

Richard III and the Origins of the Court of Requests

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On 10 December 1485, so Thomas Christmas and John Vertue, burgesses for Colchester in Henry VII's first Parliament, reported to the corporation back home, '(there) passed a byll for the Court of Request that it is annulled, and it (shall) be occupied no more'.¹ Few of the many cryptic remarks contained in the Colchester report have caused as much consternation among historians as this passing reference. Along with a lack of evidence for the functioning of a formal 'court of requests' before the 1490s, it is the purpose and fate of the bill (which never found its way on to the parliament roll) that scholars have found difficult to fathom. In 1941 A.F. Pollard described the burgesses' version of events as 'an astonishing statement, the truth of which there is no reason to doubt'.² Pollard accepted that something akin to the later court of requests was in existence by 1485 and became subject to an abortive attempt at abolition by the parliamentary Commons in December of that year.³ More recently, Sir John Baker has followed Pollard in interpreting the Colchester account as 'an unsuccessful attempt ... to abolish what was actually called a Court of Requests',⁴ and Rosemary Horrox has agreed that if we accept the Colchester account to be accurate, it is probable that the bill was intended to resume into the normal functioning of the king's council its activity in hearing the suits of poor persons which had been separated out by Richard III. Horrox argued that although the bill was never enrolled, it might nevertheless have had the desired effect, as 'no more is heard of a "court" of requests for several years'.⁵

Others, however, have remained unconvinced. In the introduction to their edition of the Colchester diary, Nicholas Pronay and John Taylor declared themselves baffled by the burgesses' statement, and contended that although there might have been a 'council of requests' by 1483, it did not become

¹ Nicholas Pronay and John Taylor, eds, *Parliamentary Texts of the Later Middle Ages*, Oxford 1980, p. 189. A second, shorter, report on the Parliament's proceedings sent to Sir Robert Plumpton by the priest Thomas Betanson makes no mention of the bill: Joan Kirby, ed., *The Plumpton Letters and Papers*, London, Camden Soc. 5th ser. vol. 8, 1996, pp. 63-65.

² A.F. Pollard, 'The growth of the court of requests', *English Historical Review*, vol. 56 (1941), p. 301.

³ Pollard, 'Court of requests', p. 303.

⁴ J.H. Baker, *The Oxford History of the Laws of England*, vol. 6: 1483-1558, Oxford 2003, p. 203.

⁵ Rosemary Horrox, '1485 November', in C. Given-Wilson et al., eds., *The Parliament Rolls of Medieval England*, 16 vols., Woodbridge 2005, vol. 15, p. 87.

known as a court until the reign of Henry VII.⁶ In a more recent discussion of the Colchester text, Michael Hicks has suggested that what the diarists witnessed was the passage through the Commons of a bill intended to *create* a court of requests, which had, however, been dropped by the end of Parliament,⁷ while Paul Cavill has argued that what the Colchester burgesses recorded was a protest by the parliamentary Commons against the formal creation of such a court.⁸

The roots of the problem lie in the obscurity of the early history of the court of requests before 1493, from which date registers normally associated with its activity survive.⁹ It is generally accepted that the court with its specific responsibility for hearing the petitions of those seeking justice directly from the king, especially those too poor to have access to the normal remedies of the common law, had its origins in similar functions of the king's council.¹⁰ Scholars have attempted to trace these back as far as the reign of Edward III,¹¹ but a formal court of requests did not become permanently resident in the White Hall of the Palace of Westminster until the second decade of Henry VIII's reign.¹² Successive twentieth-century historians of the Tudor period have been at pains to distinguish between the activities of the 'council attendant', as documented in the first half of the 1490s and earlier, and 'the king's ... Council in his Court of Requests', given a permanent home at Westminster by Cardinal Wolsey in 1519.¹³ The problems raised by contemporary terminology have been highlighted by Margaret Condon who has drawn a clear distinction between the council itinerant, which even in the early years of Henry VII's reign was occasionally known as 'the council or court of the request', and the later 'court of requests', which she saw as 'largely the product of Wolsey's reforms'.¹⁴

⁶ *Parliamentary Texts*, p. 180.

