

# BLOOD BROTHERS

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The three siblings Edward IV, George, Duke of Clarence and the future Richard III were meant to be on the same side in the Wars of the Roses. Yet the relationship between these heavyweights of the House of York was defined by jealousy, backstabbing and murder. **Thomas Penn** describes the great family rivalry that dogged the English throne in the later 15th century

The House of York versus the House of Lancaster. Edward IV versus Henry VI. White rose versus red. The Wars of the Roses – the vicious conflict for the English crown that dogged the kingdom for three decades in the 15th century – has long been described as a grand dynastic struggle waged by competing families. And not without reason.

But during this time, the war began to turn inwards: a destructive chain of rebellion, deposition, vendetta, fratricide, usurpation and regicide that originated within the house of York itself. At the heart of this unparalleled act of dynastic self-harm was the mutually destructive relationship between three royal siblings on the same side of the great dynastic divide: Edward IV, the future Richard III, and the middle brother, George, Duke of Clarence, who wanted to be king but never was. It's impossible to understand this bloody period in English history – culminating in the rise of the Tudors – without understanding the forces that drove these three brothers apart.

The key figure in the bitter familial dispute was Edward IV, the eldest son of Richard, Duke of York, and the man who, in 1461, had seized the crown from his hapless Lancastrian foe, Henry VI. At first, Edward seemed a breath of fresh air after the chaotic reign of his predecessor. Six foot four inches in his stockinged feet, he was a magnetic, virile war-leader. One good authority thought him “the most beautiful prince my eyes ever beheld”. Edward did everything intensely: fighting, governing, deal-making and partying. He loved luxury, maintaining a sensational wardrobe and court (an important aspect of kingship, given the significance of ‘magnificence’, or outward splendour) and projected the supreme self-confidence of his motto, *counforte et liesse*, comfort and joy.

But beneath this excess of energy something darker was at play. Historians have often struggled to reconcile Edward's manifold excesses and contradictions, but perhaps something approaching an answer can be found in the deeply rooted narcissism that fuelled his compulsive behaviour: the gourmandising, drinking, rapacious womanising and addiction to pleasure that quickly caused unease among his advisors. He displayed typically narcissistic traits: a marked lack of empathy, a thin-skinned inability to accept criticism, a constant desire for affirmation, and an indecision that manifested itself at crucial moments. These negative qualities all fuelled the slow breakdown in relations within the House of York during the 1460s, in particular with his



**Brothers reunited**

A depiction of the 1471 battle of Barnet, which saw Edward and Clarence fighting side by side. The brothers secured a crushing victory but their reconciliation would prove short-lived



**Lap of luxury** Edward IV loved displays of wealth. Here, he is shown receiving a book from Anthony Woodville, Earl Rivers, with his queen and courtiers in attendance – all clothed in the finest robes

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**Weak ruler** Henry VI, Edward IV's Lancastrian rival for the throne. The threats to Edward's crown didn't end with the deaths, in 1471, of Henry and his son

brother Clarence and with his influential cousin Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, who had done so much to put him on the throne and whom he increasingly ignored.

In his later years, Edward underwent the kind of physical transformation paralleled by that of his grandson Henry VIII, with his doctors entirely failing to put the brake on his prodigious appetites. As he became more obese, his fine features began to blur with fat – “gross”, winced one commentator. The king's physical decline was mirrored in a growing listlessness and depression: precisely the kind of enfeebling that his councillors had worried about. Increasingly, his rule became involuted, his dealings with both subjects and foreign princes contorted, obsessive and avaricious. With all this came a terrifying unpredictability. Tellingly, one commentator remarked how those outside Edward's charmed circle began to desert the king, perhaps convinced that the game of courtiership wasn't worth playing.

**Vulnerable wealth**

Edward loved his family. As a newly crowned king, that love was sharpened by his experience of the conflict of preceding months, which had seen his father, Richard, Duke of York, and Edmund – his closest brother, with whom he had grown up at the family home of Ludlow – killed by a Lancastrian army at Wakefield. In the early years of his kingship, his love was concentrated especially on his two remaining brothers, his protective fraternal impulse perhaps exaggerated by the substantial age gap between them: George was 11 to his 19, and Richard was eight.

The two younger boys had known little but political upheaval, the backdrop to their early years the bloody antagonism between the houses of York and Lancaster. Early in 1461, after the murder of their father, they had been spirited out of the country to Flanders for their own safety. But when they returned to England in the June of that year, their lives had been swiftly transformed. With their big brother Edward now king of England, they were first and second in line to the throne. They needed endowments to reflect this new, exalted status, and Edward, flush with the confiscated wealth of his Lancastrian opponents, rewarded them accordingly.

