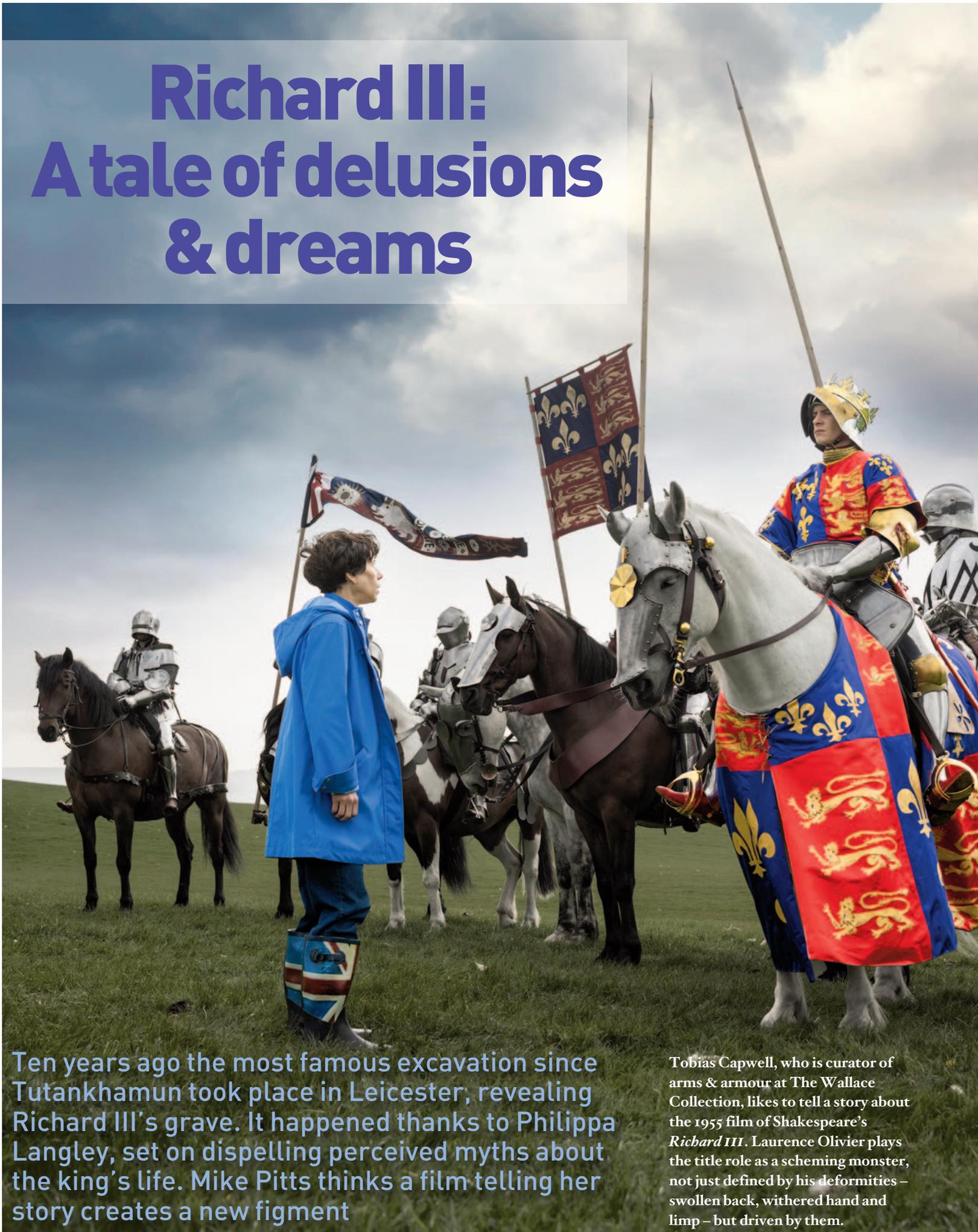


# Richard III: A tale of delusions & dreams



Ten years ago the most famous excavation since Tutankhamun took place in Leicester, revealing Richard III's grave. It happened thanks to Philippa Langley, set on dispelling perceived myths about the king's life. Mike Pitts thinks a film telling her story creates a new figment

Tobias Capwell, who is curator of arms & armour at The Wallace Collection, likes to tell a story about the 1955 film of Shakespeare's *Richard III*. Laurence Olivier plays the title role as a scheming monster, not just defined by his deformities – swollen back, withered hand and limp – but driven by them.



