

My alter-ergo

'My alter-ergo' is a series highlighting what IEHF members get up to when they're not doing their day job. If you have an interesting or unusual hobby that you don't mind admitting to, please let us know. Email the Editor at editor@ergonomics.org.uk with up to 600 words and a picture.

Peter Hancock

The life of an ergonomist is a rewarding one with a strong sense of helping and social responsibility attached to both the science and the profession. But, sustaining as the ergonomic life of the mind is to a researcher, it should not and cannot be all. I would argue that our external passions beyond our science actually feed into our professional commitments and that many an ergonomics issue emerges and evolves from our non-professional activities, but history? Surely you're joking! Well actually not, on the quiet I am a closet historian and here is my sorry tale.

Now many years ago, my laboratory had one of the very first virtual reality systems. Indeed, we had the first set of 'eyephones' sold commercially by Jared Lanier's company VPL Research, a pioneer in the area. Naturally this caused no little stir in the University but one of the strangest requests I had to use this equipment came from an undergraduate who wanted to fight one particular battle over again, in which he claimed the wrong side won. The battle was Bosworth Field, August 22nd, 1485 and the respective sides were the Lancastrians led by Henry Tudor, who later that day was to become Henry VII, versus the Yorkists led by Richard III who died on the field of conflict as the last King of England to lead his troops in battle.

Our first concern was to research the location and morphology of the battle and this led to, for me, the staggering conclusion that no one really knew where the battle had been fought! I was stunned. One of the pivotal events of late medieval England and no one knew where it happened – surely not. However, it turned out to be true and after extensive research we could only approximate the appropriate virtual world. But this led me to very much question the received truth of Richard III in particular, and later the received truths of history in general.

A good overall introduction to Ricardian doubts is Josephine Tey's *The Daughter of Time* and reading this alongside Shakespeare's *Richard III* produces so much cognitive dissonance that enquiring minds are forced to seek a resolution. Certainly I personally was forced into this path of investigation. This process led to a series of historical research projects that eventually resulted in the publication of my own book *Richard III and the Murder*

in the Tower. (Buy some, then buy many; the book is an excellent gift for annoying teenage children on birthdays and at Christmas, and an unparalleled cure for insomnia).

Richard III has been much in the news recently. For example, an extensive field survey and archeological investigation actually resulted in a new identification of the battle scene; located some miles from the traditional site on the slopes of Ambien Hill just south of Market Bosworth. Now established in the Fenn Lane area close to Dadlington, it is hoped that further field work can render greater insight into this pivotal event. And thanks to stalwart work from Ricardian researchers, it is possible that the body of the former king has been located during an archeological investigation of the remains of the Grey Friars in Leicester. As I write, the historical world is holding its collective breath awaiting the results of DNA testing on the male corpse that was found.



Peter Hancock in front of the National Portrait Gallery's Portrait of Richard III

But is there more to history than just the past? I believe there is. If I didn't believe this, I don't think I would have pursued such efforts for so long a period of time. In the same way that human memory is primarily for the future so, I believe, it is that history itself is principally a future-oriented endeavour. I can't, in these few paragraphs go into a detailed exposition as to why this is so, but can only say that when I am cognitively fatigued with the present, I take refuge in the apparently deterministic but progressively more probabilistic past. I can only hope that you might be tempted to join me.

It has been said that those who ignore the past are doomed to repeat it, but it may well be that our potential to know the past and the future are much more formally equivalent than we might like to believe. But knowing the past and forming the future brings us back to ergonomics – does it not?