⁷ Michael Hicks, 'King in Lords and Commons: three insights into late-fifteenth-century parliaments 1461-85', in Keith Dockray and Peter Fleming, eds., *People, Places and Perspectives*, Stroud 2005, p. 147.

⁸ Paul Cavill, 'Henry VII and Parliament', unpubl. Oxford Univ. D.Phil. thesis, 2005, pp. 155-6; *idem*, 'Debate and dissent in Henry VII's parliaments', *Parliamentary History*, vol. 25 (2006), p. 172.

⁹ I.S. Leadam, ed., *Select Cases in the Court of Requests, A.D. 1497-1569*, Selden Society, vol. 12 (1898), p. x.

¹⁰ Baker, *Laws of England*, p. 203.

¹¹ George Spence, *The Equitable Jurisdiction of the Court of Chancery*, 2 vols., London 1846-49, vol. 1, p. 337.

¹² Baker, *Laws of England*, p. 204.

¹³ G.R. Elton, ed., *The Tudor Constitution*, 2nd edn., Cambridge 1982, pp. 187-90; J.A. Guy, 'The privy council: revolution or evolution', in Christopher Coleman and David Starkey, eds., *Revolution Reassessed: Revisions in the History of Tudor Government and Administration*, Oxford 1986, pp. 66-67, 82-84.

¹⁴ M.M. Condon, 'An anachronism with intent? Henry VII's council ordinance of 1491/2', in R.A. Griffiths and James Sherborne, eds., *Kings and Nobles in the Later Middle Ages*, Gloucester 1986,

There is, however, some evidence of formal administrative provision for the council's work in hearing the petitions of poor men by Richard III, who in December 1483 appointed John Harrington as '*clericus consilii nostri requisicionum ac supplicacionum*', in addition to the clerk of his council.¹⁵ What was intended, is unclear. The Latin of the appointment is ambiguous and could be rendered either as '*clerk of requests and supplications* of the council' or '*clerk of the council of requests and supplications*'. We have no way of telling whether Harrington was to be an additional servant of the council with specific responsibility for requests, or whether he was to serve a separate council to which such responsibility had been delegated. This ambiguity was not lost on A.F. Pollard, who was prepared to give some credit to Edward IV 'and the general superiority of Yorkist to Lancastrian administration' for the evolution of a formal process supported by a clerk, if not even a formal institution, to receive and expedite the petitions and requests 'of poor persons' to the king, but who also noted that 'the extremely hostile tone of the bill recorded in the Colchester diary implies special animosity and responsibility to Richard III'.¹⁶ Others have placed even greater emphasis on Richard's particular commitment to provide poor persons, who could not normally afford to go to law, with 'a form of redress which later developed into the Tudor Court of Requests'.¹⁷ Anne Sutton has maintained that Richard 'actively promoted the court that was to become the Court of Requests',¹⁸ and to A.J. Pollard the terms of Harrington's appointment represented 'the first step towards the establishment of a court of poor requests',¹⁹ while Sir John Baker has interpreted the same terms of appointment as an indication that by 1483 the expedition of the requests and petitions of poor persons was already regarded as a distinct feature of conciliar activity.²⁰

II

The concept that the suits of poor individuals should be given priority before the council was not peculiar to the Yorkist kings, nor had they invented it.²¹ Even the process of formalising the way in which the council dealt with such

pp. 236-37.

¹⁵ CPR 1476-85, pp. 413, 538; A.F. Pollard, 'Council, star chamber, and privy council under the Tudors', *English Historical Review*, vol. 37 (1922), p. 344.

¹⁶ Pollard, 'Court of requests', p. 303.

¹⁷ Charles Ross, *Richard III*, Berkeley 1981, p. 174.

¹⁸ A.F. Sutton, "'A curious searcher for our weal public": Richard III, piety, chivalry and the concept of the good prince', in P.W. Hammond, ed., *Richard III: Loyalty, Lordship and Law*, London 1986, p. 64.

