

Heraldic, Blazonry and Genealogy: Discovering New Worlds in Family History

By
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The knowledge of heraldry and blazonry is essential to the genealogist and historian to discover new worlds in family history. Those who trace the roots of family trees can use heraldry and blazonry in their search for information. The genealogist can point with pride to the noble deeds of his, her, or other forebears—the memory of which has been handed down from generation to generation by those heraldic symbols of honor and distinction.

Slide #1 Diplomas from Universities of
Padua, Venice, Rome



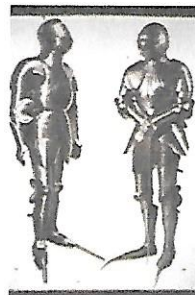
A great deal of genealogical information can be revealed about individuals who bore their coat-of-arms. A coat-of-arms gives some of the highlights of their personal accomplishments in the entire arena of life, including religious, civic, military and many other activities. Official publications, like *Burke's Peerage*, provide fascinating records of arms-bearing individuals. But *how, where and why* did heraldry and blazonry begin?

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The use of armorial bearings as personal, national and military marks of distinction undoubtedly arose from very remote antiquity. Emblems and identifying devices have been used from time immemorial, both in peace and war. The shields of ancient warriors and the devices on coins and wax seals bear a direct resemblance to modern blazonry. But the general introduction of heraldry and blazonry into England and northern Europe can be attributed in part to *Tournaments*—which were popular from 900 A.D. to about 1300 A.D.—and in part to the *Crusades*, from around 1096 to about 1250.

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The necessity of some distinguishing insignia in battle was required to identify commanders and the order of battle. Coats of arms were worn by combatants on their shields, helmets, back and breast plates, and surcoats. The cavalry units displayed the colors, standards and representations of their armed groups on their shields and colors of the horses' trappings, called

caparisons.



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Tournaments, joustings and tilting in peacetime were honorable, civilian exercises used by arms-bearing individuals who desired to gain a reputation or justice in feats of arms. I say “justice” because it appears that before English common law was established in 1066, a legal trial by jousting with lethal spear points and sharp swords was ordered by judicial authorities. This “trial by combat” involved kings, dukes, and knights on down the aristocratic chain of titles to the private gentlemen. It was the custom of those who participated in these tournaments to dress in complete military equipment, with arms on their shields, and *caparisons* on their horses.



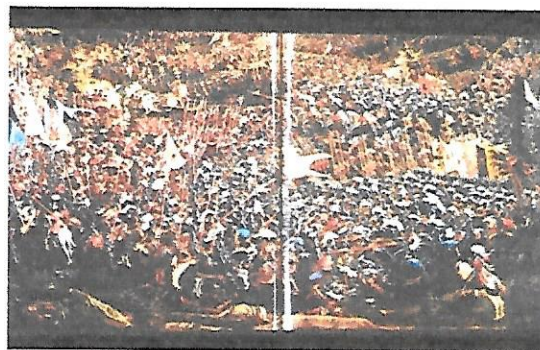
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Their squires rode before them, carrying the combatants’ tilting spears with their pennants boldly displaying their coats-of-arms. Their helmets were to be worn during the exercises, and these

helmets were festooned with wreaths of silks, colored in the tinctures of their arms, and surmounted with their crests. Whoever won the “tournament,” a word derived from the French word, *tourner*, which means “to run around,” was the winner of the disagreement. Tournaments contributed to the use of armorial bearings as heraldic distinctions. In other words, whoever was left standing at the end of the fight, was “right” regardless of whether he was legally “wrong” to begin with. Not only was the winner “right,” but his coat-of-arms was “right,” and it retained its dignity and reputation.

When the armored combatant and his servant squire approached the “barrier,” where the jousting was held, the squire blew a horn or trumpet. An attendant came forward and registered the combatants’ names, their armorial bearings, and other proofs of their identity. This attendant was called a *herald*, and from it was derived the word *heraldry* or the art of the blazon, which signifies a description of arms in proper terms. The word “blazon” actually comes from the German word “Blatzen,” meaning to blow a horn.

