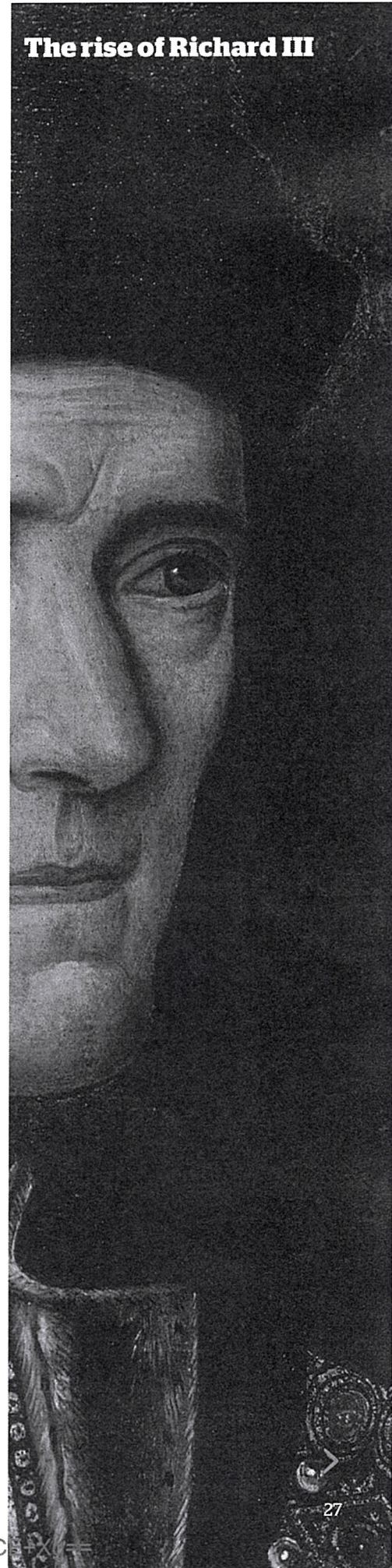


COVER STORY

DID FEAR DRIVE RICHARD TO THE THRONE?

Was Richard III's seizure of the English crown the result of a brilliantly executed plan or a desperate gamble to save his own skin? **Chris Skidmore**, who has just written a biography of the king, returns to the spring and summer of 1483 in search of an answer

Richard III, shown in a late 16th-century portrait, would have been all too aware that, in the fallout from his brother's death, one misstep could lead to his own bloody demise



The rise of Richard III

Westminster, February 1483. Richard, Duke of Gloucester was a man who seemed to have the world at his feet. Now aged 30, he had managed to transform his position as a younger brother of the king with few prospects to become the most powerful nobleman in the realm.

Thanks to his loyalty to his elder brother, King Edward IV, whom Richard had fought for valiantly at Barnet and Tewkesbury – decisive battles in the Wars of the Roses – Richard had been richly rewarded with vast estates, allowing him to establish himself as ‘Lord of the North’. Only the summer before, in August 1482, Richard had demonstrated his military credentials, leading an army into Scotland, not only winning back Berwick-upon-Tweed from the Scots, but marching 50 miles to the centre of Edinburgh.

Edward IV had been delighted at his brother’s success. During the parliament held that February, Richard was rewarded with a remarkable prize: the creation of his very own ‘palatinate’, an independent duchy straddling the western borders of England and Scotland. The summit of his ambition seemed to have been reached.

Richard had achieved all this through loyalty: loyalty to the king, and loyalty to the king’s heirs. He swore several oaths of allegiance to uphold the rights of the Yorkist monarch and his eldest son, Prince Edward.

But then, on 9 April, everything changed. At the age of just 40, Edward IV died, a turn of events that delivered a huge shock to the kingdom, and struck a shattering blow to its stability. What happened next would spark one of the greatest crises that the English monarchy has ever witnessed. Within 80 days, Richard had cast aside his loyalties to the Yorkist dynasty, deposing his young nephew, Edward V, and acceding to the throne.

How did this come about? Had Richard planned all along to seize the throne, or was he forced into taking a drastic course of action that even he would have recoiled from just months earlier? To answer these questions, we need to return to the momentous events of 1483, beginning with Edward IV’s death...