Both George and Richard were given royal dukedoms. George received the dukedom of Clarence (which had originally belonged to the second son of Edward III, from whom the Yorkists were descended), together with a vast portfolio of lands, instantly making him one of the greatest noblemen in England. Richard, meanwhile, was handed the title of Duke of Gloucester. His landed settlement was rather more of a ragbag: his majority was

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some way off, and Edward had plenty of other Yorkist supporters to reward.

Circumstances had raised Edward, Clarence and Richard into a place of exceptional power and wealth. Yet the sense that they could lose everything in an instant rarely left them. This precariousness was at times overwhelming: it distorted their behaviour and decision-making, their views of the world and, ultimately, of each other.

Edward was hardly the first king to prioritise his family. Nevertheless, he was specific about his rationale for doing so. While he subscribed to the prevailing view that the “might of the land” rested in the “great lords”, he stressed that power should most of all be concentrated in the hands of his family, the “king's blood”. The quantity of royal blood in people's veins correlated directly to the extent that they should “of right” be “honoured and enhanced of right and power”. Edward, in other words, would build up his brothers, heaping them with possessions and riches.

But with every grant, Edward intended to bind his siblings more tightly to him: tied, he explained, not only by the “bonds of nature”, or blood, but by the “bonds of so great benefit” that he had given them. It was a way of underscoring not just their familial closeness, but the servitude that lay at the heart of their fraternal relationship. Edward would envelop George and Richard in his smothering love – but he expected their unconditional loyalty in return. In the first instance, this applied especially to George, or as he now was, the Duke of Clarence.

Clarence, for his part, would prove phenomenally disobedient. In the early years of Edward's rule, the de facto heir to the throne grew up fast; by all accounts, he was intelligent, with a quicksilver wit. But he also had the overdeveloped sense of honour and self-entitlement characteristic of the landed classes of the age. Barely into his teens, he was already hungry for power and prickly sensitive about his new status – which, as he well knew, fragile. Once Edward married

and had children, Clarence would cease to be heir to the throne. More pressingly, the exceptional wealth with which he had been endowed was vulnerable to the demands of rival claimants. Clarence was “not born to have any livelihood”: his lands had been confiscated from their previous, Lancastrian, incumbents. As soon as these noble families had made their peace with the Yorkist regime, they would be wanting those titles and lands back – and what the king gave, the king could always take away.

**Fraternal knot unravels**

By the late 1460s, Clarence’s sense of insecurity had deepened, fuelled by a growing resentment against Edward. One way of acquiring hereditary landed wealth – not subject to the whims and vagaries of royal favour – was to marry a rich heiress, and Clarence’s eye had alighted on one of the greatest of them all. This was Isabel Neville, the older daughter of his Yorkist cousin, the powerful and influential Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick. But while the upwardly mobile family of Edward’s new queen, Elizabeth Woodville, was busy marrying into the Yorkist establishment, Edward categorically refused to let his brother’s match go ahead.

Convinced that Edward was denying him what was rightfully his, Clarence also felt excluded from the king’s inner circle, one increasingly dominated by members of the queen’s Woodville family and their affiliates. This burgeoning sense of grievance was recognised and nurtured by Clarence’s putative father-in-law, Richard, Earl of Warwick. Himself estranged from Edward, the king he had once helped put on the throne, Warwick saw Clarence as his new project and convinced him he could do better. Clarence duly married Warwick’s daughter in defiance of Edward’s wishes and, aged 19, went into open rebellion against his own brother.

It was impressionable behaviour: one contemporary, trying to explain it, shrugged that Clarence had “a mind too conscious of a daring deed”. And such behaviour had enormous consequences. In 1470 Clarence, alongside Warwick and a French-backed Lancastrian army, forced Edward into exile and restored Henry VI to the throne.

Henry rewarded Clarence by making him next in line to the throne after his son. But Clarence soon realised that the newly

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restored Lancastrian regime couldn’t give him what he wanted. And so he made up with Edward again.

In spring 1471, after an emotional reunion, Edward and Clarence joined forces in the battles of Barnet, where Warwick was killed, and Tewkesbury, where the house of Lancaster was all but exterminated. As one poet, triumphantly proclaiming unity between the Yorkist brothers, asserted: “The knot was knit again.”

That knot quickly began to loosen. The escalating infighting had pitched Clarence against Edward’s household men – who, whatever their fine words in public, had “other language” about Clarence’s actions in private – and against Queen Elizabeth Woodville, whose father and brother Clarence had had executed during his rebellion against his brother Edward. As a haze of paranoid mistrust settled around Clarence, a new element was added to this toxic stew: the youngest Yorkist brother, Richard.