*Philippa Langley (played by Sally Hawkins) bids Richard III (Harry Lloyd) goodbye as he leaves for the Battle of Bosworth in 1485*



Shakespeare gave Richard “legs of an unequal size”, which with all the rest – including being born with teeth – he found in a history by Thomas More published about 30 years after the king’s death. Counter arguments, that Richard was a good man and not misshapen, were first put forward in the 17th century and



gained strength with the foundation in 1924 of the Richard III Society, which seeks “to secure a more balanced assessment of the king”, believing that much of the traditional narrative is “neither supported by sufficient evidence nor reasonably tenable”. In one respect this was confirmed by a striking result of the excavation in 2012 that uncovered Richard’s grave: his back was not humped but curved sideways, and his arms and legs were unremarkable. The king did not limp.

But Olivier did. During filming in Spain, says Capwell, a misfired crossbow bolt penetrated his leg; his armour was made of painted rubber. The actor portrayed an iconic limp – once thought historical, now shown to be mythical – with a real one. Balanced assessment is not always as simple as it might seem.

*The Lost King*, released in the UK on the day this magazine is published, is a film about righting wrongs, portraying real people and events. It follows Philippa Langley’s determination to reveal Richard III’s good character to the world, channelling the Richard III Society mission into finding the king’s grave. Her journey is extraordinary and

*Above: From The Lost King, Philippa Langley in Edinburgh with John Ashdown-Hill’s book, which predicted that one day Richard III’s grave might be found in a Leicester carpark*

inspirational, and the film shows it as a universal struggle against odds. She is seen to suffer from chronic fatigue syndrome or ME, which early on becomes an excuse for her boss to sideline her. ME, she protests, is all anyone can see. “There’s more to me than that.”

Langley has often spoken to her Ricardian supporters of her difficulties with authority, complaining that she was given insufficient credit by archaeologists and the University of Leicester for the success of her project. The film makes this explicit and very public. As Mariella Frostrup, an arts broadcaster and journalist, said at the press screening I attended, there are now new rogues to fill the vacancy left by Richard III’s reinvention: “The baddies are the academics, the archaeologists.” How so? And is she right?

### Based on a true story

Written by Steve Coogan and Jeff Pope and directed by Stephen Frears, *The Lost King* is billed as a comedy drama. But it does not ask us to laugh at Langley (played by Sally Hawkins) or her quest,



*Above: Stone memorial erected in Leicester in 1856, marking legend that Richard III's body had been exhumed and thrown into the River Soar; the green plate, placed by the Richard III Society in 2005, says the legend is "now generally discredited"*

which she pursues with Richard III (Harry Lloyd) in spiritual attendance in full medieval dress. Like *The Dig*, released last year and making *The Lost King* the second movie to showcase a real archaeological excavation in Britain (see feature Mar/Apr 2021/177), it is "based on a true story".

Inspired by a performance of Shakespeare's play, Langley reads up on history. She meets a Richard III Society group in an Edinburgh pub and hears from amateur historians, who inform her that Richard's image as a bad king was created only after his death. Angered by the injustice, she decides to find Richard's lost grave. But if she succeeds, how will she know it's his? She meets John Ashdown-Hill (James Fleet), who says he has identified a living relative of the king whose DNA would prove it. She heads south.

In Leicester she finds a white R painted on the tarmac of the Social Services carpark, and determines to dig. But she struggles to find support for her project. Richard Buckley (Mark Addy), the university's lead excavating archaeologist, repeatedly fails to answer her calls, until eventually she gains a meeting when he (wrongly) thinks she is a friend of the city mayor. Buckley and fellow archaeologist Mathew Morris (Alasdair Hankinson) dismiss her. But she finds an ally in Sarah Levitt (Amanda Abbington), arts head at the city council, who battles Richard Taylor (Lee Ingleby), representing Leicester University and laughing at her as "an amateur". Eventually she wins through



*Above: Philippa Langley in Trench 3, September 1 2012, at what was thought to be a paved area in Robert Herrick's garden, said in the 17th century to feature an inscription marking Richard III's grave*

thanks to Buckley: the university, in financial trouble, lays him off and he sees a way to save the archaeology unit by taking Langley's money. The dig is on. In the pivotal scene when Jo Appleby (Phoebe Pryce) reveals the king's curved spine, there is concern that Langley will be shocked by what is described as a hunchback (as indeed, at that moment, it was). "He's perfect," she whispers.