April 1483

The Woodvilles freeze Richard out

The king’s demise was entirely unforeseen but he did have enough time to make final revisions to his last will and testament. One chronicler observed that, “on his death bed” the king “added some codicils” to his will – a statement that’s been confirmed by a recently uncovered petition from the Dean and Canons of Windsor. According to several

contemporary sources, one of Edward’s final requests was for his brother Richard to be appointed the king’s protector.

However Edward IV’s wife, Queen Elizabeth, and her Woodville family were determined to remain in control of the young king Edward. At a council meeting, they pressed for the king’s coronation to take place as soon as possible, on 4 May, and vetoed the proposition that Richard be appointed protector.

There was, however, one dissenting voice on the council: Edward IV’s former chamberlain, William, Lord Hastings. Hastings not only forced the council to agree to take the young king journey from his home at Ludlow to the capital with no more than 2,000 men, he also sent secret messages to Richard, informing him of the Woodville plans to quash his appointment as the king’s protector.

Richard risked being frozen out of power. He needed to act to secure the protectorate for himself. Fortunately for him, he could command the support of the nobility.

The Woodvilles had earned themselves some formidable enemies in the English court. Among those to resent their rapid rise to power from relatively lowborn obscurity was Henry, Duke of Buckingham, who had been forced to take one of the queen’s sisters as his wife, while his own powers had been diminished. At some point in late April 1483, Richard and Buckingham made contact. We do not know what was agreed between the two men, but it is clear that Richard needed to secure the protectorate before the Woodvilles got hold of the king in the capital. That meant gaining possession of Edward – something that Richard must have considered was within his rights as the king’s paternal uncle. In his own mind, he was merely fulfilling the spirit of his brother’s final will.

30 April Edward V gives his uncle a nasty shock

As the young king prepared to journey towards the capital, Richard and Buckingham wrote to him, requesting that they meet on the road to London, so that they might enter the city together. Edward was accompanied by his uncle, the queen’s brother, Anthony, Earl Rivers. What took place next is well known. Rivers was sent to enjoy dinner with Richard and Buckingham, only to be arrested the following morning. With the king now isolated, Richard came face to face with Edward V at Stony Stratford, pledging his loyalty to the king.

Perhaps the duke assumed that Edward would be grateful. Yet the young king stunned Richard by requesting that Rivers be released and objecting to Richard’s treatment of his

father’s household men. Witnessing the stubbornness of the teenage king must have come as a wake-up call to Richard. He had not seen his nephew for years; he was no longer an innocent child, but a young adult with a mind of his own.

Richard had underestimated the king, and must have now realised that his sudden actions had polarised the court. When the news broke in the capital that Richard had arrested Rivers and seized the king, Queen Elizabeth fled into sanctuary at Westminster. Crucially, she took with her Edward’s brother, Richard, Duke of York, and his sisters, thereby creating a rival powerbase. Armed men marched through the streets. There could be no turning back.

Richard and the king arrived in London on 4 May. Six days later, Richard secured what he had craved all along: the protectorate. Yet the king’s council refused his demands to have Rivers and other Woodville associates indicted for treason. It was another blow for Richard, who realised that if he was unable to silence his Woodville critics, once Edward V was crowned, he might lose his position as protector. Worse still, there was every chance that Anthony, Earl Rivers, the queen, and even the young King Edward would seek their revenge. And, with the new coronation date set for 22 June, and parliament meeting on 25 June, time was running out. In his desire to ensure he obtained the protectorate, something he believed was his right, Richard had potentially engineered his own downfall.