Richard seemed to be everything that Clarence was not. Fiercely loyal, dependable and obedient, he had fled into exile with

Edward in 1469, and had then fought with remarkable ferocity in the battles of 1471, belying not only his youth – he was still only 18 – but his apparent physical fragility. Even though the scoliosis that had begun to afflict him was hardly detectable, in time it doubtless contributed to the contrast, remarked on time and again by contemporaries, between Richard’s slight frame and his “great heart”.

Growing up in the shadow of the grabby, aggressive Clarence, Richard learned to keep quiet and to bide his time. Perhaps driven by a desire to order the messy reality around him, Richard prized the abstract ideals that he found in books – chivalry, justice, piety, loyalty – which could be defined and enumerated. Edward valued Richard’s fidelity and rewarded his youngest brother accordingly, setting him up as Warwick’s de facto heir in the north-east of England. For Richard, this was the great landed powerbase that he craved.

**Whispering campaign**

If Richard shared Clarence’s hunger for wealth and power, he also shared the predicament of how to make his vast gains permanent, to protect them for his family line in perpetuity. In this regard, Edward was prepared to indulge Richard as he had never done Clarence. He allowed Richard to marry Warwick’s younger daughter, Anne, which in turn enabled his younger brother to consolidate his hold on the late earl’s lands, and to move in on Clarence’s share of the Warwick estates, inherited through his wife, Isabel.

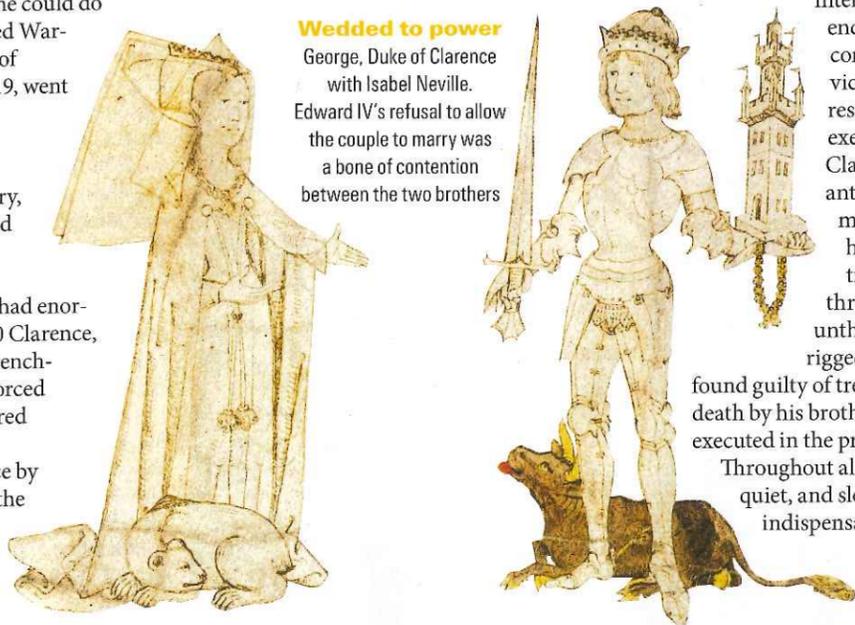
All of this served to fuel Clarence’s persecution complex, which, despite the brothers’ reconciliation in 1471, had never really gone away. By 1477, the whispering campaign against him at court had grown intense; this, allied to his

enduring inability to control his tongue and a vicious lashing-out that resulted in the judicial execution of some of Clarence’s former servants, helped convince a mistrustful Edward that his brother was still trying to usurp his throne. In early 1478, the unthinkable happened. In a rigged trial, Clarence was

found guilty of treason, condemned to death by his brother the king, and executed in the privacy of the Tower. Throughout all this Richard kept quiet, and slowly made himself indispensable to Edward. He was also persuasive, encouraging the

**Wedded to power**

George, Duke of Clarence with Isabel Neville. Edward IV’s refusal to allow the couple to marry was a bone of contention between the two brothers



BRIDGEMAN ARCHIVES

**THE POWER TRIO**

The three Yorkist brothers who dominated England



**Edward IV**  
1442–83

**FAMILY**

Married to Elizabeth Woodville; children included Edward V and Richard of Shrewsbury (the princes in the Tower), and Elizabeth of York, who would go on to marry Henry VII.

**STRENGTHS**

He was hugely charismatic, exuding strength, authority and self-confidence.

**WEAKNESSES**

A narcissist, his behaviour became increasingly compulsive. His prodigious appetites resulted in ballooning weight later in life.

