



The right to arms

Surprisingly few people who use a coat of arms and crest today have any actual right to do so. Armorial bearings do not appertain to all persons of a given surname but belong to and identify members of one particular family. Coats of arms and crests are a form of property and may rightfully be used only by the male-line descendants of the individual to whom they were first granted or allowed. Such grants were and are made by the appropriate heraldic authority acting under the sovereign. These authorities are: (for England, Wales and Northern Ireland) the College of Arms, Queen Victoria Street, London EC4V 4BT, and (for Scotland) the Lyon Office, New Register House, Edinburgh EH1 3YT. In the Republic of Eire, the relevant official is the Chief Herald of Ireland, Genealogical Office, 2 Kildare Street, Dublin 2, Eire. In order to discover whether an inherited right to arms exists, it is necessary to trace one's male-line ancestry back as far as possible and then to examine the official records of the heraldic authority concerned.

Unfortunately, over the centuries, many families have simply assumed arms and crests belonging to other families of the same name, usually without authority and without demonstrating any relationship between the families. It follows that mere usage of a coat of arms, even over a long period, does not necessarily indicate a descent from the family for whom it was first recorded. Indeed, more often than not, there is no such connection. Even in the days when a tax was levied on the use of armorial bearings, those paying the tax by no means always had an established right to arms.

The erroneous and widespread practice of adopting the arms of a family of the same surname (extracted in most cases from one of the printed armorials listing the arms of families alphabetically) is much to be deplored. It detracts from the basic purpose of coats of arms and crests, which is to provide hereditary symbols by which particular families may be identified.

Grants of new arms have been made to worthy applicants, on payment of fees, since the fifteenth century. The practice continues to this day, and in addition grants of honorary arms are occasionally made to foreign citizens of British male-line descent. There is no complete printed list of families granted arms in England prior to 1687 but an index of many surviving grants from that early period will be found in *Grantees of Arms* (Harleian Society, vol. 66, 1915). For the period 1687-1898 the great majority of persons to whom grants of arms were made are listed in *Grantees of Arms II* (Harleian Society, vols. 67 & 68, 1916-17). These do not describe the arms granted. Records of original grants are kept at the College of Arms, though the reason for a particular grant and the rationale behind a design of arms are not normally recorded.

The majority of families using arms in the period 1530-1687 established their heraldic rights at the Visitations made by heralds from the College of Arms who toured the country at intervals for that purpose. The office copies of pedigrees recorded at Visitations are at the College of Arms. Many of them have been printed, often from unofficial (and sometimes inaccurate) copies in the Harleian Manuscripts preserved at the British Library. References to printed pedigrees of Visitation families will be found in G W Marshall, *The Genealogist's Guide* (1903), J B Whitmore, *A Genealogical Guide* (1953), and G B Barrow, *The Genealogist's Guide* (1977). All three works need to be consulted. In the years since 1687, many pedigrees have been officially registered at the College of Arms, sometimes in order to establish a right to arms by descent and sometimes for purely genealogical interest.

The best known published armorial is Sir Bernard Burke's *General Armory* (last edition 1884), which lists families in alphabetical order and describes the arms they used. It is unofficial, incomplete and often inaccurate; though a useful general guide it should be used with the greatest care. A W Morant's additions and corrections to Burke's list are to be found, edited and augmented by C R Humphery-Smith, in *General Armory Two* (1973). It may also be instructive to consult earlier works such as William Berry, *Encyclopaedia Heraldica* (4 vols. 1828-40), and the armory in Joseph Edmondson, *A Complete Body of Heraldry* (1780), vol. 2. Many families with an established right to arms in the period 1890-1929 are detailed in the various editions of A C Fox-Davies, *Armorial Families* (last edition 1929).

The formal description or 'blazoning' of a coat of arms proceeds along certain well defined lines, and an unknown coat of arms on a signet ring or monument, for example, may be identified by using an 'ordinary', which indexes arms by design and gives the names of families to whom they have been attributed. The best known of these is J W Papworth, *Ordinary of British Armorial* (1874), but a knowledge of heraldic terminology is needed to consult it, and it is not in any case a complete index of British coats of arms. Many crests may be similarly identified from the series of plates in James Fairbairn, *Book of Crests* (4th edition, 2 vols. 1905). A more extensive collection of manuscript volumes at the College of Arms, known as Garter's Ordinaries, enables the heralds to check whether any coat of arms or crest is to be found in their official records. *The Dictionary of British Arms - Medieval Ordinary* (Vol.1 1992, Vol.2 1996) edited by T Woodcock et al. are the first volumes of a project to revise Papworth's *Ordinary* by concentrating on pre-visitation arms recorded prior to 1530, and with the addition of sources and name index; thus acting as a combined ordinary and armorial.

Mottoes are often associated with heraldic devices and may provide a useful clue in the identification of arms. However, there is no monopoly on the use of a particular motto, and the same motto may therefore be used by many different families. Numerous mottoes are listed and identified (and foreign ones translated) in C N Elvin, *A Handbook of Mottoes* (1860, revised edition 1971). Indexes of mottoes also appear in the Burke and Fairbairn volumes mentioned above.

The regulation of Scottish heraldry differs considerably from the system in England, and all persons using arms are required to register or 'matriculate' their right to arms in the Court of Lord Lyon King of Arms. No Visitations were made in Scotland, and the records of grants and matriculations of arms commence only in 1672. The shields of arms (but not the crests) are all listed for the period 1672-1973 in Sir James Balfour Paul, *An Ordinary of Arms contained in the Public Register of all Arms and Bearings in Scotland* (2 vols. 1903 and 1977). The wrongful assumption of arms in Scotland is punishable by fine and imprisonment.

An Ulster King of Arms was first appointed in 1552, and records of grants in Ireland exist from that date. Heraldic jurisdiction over Northern Ireland was transferred to the College of Arms in 1943, the office of Ulster King of Arms being joined to that of Norroy King of Arms. In the Republic of Ireland, an official Genealogical Office was established in Dublin, with the Chief Herald of Ireland at its head, and his authority is the primary one in Eire. Photocopies of the old records of Ulster King of Arms are deposited in the College of Arms, the originals being retained by the Chief Herald.

Those of Scottish and Irish origin living abroad should apply to the appropriate office for information about grants and registrations. In Edinburgh and Dublin the records are open for public inspection, and personal searches can be made.

In England, the College of Arms is unsupported from public funds and access to its records (described in A R Wagner, *The Records and Collections of the College of Arms*, 1952) is therefore limited. However, the heralds do undertake searches in the records on payment of professional fees, and if an enquirer wishes to consult a particular manuscript appropriate arrangements can be made. Enquiries should be addressed in the first instance to any individual herald or to the Officer in Waiting, College of Arms, Queen Victoria Street, London EC4V 4BT. The College of Arms is open for enquiries between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., Monday to Friday.

Further reading

Basic facts about heraldry for family historians, I Swinnerton (1995)

Heraldry: for the local historian and genealogist, S Friar (1996)

The Oxford guide to heraldry, T Woodcock & J Martin Robinson (1990)



Armorial Bookplate of Edward Littleton, 1st Baron Littleton (created 1641), died 1645, designed by William Marshall. The earliest signed bookplate.