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The next occasion of the advancement of heraldry was the Crusades. These were three expeditions by Christian forces from England and Europe to wars in the Holy Land against the

Saracens. These wars began in 1096 and ended around the year 1270. The Crusades were so named from the French word, “Croisades,” and were undertaken to stamp out the Saracens and to replace them with Christians. Kings, nobles, knights, gentlemen, and persons of all social ranks, vied with each other in the martial arts and religious enthusiasm. This contemporary mindset of Christianity prompted thousands of English and Europeans to join what was thought to be Holy warfare that would open a path to glory—both here on earth, and for happiness in Heaven. It was the belief that those who were killed in battle for such a holy cause would immediately receive the reward for martyrdom and salvation in God’s kingdom.

Thousands enlisted from many countries, and for the sake of distinction in battle, most of the new adventurers assumed new heraldic devices most notably consisting of Christian crosses and shapes. It was the second Crusade, which began in 1147, in which the English and European armies were better armed and equipped than during the First Crusade of 1096. Most historians of genealogy and heraldry refer to this second Crusade as the period for the introduction of the greatest number of armorial bearings in England.

Genealogists presume that heraldry was introduced and established gradually. The feudal system of master and servant contributed to the adoption of heraldry, and tournaments and the Crusades methodized and perfected heraldry’s applications and uses.

In addition to the military use of heraldry as a means of identification in battle, coats-of-arms soon became a kind of status symbol which illustrated one’s accomplishments and social rank. From about 1300 to the present, the achievement of obtaining a coat-of-arms spread to widening circles of peers—such as those five ranks of the British peerage, namely: Duke, Marquess, Earl, Viscount and Baron. Even various degrees of knighthood could bring a coat-of-arms. Yet the Arms-bearing man or woman was expected to continue to lead and reflect the honored ideals of

an exemplary life.

Heraldry thus became a very serious business—although Oscar Wilde once sarcastically remarked that we should “study the peerage for it is the best thing in fiction the English have ever done.” Despite Wilde’s impertinent comment, a coat-of-arms is a badge of honor to be appreciated by all who have one.

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The Royal College of Arms, in London, was incorporated by King Richard III in 1484. The College’s purpose was to assign specific reasons why such armorial charges must graphically depict the grantee’s social rank and accomplishments in his/her contemporary setting. Thus armorial charges upon a blazon relate pictorially to various accomplishments—like heroic deeds, honorable services, financial wealth, noble biographical qualities, and other acts worthy of recognition.

To this day, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson notifies those chosen to be knighted by Queen Elizabeth II. After the newly-made knight has been “dubbed”, the Prime Minister asks whether he/she wishes to buy a coat-of-arms. Since the salaries paid by the Crown to the heralds in the Royal College of Arms are only a small, token amount—about 100 pounds sterling per year, the heralds, in order to make a living, have to charge a fee for the newly-made knight or Lady to ‘buy a coat-of-arms—if, indeed, the knight or Lady want to invest in such regalia. The

fee for a knight or Lady to buy a coat-of-arms is a very confidential matter, but I was once told that it cost about 1,200 pounds sterling—then about \$2,000. In order for the Herald of Arms to justify his creation of a coat-of-arms, he must certify that the recipient's family is indeed a good one. The herald then hires a "peerage solicitor," a lawyer who specializes in tracing the family tree of the newly-knighted. The cost of this legal process is added on to the herald's basic fee of 1,200 pounds sterling.

But the total financial package for a knighthood, with a coat-of-arms, is not as high-priced as the cost of a lordship. As Benjamin Disraeli sarcastically described in his novel, *Sybil* (1907), "To be made a lord might cost you less than a paltry twenty or thirty thousand pounds." In 1907, this amount was roughly equivalent in value to \$112,000 to \$168,000 in U.S. currency.

The rules of blazoning teach how to describe the coat-of-arms in proper terms. Detailed care must be taken in describing the visible symbols, and once the symbols have been assigned by the Royal College of Arms, they cannot be changed, because the adding to- or eliminating any part, without first obtaining permission from the College, is an unauthorized alteration of the coat of arms.

