

Royal Deaths - a talk by Darren Harris June 10th

The local history group welcomed back Darren Harris for our last meeting of the 2023-24 season. He regaled us with gruesome tales of treachery and deceit surrounding the deaths of many English kings. So detailed were some of these tales we only managed to cover the medieval era up to the death of Richard II. Referred to by some as the Dark Ages, if the gory details that Darren related are anything to go by they were certainly dark times for many of those early monarchs.

Darren started with the legends surrounding Norse king, Ragnar Lothbrok who is supposed to have ended his days in Northumbria by being thrown into a pit of adders. After the battle of York in 867 his sons exacted their brutal revenge on their father's murderers by employing a method of ritual execution called the blood eagle- too gruesome to repeat here!

Other kings referenced from shortly after this time included Edmund the Martyr ruling East Anglia from AD 855 to 869 who was killed by Danish invaders after refusing to denounce his Christianity. After being tied to a tree and shot with arrows (until he resembled a hedgehog) he was beheaded to prevent his body being retrieved by his followers and his head discarded in nearby woodland. Only centuries later were the parts reunited and he was buried and enshrined in the abbey at Bury St. Edmunds.

*Other kings chronicled for their unconventional early deaths included:
Edmund 1- stabbed by a thief after a drunken brawl during a feast.
Edward the Martyr was also stabbed although whilst seated on his horse waiting to enter Corfe castle.*

Depending on which source you read Harold Harefoot was either shot or drowned after being thrown into the Thames: in any event his bloated body turned black suggesting poisoning.

Harthacanute died at a wedding feast after drinking copious amounts of alcohol but again poison may have been involved.

King Harold was probably the first monarch with which the majority of the audience were familiar. However, Darren raised some doubts about the Bayeux account that he was seated on " 'is 'orse with his 'awk in 'is

‘and” when he was shot in his eye with an arrow. It may have been a spear after all.

Both William (the conqueror) and his son, William (II) Rufus, died whilst out hunting; William 1 probably died from heat exhaustion brought on by over indulgence and his son was killed in the New Forest when shot with an arrow.

We also heard the story of Henry 1 dying from eating too many lampreys (eels) whilst over in Rouen- but then again rich French cuisine has proved the downfall of many a tourist.

A bout of dysentery is supposed to have hastened the passing of ‘Bad king’ John yet his glutinous appetite and poisoning may have been to blame . Hearing that Edward II’s death was probably caused by being subjected to torture with a red hot poker caused some wincing among the audience.

Darren finished his talk by saying there is scant evidence for some of these tales of monarchic murder. Many of those chronicling the demise of our kings were motivated in their accounts by financial reward and political pressure by succeeding rulers wanting to sensationalise the accounts in their favour. The scientific researches of Phillipa Langley and others into Richard III’s death clearly show how warped are some historical accounts of some events.