**DOWNFALL**

Edward died of an unspecified illness – possibly typhoid or pneumonia – in April 1483. His sudden death, aged 40, shocked the nation.



**George, Duke of Clarence**  
1449–78

**FAMILY**

George was married to Isabel Neville, older daughter of the powerful magnate Richard, Earl of Warwick. Henry VII regarded the couple’s oldest son, Edward, Earl of Warwick, as a threat and had him executed in 1499.

**STRENGTHS**

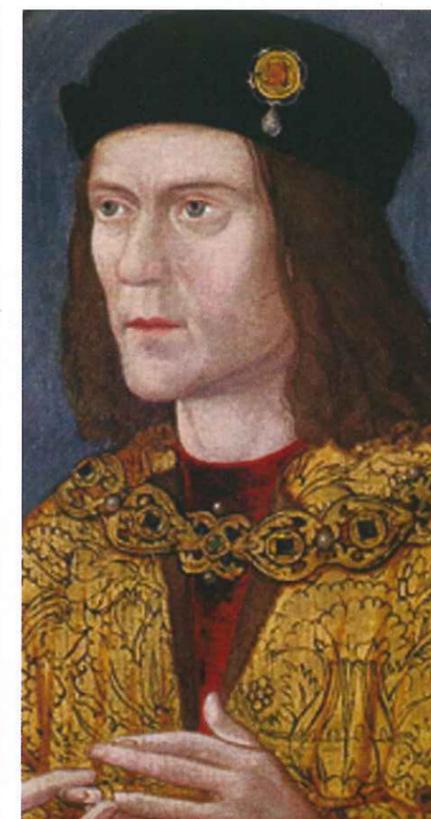
He was intelligent and quick-witted.

**WEAKNESSES**

George’s intelligence was matched by a sense of self-entitlement and a wilful independence of mind – characteristics that, in his relationship with his brother Edward, would cost him dear.

**DOWNFALL**

Edward IV lost patience with his recalcitrant brother in 1478 and ordered his execution in the Tower of London.



**Richard III**  
1452–85

**FAMILY**

Richard married Anne Neville, younger daughter of the Earl of Warwick. He had one legitimate son, Edward of Middleham, who died as a child.

**STRENGTHS**

Loyal, dependable, idealistic and brave, he gained a formidable reputation as a soldier in the 1471 battles of Barnet and Tewkesbury.

**WEAKNESSES**

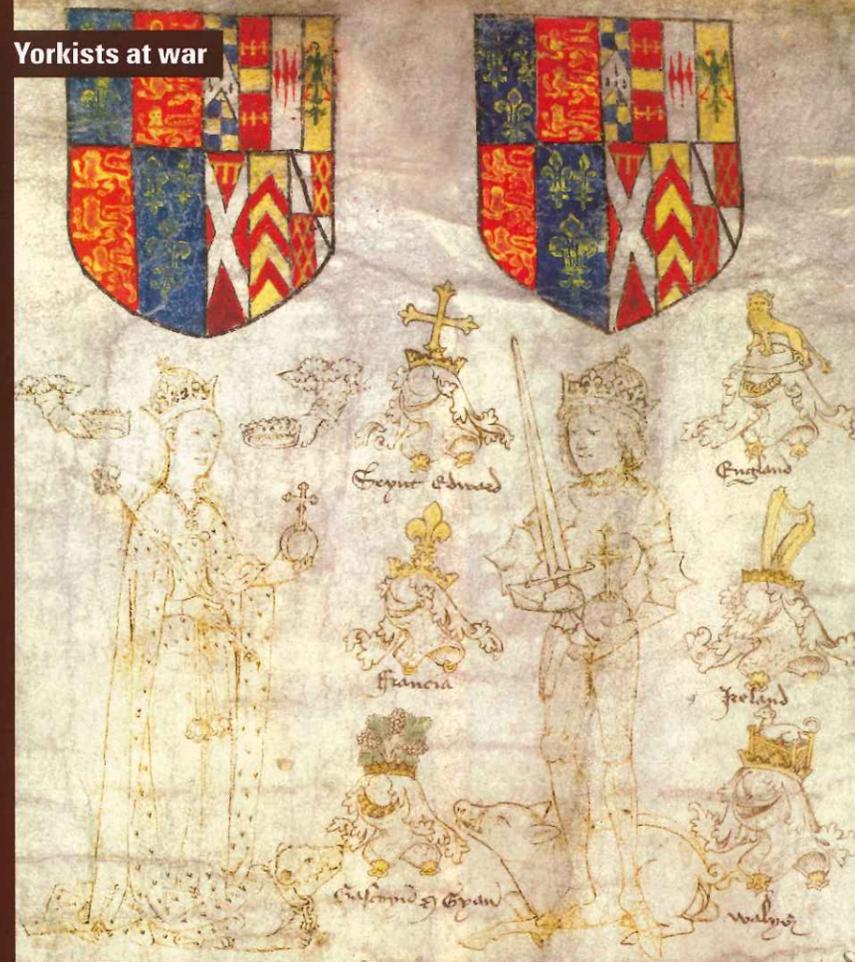
His inability to practise the kingly ideals he preached – as well as a failure to control the narrative surrounding the fate of the princes in the Tower – led ultimately to his downfall.