¹⁹ A.J. Pollard, *Richard III and the Princes in the Tower*, Stroud 1993, p. 154.

²⁰ Baker, *Laws of England*, p. 203.

²¹ *Select Cases in the Court of Requests*, pp. ix-x.

suits was well under way in Henry VI's reign. Thus, in 1429-30 an ordinance for the functioning of the king's council had laid down that

the clerk of the counsell shal be sworn, that every day that the counsell sitteth on any billes betwix partie and partie, that he shal, as ferre as he can, loke which is the poverest sutours bille, that furst to be rad and answerd; and the kynge's sergeantz to be sworn truly and pleyntly, to yeve þe povere man, þat for swiche is accept to þe counsell, assistance and true counsell in his matier, so to be sued, withouten any good takyng of hym, on peyne of dischargyng of þeir offices²²

and the terms of this ordinance were copied into a similar document issued by Henry VII on the eve of his French expedition of 1492.²³ Richard III's concern for the administration of justice has been much commented on,²⁴ and it is in keeping with his repeated reaffirmation of his commitment thereto that he should have gone a step further in entrusting the petitions of poor persons to a separate clerk. The personal nature of Richard's concern to provide redress for the grievances of the poor is demonstrated not least by his choice of a clerk 'of requests'.

The terms of John Harrington's formal appointment on 27 December 1483 suggests that he had already been carrying out at least part of the duties of the office for some time, for he was also granted an annuity of £20 'for his good service before the lords and others of the council and elsewhere and especially in the custody, registration and expedition of bills, requests and supplications of poor persons'.²⁵ It is uncertain in what capacity he had done so, and from what date. It is not impossible that he held a junior position in the Westminster administration, for instance as one of the deputies or under-clerks to the clerk of the council, but no evidence of his tenure of such a post has been found. Arguably, the tenure of such a position would have demanded regular residence at Westminster, and seems incompatible with what is known

²² *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, 6 vols., London 1783, vol. 4, p. 344.

²³ Condon, 'Anachronism', pp. 228-53.

²⁴ E.g. Ross, *Richard III*, pp. 174-75; Rosemary Horrox, 'The government of Richard III', in John Gillingham, ed., *Richard III: A Medieval Kingship*, London 1993, p. 69; Pollard, *Richard III and the Princes*, pp. 154-57; Jonathan Hughes, *The Religious Life of Richard III*, Stroud 1997, p. 42.

²⁵ CPR 1476-85, p. 413. Details of Harrington's career are assembled in an appendix to Robert Davies, ed., *Extracts from the Municipal Records of the City of York during the Reign of Edward IV, Edward V. and Richard III*, London 1843, pp. 289-304. Colonel Wedgwood apparently confuses the common clerk of York with another man from a family resident at Grantham in Lincolnshire well into the 16th century. Conceivably, this man, too, was a civil lawyer admitted to the position of notary public in 1468: J.C. Wedgwood, *The History of Parliament: Biographies of the Members of the Commons House 1439-1509*, London 1936, p. 425; *Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers relating to Great Britain and Ireland: Papal Letters*, 20 vols, London and Dublin 1893-2005, vol. 12, p. 697.

for certain of Harrington's service to both the northern gentry and the chapter of York minster.

Born at Eastington near Howden, John Harrington was descended from an impoverished cadet branch of the Harringtons of Badsworth, a family with close ties of service to the house of York.²⁶ Despite the precarious economic position of John Harrington's father, 'a poore gentilman borne' who was held by his neighbours to be merely of yeoman status, his influential kinsman Sir Robert Harrington, a member of the duke of Gloucester's council from the 1470s, had no hesitation in acknowledging their kinship.²⁷ Through his mother, 'a poore gentilwoman', John Harrington was connected with another Yorkshire gentry family with ties of service to Richard of Gloucester, the Askes of Aughton.²⁸ The young John Harrington attended Cambridge university, and by 1481 held the degree of bachelor of civil law.²⁹ Rather than seeking a career in the ranks of the clergy, he married, and in 1476 gained admission to the office of a notary public.³⁰ Before long he found employment not only in the service of the see of York, as registrar of the consistory court and legal agent of William Poteman, the influential vicar-general of the archdiocese, but also of important members of the regional gentry, such as Sir John Conyers of Hornby, whom he served as his 'clerc and secretarie in the rowme of a gentilman'.³¹

