into that document. I'm going to leave you with that thought to ponder. I'm Peter Moore and this was *Travels Through Time* and thank you for listening.

Paul Lay: Hello, I'm Paul Lay, editor of *History Today*, the world's leading serious history magazine. You can read more articles about Richard III and the Wars of the Roses on our website www.historytoday.com/travelsthroughtime. There, you can read Tim Stanley on forgiving Richard III; Stephen Cooper on how Richard was viewed by his contemporaries; and Ann Bailey on how Richard has become a modern version of a medieval saint. Every month, *History Today* magazine features a wide range of articles on every aspect of the past, written by leading historians. To subscribe, go to www.historytoday.com and dwell on the past.

Artemis Irvine: Hello, I'm Artemis and that was Thomas Penn adding Edward IV's will to our list of mementoes. It goes into the back our time machine, alongside a copy of Isaac Newton's lecture notes for 1684; Mark Smeaton's keyboard; a fragment of the True Cross; and one of James Watts' little green bags made especially for inhaling nitrous oxide. There's a story behind each of these objects, of course, and you can find out much more about them from the *History Today* website. The most important object we have to tell you about though is Thomas Penn's magical new book, *The Brothers York*, which is published by Penguin Press and is out now. We'll be back in a fortnight for a trip to 1862 with Dr Thomas Waters, a real-life professor of the Dark Arts. Till then, goodbye.

[Sound of ticking clock]

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