Because American citizens are equal under law, as certified by our Constitution, we don't assume that having a coat-of-arms makes us any better than other Americans who do not. But while I'm on the subject of human rights, you might be interested to know that until 1948, both peers and peeresses of Great Britain and her protectorates, like Canada, Australia, Grenada, *Jamaica*, Belize and others, were free from all arrest and prosecution in civil court actions, and were exempt from serving on juries. A peer or peeress also had the right, in cases of treason and felony, of being tried by others of his or her social rank. Witnesses brought before the accused gave his or her judgment not under oath—but on honor. Peers of the realm of England are

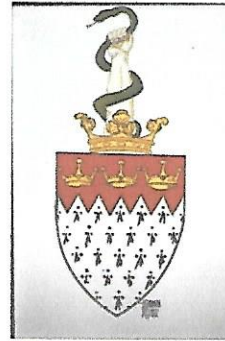
usually tried in the center of Westminster Hall, at the expense of the Crown. When these courts were removed at the end of the trials, all court records were impounded, and were closed to public inspection.

Maybe it was the tragic death of Diana, Princess of Wales, who died in August of 1997, that prompted British Parliament to enact a bill of rights—called the Human Rights Act. It passed in 1998 and became effective on October 1, 2000. It incorporates the European Convention on Human Rights into the domestic law of Great Britain. Not since the Magna Carta was written in 1215 has Great Britain had a single written summary of rights. Rights guaranteed under this act include freedom from torture and killing, as well as the right to liberty, education, fair trial, freedom of expression and the privilege of voting.

We can see that both heraldry and blazonry are rich in imagery, and can give the genealogist and historian a wealth of information relating to biographical research about the personal and professional background of the owner.

It is safe to assume that many thousands of heraldic blazons have been created in many countries throughout time, and some specific examples can narrow such a broad subject into a manageable study of both specific individuals and corporate organizations.

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The first arms-bearing physician in England was probably John Leche, surgeon to King Edward III around 1300. Dr. Leche performed great services to both the king and his son called the “Black Prince.” He was granted this coat-of-arms—described as an “ermine coat, in the red chief three golden crowns.” We know the helmet figure is a ducal crown, indicating that Dr. Leche was likely created a Duke. An arm rises from the crown, around which twists a green snake, symbolizing medicine. According to the official records, later recorded by England’s College of Arms, the three crowns in the red chief show that Dr. Leche provided medical care, at different times throughout his career, to the English, French and Scottish kings.

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Another early example of an arms-bearing English physician was a barber-surgeon named William de Bolton, who healed David the Bruce, who was wounded in the battle of Neville’s

Cross, in 1346. The arms of Bolton, which are displayed above the northeast arch of York Minster, in Beverly, Yorkshire, were granted as a reward for Bolton's medical services.

But, in 1666, the great fire of London burned the College of Arms to the ground. Most records of family genealogies and the granting of coats-of-arms were lost, although some were later reconstructed through personal records kept outside of the College in the possession of families, as well as in published sources. Despite the tragic loss of heraldic and genealogical records, the administration of the College never lost control of its aim and function. It is headed by the Earl Marshall of England. Its meetings are held in the Herald's office, where the Earl's court jurisdiction determines the laws of arms.

The Royal College of Arms publishes all royal proclamations. It marshals the royal solemnities of the nobility—marriages, christenings, and funerals. To the Earl Marshall of England belong the administration of arms when they are borne unjustly, as in the recent case of Washburn University, located in Topeka, Kansas.

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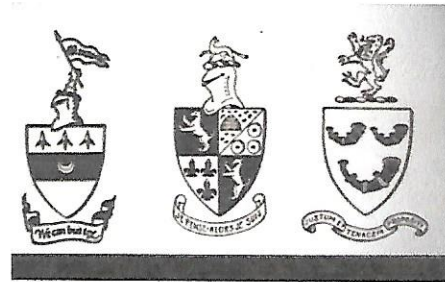
Coats-of-Arms are thus marshaled on various accounts, for example: to show descent, marriage or marriages, alliance, adoption, or a gift of the sovereign. When marriages of arms-bearing men and arms-bearing women occur, the officers of the College-of-Arms create both sets of their arms. The husband's arms are always placed on the right side of the shield, and his wife's on the left side.