It is uncertain how John Harrington first came to the duke of Gloucester's attention, but it is possible that family ties played a role. At least two of his kinsmen (Sir Robert Harrington and his brother Sir James) were retained by Richard in the 1470s and after his accession became knights of the body, while Sir James's son John was appointed an esquire of King Richard's household. Similarly, Harrington's erstwhile employer, Sir John Conyers, was one of

²⁶ On the Harrington family see Michael Jones, 'Richard III and the Stanleys', in Rosemary Horrox, ed., *Richard III and the North*, Hull 1986, pp. 37-41; Keith Dockray, 'The political legacy of Richard III in northern England', in Griffiths and Sherborne, eds, *Kings and Nobles*, pp. 205-27; Rosemary Horrox, *Richard III*, Cambridge 1989, pp. 41, 46-7, 58, 69-70, 183, 192, 267, 321-3; W.E. Hampton, 'Opposition to Henry Tudor after Bosworth', in James Petre, ed., *Richard III: Crown and People*, Gloucester 1985, pp. 173-5; Michael Hicks, 'Dynastic change and northern society: the fourth earl of Northumberland, 1470-89', *Northern History*, vol. 14 (1978), pp. 78-107, repr. in Michael Hicks, *Richard III and his Rivals*, London 1991, pp. 384, 394.

²⁷ Rosemary Horrox has identified John Harrington's father with William Harrington of Newbiggin, Cumberland: Rosemary Horrox, 'Richard III and the East Riding' in Horrox, ed., *Richard III and the North*, p. 88.

²⁸ L.C. Attreed, ed., *The York House Books 1461-1490*, 2 vols., Stroud 1991, vol. 2, pp. 511, 520.

²⁹ *York House Books*, vol. 2, p. 505.

³⁰ C.R. Cheney, *Notaries Public in England in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, Oxford 1972, p. 81; J.S. Purvis, *Notarial Signs from the York Archbishopial Records*, London [1957], p. xii.

³¹ *York House Books*, vol. 1, p. 389; vol. 2, p. 521.

Richard's longstanding retainers.³² Equally, however, Richard had close ties with the cathedral chapter of York from an early date, and it is possible that it was by this route that he first came across Harrington. Certainly, it is as part of a group of mostly Cambridge-educated members of the York cathedral clergy involved in Gloucester's collegiate foundation at Middleham that Harrington is first encountered in the duke's circle in 1478.³³ As his later appointment as clerk to the council indicates, Harrington soon became one of Richard's most indispensable and trusted clerical servants, but if his appointment was characteristic of the king's heavy reliance on northerners in his administration, it is equally indicative of just how far Richard was prepared to be a king 'of the north'.³⁴ As successive students of the evolution of conciliar jurisdiction have argued, much of the judicial activity of the king's council took place away from Westminster, when king and council were in progress around the realm. This was especially true of the tasks entrusted to Harrington, the provision of justice to the poor, for whom the need for a journey to Westminster might present an insurmountable obstacle. If Richard chose as his clerk of requests a man with heavy commitments in Yorkshire and the city of York, it is likely that he expected at least a substantial part of Harrington's official business to be carried out in the north. Indeed, Richard himself strengthened Harrington's ties in the locality by nominating him as common clerk of the city of York, which had already (on 19 May 1484) granted him an annuity of 20*s*. Significantly, the citizens' request for a nomination had specified that the candidate should be resident within their walls. Precisely this, however, proved problematic, for Harrington's duties frequently required his presence at Westminster, and time and time again Richard had to issue letters to the citizens excusing the continued absence of their common clerk.³⁵ About the same time, Harrington was also given an important role in the administration of Richard's proposed foundation of a college of chantry priests at York by being entrusted with the custody of its records.³⁶ If these combined duties kept Harrington extremely busy, they also provided him with a valuable income, not

³² Horrox, *Richard III*, pp. 49, 267.