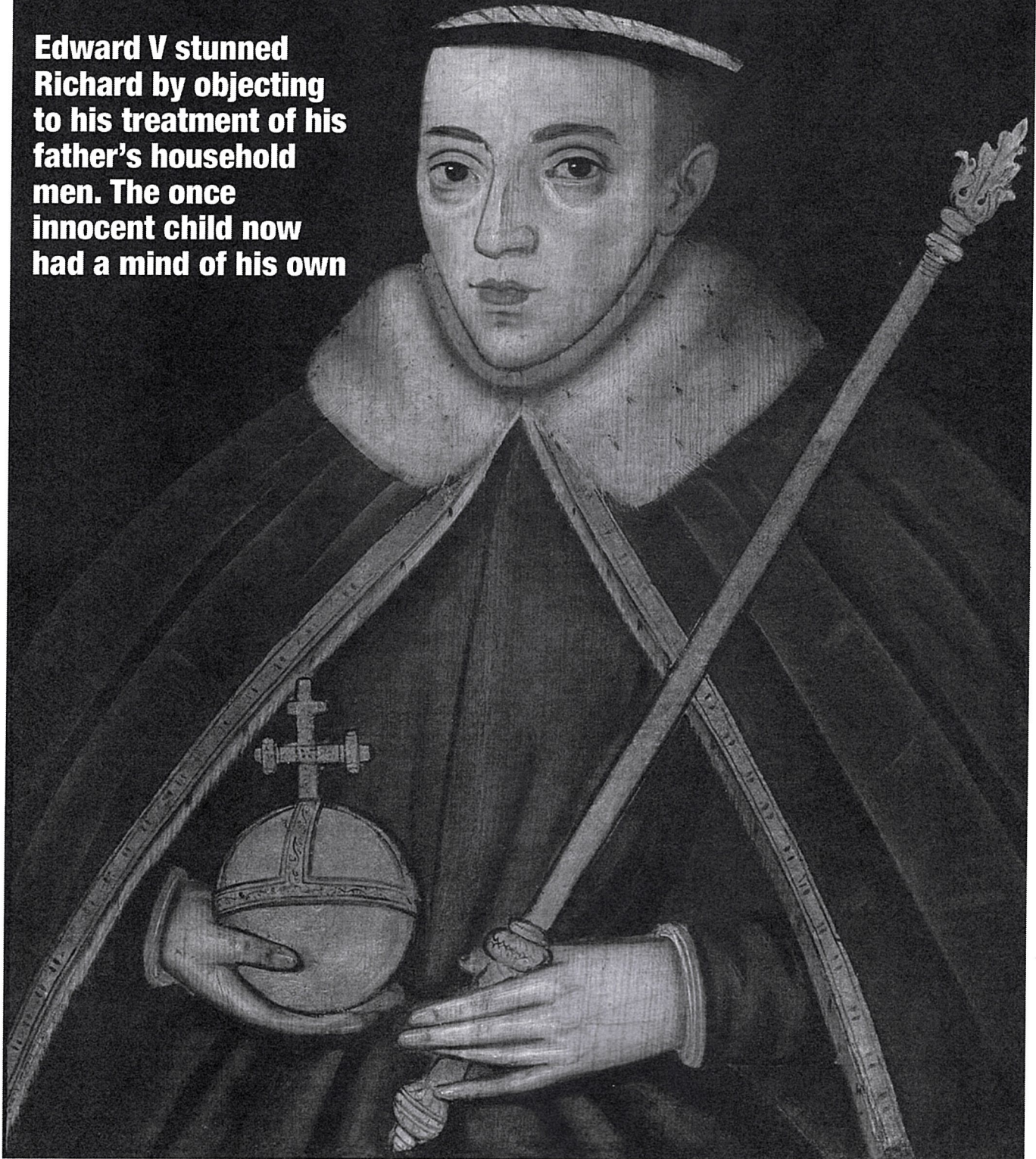
He could not allow this to happen. So, instead, he drew up a plan for him to remain in post as protector. The chancellor, bishop John Russell, began to draft a sermon, seeking parliament’s consent that “till ripeness of years and personal rule be... concurrent together” in the young king, Richard’s “power and authority” should be “assented and established by the authority” of parliament. It would be through the consent of parliament, Richard judged, that his own authority might be strengthened further, granting him increased powers over the “tutelage and oversight” of the king. Yet it was far from

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Edward V stunned Richard by objecting to his treatment of his father's household men. The once innocent child now had a mind of his own



NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

Edward V in a painting dated to the turn of the 17th century. Within days of Edward IV's demise, Richard, Duke of Gloucester and the powerful Woodville family were engaged in a desperate race to gain control of the dead king's son and heir



The rise of Richard III

certain whether the royal council would back Richard's plans for his own survival.

10 June An army is summoned to London

Richard had not yet resolved what to do with Queen Elizabeth in sanctuary. He attempted to coax her out in late May, pledging to promise her safety, but she refused. Richard tried to persuade the council to have Edward V's brother, Richard, removed from sanctuary in preparation for the coronation, yet with little success. On 9 June, a meeting of the council lasted from 10 o'clock in the morning until 2 o'clock in the afternoon, "but there was not that spake with the queen".