**DOWNFALL**

His killing at the battle of Bosworth in 1485 ushered in Henry VII, the first of the Tudors.

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## Yorkists at war



### Controversial king

The reputation of Richard III – shown with his queen, Anne Neville, in the 15th-century Rous Roll – was tainted by the allegation that he had ordered the killing of his brother Edward's sons

king to become embroiled in a pointless war against Scotland. Edward, meanwhile, fed his brother's military aspirations, appointing him leader of his army with the promise that Richard could keep whatever territory he conquered north of the border. So when, in 1483, Edward died leaving a 12-year-old heir, Richard considered himself the natural candidate to run the country as protector until the boy-king came of age.

Richard's seizure of power was driven by the peculiarly corrosive mix of vulnerability, self-serving opportunism and conviction that had come to characterise the politics of the age. In the newly precarious world that followed Edward's death, Richard believed that the Woodvilles were out to get him; he also took a dim view of the late king's failure to live up to the ideals of kingship. Edward, as Richard saw it, had sunk into a pit of depravity and vice, and the country had suffered. The all-too-convenient revelation that Edward's marriage had been invalid, and that his sons were bastards, allowed Richard to present himself as the only true-blooded alternative.

He was a keen student of kingship and was convinced that he

knew what it took to rule. He would be the ideal king: expansive, open-handed and just. At home, he would bring peace, reimpose the rule of law and champion the poor and downtrodden; abroad, he would show himself the war-leader that Edward had failed to be. These ideals swiftly disintegrated on contact with the realities of kingship.

### A shattering death

Richard's binary view of the world – one in which he was on the side of "virtue" and his enemies of "vice" – had served him well on the battlefield and as his brother's right-hand man. As king, it served him poorly. Inflexible and impulsive, his inability to live up to the ideals he had so publicly proclaimed looked to many like hypocrisy and a profound failure in kingship. He was further handicapped by the shattering death of his son and

heir, Edward (who succumbed as a child to an unspecified illness), and by his increasing reliance on a small cabal of followers. The notorious verse pinned to the door of St Paul's Cathedral in the summer of 1484 – "The Cat, the Rat, and Lovell our dog/Rule all England under a hog", a refer-

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**Richard's binary view of the world had served him well on the battlefield and as his brother's right-hand man. As king, it served him poorly**

ence to three of Richard's closest advisors and Richard's boar badge – wasn't a gratuitous insult: it went to the heart of what people felt had gone so quickly wrong with his regime.

Most of all, Richard was unable to control the narrative around the fate of the princes, Edward IV's two sons, who he had declared illegitimate and had locked in the Tower of London. In a sense, what Richard had or hadn't done was irrelevant: it was what people believed that mattered – and "the people", as one chronicler wrote, "laid the blame only on him". It was this, ultimately, that drove Yorkists loyal to Edward IV and the princes to find an alternative figurehead in Henry Tudor, an exiled Lancastrian with the merest smattering of royal blood – itself an astonishing comment on Richard's rule.

Richard died as he had lived. On the eve of Bosworth, he saw the coming battle as a nihilistic encounter. If victory fell to him, he would "ruin" Tudor and his followers; after all, he pronounced, Tudor would do "exactly the same" to Richard and his men if he lost.

Few subscribed to this vision of total destruction; indeed, many of Richard's declared supporters sat out the battle on the sidelines. Nevertheless, people did see Bosworth as a settling of scores, not between the houses of York and Lancaster, but between two factions of the house of York: Richard and his supporters against Yorkists faithful to Edward IV and his line. But if, as one commentator remarked after the event, it was "King Edward's sons whose cause, above all, was avenged in this battle", the real winner was another king entirely: Henry Tudor. **II**

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**Thomas Penn** is a historian and author, whose latest book, *The Brothers York: An English Tragedy*, is published by Allen Lane on 3 October. He will be discussing the House of York at our History Weekends in both Chester and Winchester: [historyextra.com/events](http://historyextra.com/events)