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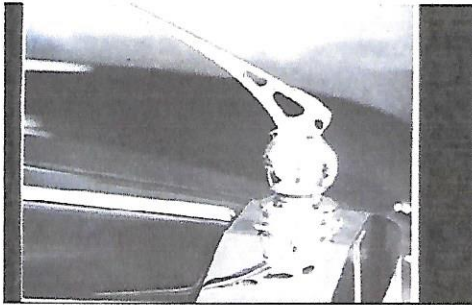
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A good example of how coats-of-arms are modified to include arms of married couples is shown by the shield of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, M.D. (1859-1930). His blazon was granted in 1902, and were quartered ten times to reflect the joining of titled families through marriage. These are especially intricate. Even Doyle's fictional characters in his novels about Sherlock Holmes displayed fictional coats-of-Arms. Doyle implied that the fictional Sherlock Holmes may have been connected with the peerage of both England and Ireland. Because of extinctions and revivals of the baronetcies of at least three different Holmes families, the image of the landed gentry fell over the persona of Sherlock Holmes like a mantle.

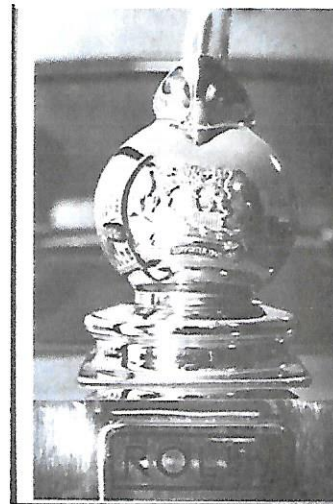
Holmes' trusted associate, John Watson, M.D. had a coat-of-arms, and its motto, "Fidelity is

my glory” was entirely appropriate to his fictional role. Even Dr. Moriarty, said to be of Irish extraction, and an arch enemy of Sherlock Holmes, had a coat of arms. This motto is Latin for “Peril delights me.”

Well, the story of each coat-of-arms is a tale worth telling, I want to conclude by illustrating a few armorial blazons which might pique your curiosity. You never know when and where coats-of-arms will appear, and some of them will show up in strange places—like the hood



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ornament of this Rolls Royce which I photographed in London. It’s an artificial hip-joint made of titanium—the socket ball of which displays the owner’s coat-of-arms.

#21 Oxford University



#22 Cambridge University



#23 Various colleges of Cambridge University



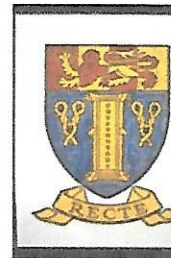
#24 Bethlem Royal Hospital and Maudsley Hospital



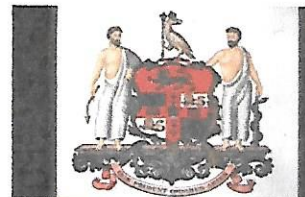
#25 Guildhall of London



#26 British Orthopaedic Association,
"Recte" is Latin for "straight" or in a
"straight line"



#27 Royal College of Surgeons of England,
Surgeons are called "Mr" instead of "Dr".



#28 A ship in the British Royal Navy



#29 Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow



#30 Institute of Hospital Engineering of England



#31 Dartmouth College (Hanover, NH)



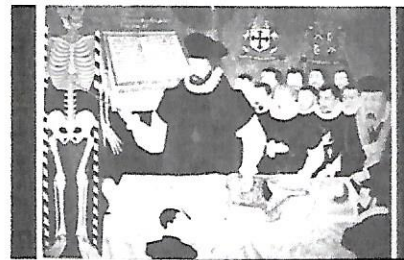
#32 Grosvenor Library (Buffalo, NY)



#33 Johns Hopkins University (Baltimore MD)



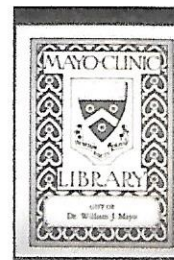
#34 John Banester, MD, (1533-1610),
English anatomist



#35 Joseph Priestly, MD (1733-1804), English
Clergyman who discovered oxygen in 1774.



#36 Mayo Clinic, Rochester MN, Scottsdale AZ,
Jacksonville FL



#37 Royal Society of London



#38 Harvey Cushing, MD (1869-1939),
American Surgeon



#39 British House of Lords



#40 Barber-Surgeons Company



Are there any questions?



Mystery Picture

Where is this “bar Sinister” located on the ISU campus?

What does it mean?

So why was this “bar Sinister” mounted
On three Lintels of this building?