She parts from the king at a dramatic meeting with him and his henchmen in

*Below: Trench 1 looking south before opening, August 24 2012; parallel lines (marked black either end) show tarmac cut with a saw ahead of removal, laid out by Mathew Morris around a parking line. A faint reserved R is circled red, and trench extension for excavation of Richard III's grave blue: if Trench 1 had been 1m to the left, the grave would have been missed*

full horseback armour, and he is killed at Bosworth (off screen, this is otherwise not a lavish production). The film concludes with the reburial – with the real Philippa Langley seated in the congregation – after which the university holds a gala dinner. Buckley is cheered. So is Langley, but it turns out she's not been invited to the dinner, and is talking to school children.

Though much of the real action took place in Leicestershire, filming was largely in and around Edinburgh, where Langley lives, at a time when Leicester was exceptionally affected by covid-19 lockdowns. The Pentland Hills stand in for Bosworth field, and excavation occurs in a remarkably appropriate-looking (aided by painted backgrounds) yard at the National Mining Museum's Lady Victoria Colliery at Newtongrange. In *The Dig*, the Sutton Hoo mound was recreated over a model of the ship, and then excavated on screen. *The Lost King* mounted a real excavation – or technically, an evaluation (archaeologists referred to the actual dig as "trial trenching") – with Rob Engl leading a team from AOC Archaeology, who found a few early 20th-century industrial remains. Actors were then brought in – far too many, Engl told me! – for the film sequences.

On screen, the team cheer when a mechanical digger rips out the first





*Above: Removing tarmac at north end of Trench 1, August 25; from left, Mathew Morris (site director), Leon Hunt (site supervisor), Richard Buckley (director University of Leicester Archaeological Services/ULAS) and Philippa Langley (Looking for Richard project)*

*Left: Mathew Morris stands in extension to Trench 1 ahead of excavation of Skeleton 1 by Turi King (left) and Jo Appleby, September 4*

chunk of tarmac, marked with the R. This was a moment where I thought the film bettered reality: the actual R, which might have been an iconic exhibit in Leicester's King Richard III Visitor Centre, disappeared unseen into the spoilheap. But beyond the trenches, the film's treatment of archaeology and the University of Leicester is appalling. Archaeologists are indeed the baddies, something that could be shown only by misrepresenting events.

*Below: The king's remains – Skeleton 1 – in the grave, September 5; note feet removed by recent building, wrists possibly tied at waist, spine curved from scoliosis, and head propped higher than body because the grave was too short (scale 1m)*





## At the trench side

The film, as it makes clear, is Philippa Langley's narrative. It's entirely true, she told me: "It's my story." As such it is consistent with her co-authored book, *Finding Richard III: The Official Account* (2014), which details her research, Ashdown-Hill's discovery of a DNA line, the reburial and various pre-excavation documents, but gives only three pages to the excavation itself and a few sentences to the science. *The Lost King* jumps from discovery, to press conference to reburial, bypassing over two years of historical, archaeological and scientific research by the university, significant works to the cathedral, and a judicial review – for which the university had to pay its share of £245,000 costs. As writer Annette Carson said at the time, for Langley and fellow Ricardians the project "was about Richard III: it wasn't about digging something up".

Nothing wrong with that: it's Langley's story, and she was less involved with the dig or subsequent research and works. However, the way in which the roles of archaeologists and the university have been reimagined raises questions, not for the first time, about how living people are represented in biopic cinema. Very little of the

account of Langley's encounters with authority is "true".

She may have struggled to find the right archaeologists, but once she had done so they were helpful. Buckley and his colleagues had no interest in searching for a king's grave; but while they openly said they thought the quest would almost certainly fail (without such odds, there would have been no film), they were happy to work with her, having found their own cause in the opportunity to locate and define Greyfriars church – necessary prerequisites to identifying the grave.