³³ R.B. Dobson, 'Richard III and the church of York', in Griffiths and Sherborne, eds., *Kings and Nobles*, pp. 140-41.

³⁴ Richard III's 'northernness' has been extensively explored. See e.g. the essays collected in Horrox, ed., *Richard III and the North* and A.J. Pollard, ed., *The North of England in the Age of Richard III*, Stroud 1996.

³⁵ *York House Books*, vol. 1, pp. 307, 346-7, 352. Barry Dobson has gone so far as to suggest that Harrington was '[p]ressed ... upon a somewhat reluctant York city council as their new common clerk' by Richard III: Dobson, 'Richard III and the church of York', p. 140. Certainly, the citizens took the precaution of inviting the king to nominate a suitable candidate to the clerkship, although they added the condition that the nominee be resident in the city: *Municipal Records*, p. 189.

³⁶ R. Horrox and P.W. Hammond, eds, *British Library Harleian Manuscript 433*, 4 vols, Upminster and London 1979-83, vol. 1, p. 247; Dobson, 'Church of York', pp. 140, 145.

least through the £20 fee attached to the office of clerk of requests.³⁷

In view of his undeniable proximity to King Richard it is somewhat surprising that Harrington appears to have faced no reprisals after Bosworth. He evidently lost his clerkship and royal annuity, but on 30 November 1485 Henry VII himself wrote to the citizens of York to confirm his acceptability as their common clerk, and over subsequent months he played an important part in reconciling the city with the new monarch. At least in part, Harrington may have owed this smooth transition to Archbishop Rotherham whom he continued to serve as registrar.³⁸ When trouble arose in 1486, it came from the ranks of the citizens of York. At some stage in the summer of that year (perhaps in an atmosphere of suspicion surrounding Henry VII's negotiations for a truce with James III of Scotland), one Thomas Wharfe had spread the rumour that Harrington was of Scottish blood. Before long, kinsmen and supporters rallied to his support, producing letters testifying to his lineage and English blood.³⁹ The matter was settled by arbitration early in the following year, and Harrington remained common clerk of York for another four years, resigning the office in December 1490.⁴⁰ He lived on for a few years thereafter and is last mentioned in 1497-98 as tenant of lands and counsel in a lawsuit⁴¹ but not heard of subsequently.⁴²

III

What, then, of the court of requests? It is now generally accepted that an act of the 1487 Parliament, which was at one time believed to have created another new conciliar court, that of Star Chamber,⁴³ did in fact no such thing, it simply established a high-powered conciliar committee intended to deal specifically with cases of unlawful maintenance and livery, and that it was not least the later addition of the heading '*Pro camera stellata*' to the act's enrolment on the parliament roll that has confused modern scholars.⁴⁴ If Henry VII apparently

³⁷ *Harleian Manuscript 433*, vol. 1, pp. 106, 188.

³⁸ *York House Books*, vol. 1, pp. 393-94; vol. 2, pp. 474, 491, 507, 509, 664. It is significant in this context that Henry VII's letters of commendation to the citizens of York specifically referred to Harrington as the archbishop's 'registre': *York House Books*, vol. 1, pp. 388-89.

³⁹ *York House Books*, vol. 2, pp. 510-11, 514-15, 519-21, 523-24.

⁴⁰ Maud Sellers, ed., *York Memorandum Book*, 2 vols., Surtees Soc. vols. 120, 125, 1912-15, vol. 2, p. 294.

⁴¹ N.J. Tringham, ed., *Charters of the Vicars Choral of York Minster*, 2 vols., Yorkshire Archaeological Soc. Record Ser. 1993-2002, vol. 2, no. 51; A. Raine and D. Sutton, eds., *York Civic Records*, 9 vols., York Archaeological Soc. Record Ser. 1939-78, vol. 2, p. 136.