Whatever was discussed in the council meeting, it seems to have prompted Richard into direct action. On 10 June, he decided to launch a second attack against the queen and the Woodvilles. Sending letters to his northern supporters, requesting armed men on horseback to journey to the capital, he accused "the queen, her blood, adherents and affinity" of intending to murder him and Buckingham, "by their subtle and damnable ways forecasted the same".

Richard planned for this northern army to be gathered to march southwards by 21 June – not in time to prevent Edward V's coronation, but ahead of the opening of parliament on 25 June. It seems Richard was not planning to take the throne at this point, merely to prevent any Woodville opposition to his plans to secure a strengthened and more permanent protectorate for himself.

No doubt Richard decided to attack the queen before his plans for gaining parliamentary approval for his protectorate were revealed. But he miscalculated. He had sent the letters to his northern followers, committing himself to the plan, without securing the support of other members of the nobility, among them William, Lord Hastings. Perhaps Richard assumed that Hastings, having supported his claim to the protectorate, would once more take his side against the queen. If so, he was mistaken.

13 June Richard kills before he is killed

Instead of throwing his weight behind Richard's plan, Hastings moved against him. The former lord chancellor's loyalties lay with the Yorkist dynasty itself, and he wished for Edward V to obtain his majority immediately. It seems that Hastings may have reached out to men close to the queen. Richard learnt that they had "foregathered in each other's houses". Other evidence points to Hastings even approaching his former enemy Thomas, Marquess of Dorset, the queen's son by her first marriage, who had fled into exile.



Henry, Duke of Buckingham, shown in a 1742 engraving, engineered Richard's rise to power, before betraying him

Richard had no choice but to remove Hastings as soon as possible, before the news of the contents of the letters he'd sent to York and the north was made public. On Friday 13 June, Richard summoned the council to meet in the Tower of London. Here he accused Hastings of betrayal, and had him dragged out onto Tower Green where he was immediately beheaded. Hastings, like Rivers before him, had not suspected a thing.

Hastings' execution appears to have been a turning point in the drama – a catalyst for Richard to consider his own position. His enemies were plotting his downfall. Edward V's coronation was just a few days away. Several Woodville accomplices were still at large. Anthony, Earl Rivers was still alive (though imprisoned). Could Richard really be certain that his foes weren't about to strike?

16 June The young princes vanish from view

The discovery of the Hastings conspiracy made it even more pressing that Richard should seize the king's brother, Richard, Duke of York, before the coronation. On Monday 16 June, armed men with clubs arrived outside the Westminster sanctuary. Thomas Bouchier, the elderly archbishop of Canterbury, had been persuaded to request that the queen relinquish her son. Surely Bouchier, even if he was acting on the king's orders, cannot have suspected that the young boy would come to any harm. The queen reluctantly agreed. Richard met his nephew at Westminster Hall, accompanied by many lords, "with many loving words".

With both the king and his brother now safely in Richard's hands, the following day the scheduled parliament was postponed until 9 November. It was only now that people's suspicions began to be raised. "After this," one London chronicler wrote, "then

was privy talking in London that the lord protector should be king."

By now, people had heard rumours of the northern army advancing upon the capital. Yet even on 21 June, a Simon Stallworth was able to write how he had heard "it is thought there shall be 20,000 of my lord protector and my lord of Buckingham's men in London this week, to what intent I know not but to keep the peace". It seems that men like Stallworth were still willing to give Richard the benefit of the doubt.

As late as 18 June, Edward V continued to sign warrants. Yet the business of government was beginning to wind down. The final date for any government business to be transacted under the name of Edward V was on the same date as Stallworth's letter: 21 June.

22 June Edward IV is declared illegitimate

Richard had now decided to claim the throne for himself, and to depose his nephew. But aside from the dual incentives of self-interest and self-preservation, he had still to articulate a good reason why he should do. On Sunday 22 June, crowds gathered outside St Paul's to hear a sermon preached by the theologian Ralph Shaa. Richard and Buckingham were in the audience, listening as Shaa announced to gasps that Edward IV "was not born of Richard, Duke of York, but from a certain other, who secretly knew his mother".

Edward V and his brother Richard should be disinherited, Shaa argued, for their father himself was illegitimate. Yet the crowds failed to respond to Shaa's rallying calls to acclaim "King Richard". Instead they stood silent, "turned into stones, for wonder of this shameful sermon".