The film portrays the university, and Richard Taylor in particular, as patronising and dismissive, coming on board only when they could see

*Above: Leicester University mounted a larger excavation in 2013 to learn more about the friary buildings and burials at the east end of the church, ahead of visitor centre construction (opposite)*

*Below: Philippa Langley addresses the world's media at a university press conference in February 2013 at which the proven identity of Richard III's remains was announced*



financial or personal career advantages; Langley, aided by the Richard III Society, puts up all the funds. This is wrong. The society paid for a desk-based assessment and a ground-penetrating radar survey (against Buckley's advice – in the event its most significant effect was to scare off a sponsor), and for about half of the initial dig. Most of the other half was paid for by the university, which underwrote the whole project and went on to fund research that proved the identity of the king's remains, as well as contributing to reburial costs, with sums totalling millions of pounds. In all Langley and the Richard III Society supplied around £20,000.

Richard Taylor, then the university's director of corporate affairs, was, as the film implies and in common with universities across the country, facing financial challenges. However, he saw Langley's project not as a joke or a funding lifeline but as an opportunity to showcase Leicester's research expertise, serving the project to find the king at the university's expense. He backed Langley and he was, as he made clear to me at the time, personally keen on it all. He notes that the film, by omitting the university's research, appears to create a

sexist opposition between Philippa Langley and male archaeologists and administrators; of Jo Appleby (human remains), Lin Foxhall (head of archaeology & history), Sarah Hainsworth (pioneering micro-CT scanning), Turi King (ancient DNA) and Deirdre O'Sullivan (friaries), only Appleby makes the cut, in a brief appearance standing in the trench. Taylor is taking legal advice.

Then there is the dig. In the film we see Langley arguing with Buckley about the excavation of what were later recognised as the king's remains. First, she orders him to start digging at the top of Trench 1, against his wishes. That did not happen. When Skeleton 1 is revealed, she orders him to excavate it, against his wishes; eventually he concedes, while saying that he knows it's not Richard, whose grave could only lie further to the west. That did not happen.

What did happen is that by almost unthinkable good luck, the king's grave was revealed about 5m from the R soon after the first trench was opened (six hours and 34 minutes, to be precise – the first sight of bone was even earlier). At that stage, however, there was nothing to say whether this was in or outside the church. The plan was to find and map the church and hopefully locate the choir, where Richard had probably been buried, before selecting



up to six male graves to excavate, which was as many as the budget allowed for. Skeleton 1 was most likely to be one of hundreds of friars and other individuals associated with the friary.

However, continuing luck allowed the archaeologists to locate friary buildings and then the church, and at that point, with Skeleton 1 determined to lie inside the west end of the chancel, the decision was made to excavate. On the second day, as Appleby found a curved spine and fatal skull wounds, they realised the grave was in the choir.

**Above: Richard Taylor and Philippa Langley in 2012, with a white rose at Trench 1**

**Below: The King Richard III Visitor Centre soon after opening in 2014; it features the in situ, and now empty, royal grave**

## Misunderstandings

Getting this right matters personally to those involved; Taylor feels the film is “reckless... and quite hurtful”, and a pre-release statement addressed to the Richard III Society from Pathé, the film's distributor, suggested they expected some comeback from society members, offering a gentle warning – “Archaeology and Shakespeare are not synonymous with an entertaining night at the movies for most people!”. But there is a bigger reason. Though it is individuals who are falsely portrayed (even as actors seem to have been chosen partly on account of physical resemblances), the film implies a wider target. Langley represents all of us oppressed by bureaucracy, prejudice and corporate thinking – *The Lost King* does a good job of this. The baddies are not just Leicester's academics and archaeologists, “a bunch of guys taking credit for what [she] did” as Frostrup put it, but the nation's. Universities are shown as places where you are forbidden to challenge convention, and where devious academics scheme to shut down competition. In reality, the Richard III dig, a triumph of open-mindedness, dedication to an unlikely cause and cooperation across a wide range of university departments, was the opposite.

Langley will have her reasons for telling the story as she does, but I think



the problem stems from two misunderstandings, one about her role in the dig, the other of wider concern. The distinction between her project (to launch a search in Leicester) and the university's (to do the fieldwork) should have been made clearer during the excavation. The 2013 press event was almost entirely about the university's scientific results, but it would have been fair for Langley to have spoken at the start rather than the end. From there her resentment over perceived exclusion grew, not helped, perhaps, by a combative and often ill-informed public debate culminating in a judicial review over where the king's remains should be interred (though the university and cathedral had to pay costs, their plans for this to occur in Leicester were upheld).