⁴² The clerk's identification with the ecclesiastical lawyer Dr. John Harrington later practising in the court of arches is at least problematic: PRO, C1/205/42; A.B. Emden, ed., *A Biographical Register of the University of Cambridge to 1500*, Cambridge 1963, pp. 291, 677.

⁴³ C.G. Bayne and W.H. Dunham, eds., *Select Cases in the Council of Henry VII*, London, Selden Soc., 1958, pp. xlix-liv; *Select Cases in the Court of Requests*, p. xi.

⁴⁴ J.R. Lander, *Government and Community: England, 1450-1509*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1980, p. 334; Nicholas Pronay, 'The chancellor, the chancery, and the council at the end of the fifteenth century', in H. Hearder and H.R. Loyn, eds., *British Government and Administration*, Cardiff 1974, p. 99; Rosemary Horrox, '1487 November', in *Parliament Rolls of Medieval England*, vol. 15, p. 336;

never sought parliamentary sanction for the establishment of his powerful criminal court in the Star Chamber, there seems little reason to suppose that he attempted to do so in 1485 to set up a 'court of requests'. There was, indeed, no reason for the king to seek the approval of parliament. It is now generally accepted that the king's council exercised an equitable jurisdiction in the sovereign's name from an early date, and Henry VII's council was no different.⁴⁵ With this in mind, the question of the parliamentary bill of 1485 becomes largely semantic, generated by the problems of terminology highlighted by Pollard and Condon, and only partly archival, that is to say, complicated by the absence of full and coherent records of the king's council.⁴⁶ Thus, Pronay and Taylor's objection was essentially a semantic one. They did not doubt that there was a committee of the king's council that dealt with 'requests' in Richard III's reign, but denied that it was already known to contemporaries as a court. The argument is circular, for in its use of the definite article the Colchester diary provides evidence that there was a body that contemporaries perceived as 'the court of requests'. Arguably, when the court came into renewed being from 1493, it was mostly referred to as the 'council of requests', but by 1503 was also described as the 'court of requestes'.⁴⁷

Nor does the absence of an enrolment of the Colchester burgesses' bill on the parliament roll present insurmountable problems. A number of explanations are possible. Although it is generally assumed that 'public' acts of parliament were automatically enrolled on the parliament roll, the same is not true of every successful private petition (or bill). It was a private suitor's responsibility to ensure by paying suitable handouts to the clerk and under-clerk of parliament that a private act found its way on to the roll.⁴⁸ Yet, there is

Baker, *Laws of England*, p. 70. On the evolution of the court of star chamber, see also John Guy, 'Wolsey's star chamber: a study in archival reconstruction', *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, vol. 5 (1974-77), pp. 169-80; *idem*, 'The early Tudor star chamber', in Dafydd Jenkins, ed., *Legal History Studies 1972: Papers Presented to the Legal History Conference, Aberystwyth, 18-21 July 1972*, Cardiff 1975, pp. 122-28; and in more detail, *idem*, *The Cardinal's Court: The Impact of Thomas Wolsey in Star Chamber*, Hassocks 1977.

⁴⁵ Pollard, 'Council, star chamber and privy council', pp. 341-42.

⁴⁶ The problems of mapping the evolution of conciliar jurisdiction in England have been discussed by a number of authors, some examples are Pronay, 'Chancellor, chancery, and council', pp. 87-103; Condon, 'Anachronism', pp. 228-53.

⁴⁷ For the various descriptions see Condon, 'Anachronism', pp. 236, 252, but note A.F. Pollard's warnings about the difficulties of distinguishing 'council' and 'counsel', *concilium* and *consilium*: Pollard, 'Court of requests', pp. 301-2.