The content of Shaa's sermon came as a complete surprise – not least to Richard's mother, Cecily Neville, who seems to have been unaware that she was about to be accused of adultery by her own son. Cecily was furious, complaining openly "of the great injury done to her by her son Richard".

Richard realised that he would need a change of plan. Once more, Henry, Duke of Buckingham seems to have been a dominating force. One contemporary chronicle noted that Richard was acting "with the instigation, advice and aid" of Buckingham. If Shaa had misread the public mood, Buckingham was determined to resolve the situation.

Two days later, on Tuesday 24 June, the duke came to the Guildhall, where in an oration lasting more than half an hour, he set out Richard's claim to the crown "so well and eloquently uttered and with so angelic a countenance" (according to *The Great Chronicle of London*) that men who heard the speech " marvelled". This time, Buckingham

argued that it was Edward V himself who was illegitimate, since his father, Edward IV, had in fact been legally contracted to marry another woman at the time of his marriage to Elizabeth Woodville, thereby invalidating the marriage and its children.

Dominic Mancini, an Italian visitor to England, reported that Buckingham argued that Edward had been contracted to “another lady by proxy” by the Earl of Warwick, “on the continent”. This probably refers to Bona of Savoy, the sister-in-law of the French king Louis XI, who had opened negotiations for her marriage to Edward in 1463 and 1464. By claiming Edward IV’s marriage was invalid, Buckingham had managed to find an entirely new means by which to claim the crown for Richard.

25 June The nobility submit to their king in waiting

After listening to Buckingham’s speech at the Guildhall, it seems that some of the nobility decided they had no choice but to accept Richard as their king. On 25 June, a delegation of lords and bishops gathered to present Richard with a petition, urging him to take the crown. He acceded to the throne the following day.

Once again, the justification for Richard’s claim to the throne had changed. Now the petition claimed that Edward had pre-contracted a marriage not with a foreign bride, but with Lady Eleanor Butler.

The chronicler Philippe de Commines later claimed that Edward’s pre-contract with Lady Eleanor, arranged so that he might sleep with her, had been revealed to Richard by Robert Stillington, the bishop of Bath and Wells, who claimed that he had performed the pre-contract ceremony. If true, Richard would indeed have had a case for claiming that Edward V was illegitimate in canon law. For all that, Stillington was only furnishing Richard with additional evidence to back a claim he needed to construct to justify his accession.

The sermon came as a complete surprise to Richard’s mother, Cecily Neville, who was unaware that she was about to be accused of adultery by her own son



Paul Delaroche’s famous painting from 1830 shows Edward V and his brother, Richard, in the Tower of London. Was the future Richard III content to serve his nephew as lord protector until events spiralled out of control and forced his hand?

The aftermath Richard’s enemies suspect the worse

What’s notable about Richard III’s seizure of power is that so few of his contemporaries seem to have discussed in any great detail why exactly Edward V’s deposition should have taken place. Did people believe the ‘pre-contract’ theories? Certainly, government warrants and letters commonly referred to Edward V as “Edward the Bastard”. Perhaps a child king was considered too dangerous for the stability of the Yorkist polity.

Whatever the reason, no one was able to mount an effective resistance to Richard as he closed in on power. It was only after an ill-fated attempt to free Edward V and his brother from the Tower months later – amid swirling rumours that the two princes had disappeared – that rebellion was raised against the new king. Only then did men decide to take action against Richard, who was now accused, Herod-like, of being a child-killer, an anathema even in medieval society. The rebellion failed, and Richard’s former ally the Duke of Buckingham paid for his support for the uprising with his life.

Looking back 500 years later – knowing how this story ended – it’s tempting to trace a clear path leading Richard, Duke of

Gloucester to the throne as Richard III. But for Richard, in the midst of the chaos and uncertainty of 1483, that path simply didn’t exist. He became king more by accident than design. He made too many errors of judgment, and got his timing wrong on too many occasions, for him to have planned his accession from the start.

I believe that it was fear and the desire for self-preservation – rather than ambition – that propelled Richard to the realisation that he must become king. Cornered by the consequences of his own decisions, his options narrowed ever more until he felt he had no choice. The throne had to be his. **IT**

Chris Skidmore is a historian and politician, who is currently minister for the Constitution. He is the author of several books on late medieval and Tudor England

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BOOK

► **Richard III: Brother, Protector, King** by Chris Skidmore was published by Weidenfeld and Nicolson in September

ON THE PODCAST

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