At a key moment in the film, Langley – dismayed that her wish to excavate Skeleton 1 has been denied – is told by her ex-husband (Coogan) to stand up for herself: “You’re the client,” he says. “Don’t let them push you around.” She returns for her second confrontation with Buckley, and gets her way.

That did not happen. Ahead of the dig, Langley had commissioned a desk-based assessment (DBA) and a written scheme of investigation (WSI), to do background research and set out procedures should excavation proceed. These are standard practices, but it’s common for one archaeological company to prepare a DBA and another to get the contract to do the fieldwork (and sometimes for a third to do post-excavation studies). You could argue that at the dig Langley was a consultant, but it was the University of Leicester’s excavation and really she was a key team member. But she is not an archaeologist. Decisions were taken by Buckley and Morris. In any event the WSI, prepared by Buckley and Leon Hunt, specifically states that “Any articulated human remains encountered will initially be left in situ and will only be removed if thought likely to be those of Richard III.” Which is exactly how it went.

At first Langley seemed happy with this, watching the dig, wearing a university T-shirt as she showed visitors round, and working with Darlow Smithson, who she had brought in to make a film for Channel 4. But as events progressed, she felt she was losing control.

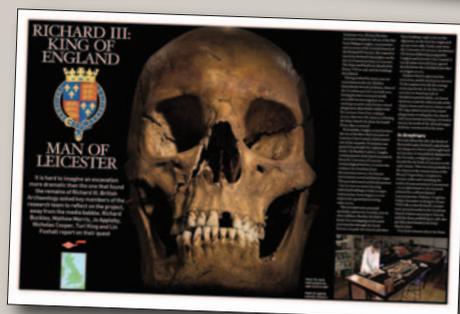
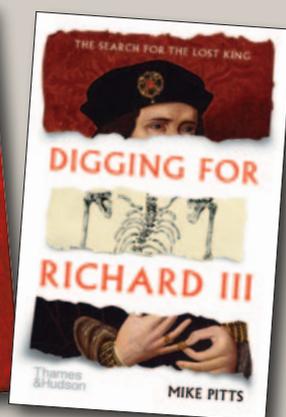
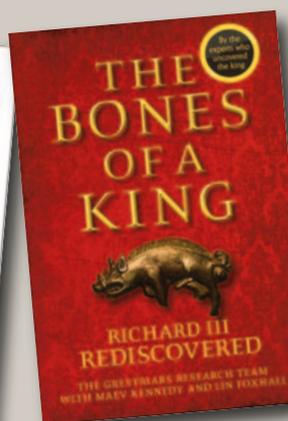
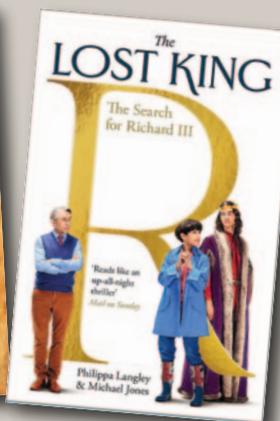
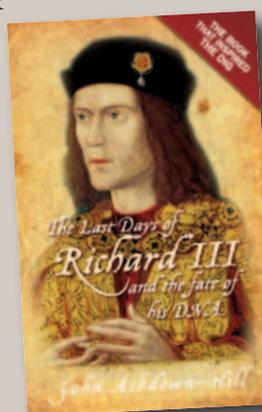
Darlow Smithson insisted on filming excavation of human remains, which she had initially objected to. She was no longer in charge of research, which had ballooned beyond her and Ashdown-Hill’s earlier efforts (though we see the late historian’s book in the film, he is not credited for predicting that Richard III’s grave was awaiting archaeologists under the tarmac of the Social Services carpark). Before the dig, so long as only she believed the grave was there – a key trope of the film – Richard was *her* king. Once found, the bones became the property of Leicester (whose mayor was as canny as the university’s corporate affairs director) and the world, curated in a secure lab which they left only for reburial two and a half years later. In her original proposal, Langley had anticipated but six weeks between that event and excavation.