⁴⁸ See, e.g., the payments made by the dean and canons of Windsor in 1483 for the enrolment of their act of incorporation (Hannes Kleineke, 'Lobbying and access: the canons of Windsor and the matter of the poor knights in the parliament of 1485', *Parliamentary History*, vol. 26 (2006), p. 152), or those of the London pewterers in 1504 (Cavill, 'Henry VII and Parliament', p. 122). Cavill's evidence casts some doubt on the automatic enrolment of public acts.

no suggestion that the bill for the court of requests was successful. The Colchester burgesses merely noted its passage through the Commons ('the same day (there) passed a byll'), by contrast with other measures which evidently had already been agreed by the Lords, such as the restitution of the earls of Oxford and Stafford, which passed 'as aucte'.⁴⁹ Was the bill for the court of requests, the last measure of the session recorded in the Colchester diary, lost on account of the prorogation, was it thrown out by the Lords, or was it vetoed by Henry VII?⁵⁰

This leaves us with Harrington's appointment, the terms of which, as we have seen, seem to indicate that he had for some time taken care of the petitions and requests of poor individuals which were now to be his official responsibility. But had he done so as a royal clerk, or in another capacity? Charles Ross was in no doubt that 'Edward [IV]'s reign saw no serious effort to extend conciliar jurisdiction at the expense of the common-law agencies'.⁵¹ So did Harrington assume special responsibility for 'requests' during the brief period of conciliar government between Edward IV's death and the duke of Gloucester's coup of June 1483? It is possible, but the scant records of Edward V's reign provided no evidence either for or against such a hypothesis. There is another possibility. Taking into account Harrington's family background, his intimate association by ties of blood and service with some prominent Ricardian loyalists, and his roots in the north where Richard had resided and maintained his power base for more than a decade before 1483, it seems not impossible that the later clerk of requests had been in Duke Richard's service before he assumed the throne. Like other great lords, Richard of Gloucester maintained a council including a staff of legal experts, which might from time to time exercise an equitable jurisdiction.⁵² Carole Rawcliffe has pointed to the duchy of Lancaster's court of duchy chamber as a prime example of such a court, but in view of Richard's position as effective lord of the north in the 1470s there can be little doubt that his council exercised similar functions. Rawcliffe is undoubtedly right in suggesting that the establishment of a court of poor men's requests represented 'an attempt not only to bring quick and relatively cheap justice within the reach of the common man, but also to emulate the facilities which baronial councils had to

⁴⁹ *Parliamentary Texts*, p. 188.

⁵⁰ A detailed discussion of 15th-century parliamentary procedure lies beyond the scope of this paper. For some suggestions see above all A.R. Myers, 'Some observations on the procedure of the Commons in dealing with bills in the Lancastrian period', *University of Toronto Law Journal*, vol. 3 (1939), repr. in A.R. Myers, *Crown, Household and Parliament in Fifteenth Century England*, ed. C.H. Clough, London 1985, pp. 52-3; and also Kleineke, 'Lobbying and access', pp. 156-57.

⁵¹ C.D. Ross, *Edward IV*, London 1974, p. 403.

⁵² Carole Rawcliffe, 'Baronial councils in the later middle ages', in Charles Ross, ed., *Patronage, Pedigree and Power in the Later Middle Ages*, Gloucester 1979, pp. 91-92.

offer in this respect'.⁵³

When Richard assumed the throne it was natural that he should seek to extend the means of 'good governance' that had served him well as duke of Gloucester to the government of the whole of England, and it was equally natural that he should draw upon trusted and experienced servants to make this transition. The evidence suggests that the result had certain features in common with the later court of requests. Like the later personnel of the court of requests, Richard's clerk of requests was a civil lawyer,⁵⁴ and the volume of business that he had to deal with is indicated by his lengthy absences from his home at York to the detriment of his other offices. His permanent return to the north after Bosworth suggests that he lost his post at Westminster, but does not necessarily prove that the court he had served had ceased to function. Henry VII's 'council in attendance' continued to hear petitions and requests, and its recorded deliberations from 1493 blend seamlessly into the proceedings of the later 'court of requests'. Whether it was the compiler of the Colchester diary or the drafter of the bill he recorded who determined the language used, somebody in 1485 was in no doubt that there was a 'court of requests'.

First published in *The Ricardian* Vol. 17 2007.

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⁵³ Rawcliffe, 'Baronial councils', p. 105.

⁵⁴ *Parliamentary Texts*, p. 181.