The second, profound, misunderstanding is about how research works. Langley famously experienced a visionary moment in the Leicester carpark, unexpectedly and suddenly convinced she was standing on the king’s grave. Tellingly, she now says, she kept this from academics for fear of not being taken seriously. But intuition, guesswork and even dreams can be key tools of science. So too is luck – again tellingly, in a recent podcast for Dan Snow’s History Hit, Langley insisted luck played no part in her discovery of Richard’s grave. Patently it did. I can’t imagine an archaeological project in

which it would not.

Despite the film, professional archaeologists happily work with amateurs: all they care about is the quality of research and reporting. The idea of science as a closed network of self-interested people scared of being challenged, who try to block others from asking questions and have no curiosity, is a bizarre falsehood – why would anyone want to be a scientist? – but it underpins conspiracy theories that affect us all, from anti-vaxxing to climate change denial. Engagement with archaeologists and the University of Leicester before the film’s release could not only have avoided some of the worst cases of misinformation, but might have resulted in a more realistic portrayal of the university world, at a time when it most needs it.

The *Lost King* premiered in Toronto on September 9 and was released in the UK on October 7. See Richard III: How to Find a Lost King (*Dan Snow’s History Hit*) at <https://bit.ly/3D64Vd2>; The Last Days of Richard III & the Fate of his DNA: The Book that Inspired the Dig, by *J Ashdown-Hill* (2013); The Lost King: The Search for Richard III, by *P Langley & M Jones* (2014/2022); The Bones of a King: Richard III Rediscovered, by the *Greyfriars Research Team with M Kennedy & L Foxhall* (2015). *Mike Pitts* is editor of *British Archaeology* and author of *Digging for Richard III: The Search for the Lost King* (2014/2022) ■



Read about Richard III in *British Archaeology*: left, May/June 2013/130 (the dig) and right, Mar/Apr 2015/141 (reburial)



## Ready for battle

A small display at the Wallace Collection, London (open free until January 8 2023), features the museum's contributions to understanding Richard III through art and cinema. Tobias Capwell, curator of arms & armour, was a historical advisor on *The Lost King*, bringing expertise in late medieval armour and weaponry, in which the collection excels, and horse-riding in full gear. Paul Delaroche's *Edward V & the Duke of York in the Tower* (1831) is exhibited with the armour worn by Harry Lloyd as Richard III in *The Lost King*, made by Fred Ryall, Ninya Mikhaila and Capwell. Five historic pieces are highlighted in the permanent galleries, including this German equestrian armour (1480–90, right), photographed with (from left) Lloyd, film director Stephen Frears and Phillipa Langley.



Above: Langley with Paul Delaroche's *Edward V & the Duke of York in the Tower*. Below: Harry Lloyd with the king's armour made for the movie



## To see or not to see

*The Lost King* is entertaining and Phillipa Langley's quest, in a fine performance by Sally Hawkins, inspires (Simon Donaldson delivers a small comic masterpiece as an obsessed Richard III fan). If you're interested in archaeology you should see it, so rare is it for real excavations to be depicted in screen drama. If you are informed about archaeology, you will be annoyed: Langley has to persuade sceptical archaeologists to try map regression, for example, and professional staff are shown as unreconstructed has-beens. The film is based on a book Langley co-authored, she is an executive producer, and it tells her story. That could work, but it would have been richer with at least some of the many unexpected twists delivered by the archaeology and science, and the effect is strangely anodyne for a movie featuring one of Shakespeare's great, monstrous characters. Ironically, like the king's,

Langley's real story is more complex and interesting than shown. With that and the archaeology, there's another drama waiting to be made.

"Flawed but compelling." *Daily Telegraph* \*\*\*

"Closing credits reveal that Langley got the MBE for her work — but not that Buckley got the superior OBE... A misfire." *Guardian* \*\*

"Quietly subversive, truly droll, and could and should earn Sally Hawkins a Best Actress nomination at the Oscars/Baftas." *Evening Standard* \*\*\*\*

"It plods along, entirely free from intrigue or tension." *Times* \*\*

"If you want to know what really happened, you need to come and watch the film." Steve Coogan interviewed by *Hollywood Reporter*