

The Armory Primer

What & Why is Armory?

by

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(The Royal Coat of Arms of England)

Introduction

Heraldry, if defined by itself, is the practice of creating, verbally describing (blazoning) and granting Armorial Bearings (popularly called a Coat of Arms, or Armory) to an individual, and of recording the genealogy, or family tree, of that line.

Heraldry began as a way to identify a person, and later an entire line of descendants, during public functions. It started as simple symbols but eventually became fancier, until it was a true detailed art form by the Middle Ages. More properly called **Armory** or Armorial Bearings, it became established in the 12th century. At first, only nobility used “devices”, displayed on shields, surcoats, bardings (armor on horses) and banners (flags emblazoned with the Coat of Arms). The earliest known were those of Geoffrey of Anjou and described in an 1127 chronicle. He was the father of Henry II. By the mid-13th century, Armory was used by most knights and later, gentlemen.

(Note: Armory, Armorial Bearings, Arms, Heraldic design and Coat of Arms may be used interchangeably many times. In this article **Armory** will be the term of choice.)

Gentleman?

Originally a Gentleman was a male born legitimately from a noble family. Later it was designated to be a male somewhere in status between a knight and a yeoman. A 1429 English act of Parliament used the term to describe men holding freehold property of 40 shillings a year or more. From the 16th century and later, gentleman referred to a male who employed servants and did not financially or physically have to work.

The Legitimizing of Armory

Knights found Armory an easy way to identify who was who, since it was difficult with all the armor that was worn at times, as well as to determine who had certain rights. Each knight was originally allowed to choose his own design and it was very personal to that particular individual. The design was passed down through the family, eventually (see below), but not at first. So families with similar names could have different symbols. Armory is particular to a family, not necessarily to everyone with that same surname. Near the middle of the 14th century, English courts agreed that no man could use the Armory already adopted by another person. By the 15th century the practice was becoming overly confusing and a systematic organization of Armory was taken up by the Crown and the College of Arms. An exact science was formed. Now the Crown granted Armory, and all ancient and new symbols were registered in the College of Arms, for English countries. Similar practices were undertaken in other countries.

The College of Arms

In the medieval period it was the function of Heralds to organize tournaments, as well as marshal the contestants and keep score. Because of this exposure they eventually became experts at organizing events and in Armory. The knights in tournaments bore their “Arms” on their shields and their “Crest” on their helmets. Heralds became experts at recognizing these symbols and recorded them, later even controlling their use.

Since Armory was a hereditary symbol, heralds began to acquire expertise in genealogy as well! When tournaments and battle fields became less important, as time passed, the civilian use of Armory grew. So even today heralds still control and examine heraldic claims, run the College of Arms, and organize many state festivals and events.

In the medieval period there were heralds working for both the monarch and for great noblemen. In the 13th century heralds were part of the royal household. From 1420 Royal heralds worked somewhat together and had a common seal. In 1484 they were granted a Charter of Incorporation by King Richard III. They were given a house in Coldharbour, London to keep records in. This house was taken away by King Henry VII in 1485. They finally again received a new charter and site from Queen Mary and Philip of Spain in 1555. This site and corporation of Heralds is called the College of Arms. The leader of the Heralds is called the **King of Arms**. The present building dates from the 1670’s. The Duke of Norfolk, as Earl Marshall and King of Arms is the head of the **College of Arms**. The official registers of the college include Armory for English and Welsh families from the 15th century until today. Thousands of family trees are also recorded there.

In other countries similar organizations are Lyon King of Arms in Scotland and Ulster King of Arms in Ireland.

Coat of Arms?

Let’s get this straight. When you look at a complete Armory, with the shield in the middle and all kinds of items around it, like a motto, a helmet and crest on top, ribbons on the top and sides, and maybe some characters on either side of the shield (supporters), you are looking at what is called the **Complete Achievement** of Arms. Sometimes you will see the Armory shown just as the shield (middle) part. So, a **Coat of Arms**, otherwise known as **Armorial Bearings** or **Armory**, can refer to the complete achievement or just the shield part. The “extras” placed around the shield were added to basically fancy up the shield part and tell a little more about what the bearer wanted to tell of himself, and to show more of his colors as well.

Armory marks and designs were first emblazoned on a knight’s shield and banner. Around the start of the 15th century Armory was used on surcoats. A surcoat is the long outer garment worn by those of rank, in both sexes, often worn over armor. This is how Armory became known as the **Coat of Arms**. These Coat of Arms originally were not hereditary, but only gradually became so. The

right to bear a particular Coat of Arms, as evidence of a noble birth, became hereditary as early as 1390. It was the College of Arms duty to trace the ancestry of anyone bearing a certain Armory, so that it could be approved for use, or to claim rights. Some sons inheriting their father's Armory have added particular symbols to it, indicating their order of birth (called cadency).

A **seal** was usually found on the shield part of the Armory. The seal was the equivalent of a signature today. Usually it is the depiction of a knight on horseback and fully armed. Part of the Armory came to be displayed on a knight's helmet. This became known as the **crest**. The animals or people on either side of the shield are called **supporters**. At first these were merely decorative. **Mottoes** can be associated with particular Armory, but the same motto may be used by different families. The motto may provide a clue as to the identity of a particular Armory.

Terms

The terms in Armory became exact. A Coat of Arms was "**blazoned**" in heraldic language, not just described in plain english. Partition lines were termed engrailed, nebuly, wavy, invected, indented, dancette, Raguly or embattled. Figures were either Ordinaries (Chief, Pale, Bend, Fess, Chevron, Cross, Saltire, Bar, Baton, etc.) Subordinaries (Roundels, Fusils, Orle, Annulets, Cinquefoil, etc.) or Common (hand, fish, lions, bears, birds, mullets, etc.). The colors used were, two metals, gold (Or) or silver (Argent), and other colors red (Gules), green (Vert), blue (Azure), black (Sable) purple (Purpure). The color names are listed in the order of their ranking of importance.

Armory and Women

A woman usually had limited rights to use a Armory. She had to be a sovereign to fully use it. But all females were granted rights to "display" the Armory of her father, before her marriage. She could only use a diamond shaped frame (called a **lozenge**) to show her father's Armory. After marriage she used her husband's Coat of Arms, also on a lozenge. This symbol she now used even if she became a widow. Sometimes the husband and father-in-law would show their Coat of Arms side by side (called Impaling). The husband would place his Coat of Arms on the left side (Dexter) and the arms of the father-in-law would appear on the right (Sinister), as you face the shield.

If a woman was from a family with no brothers, her husband placed a small shield with the Armory of his father-in-law in the center of his own. This would show that he was "carrying" the Coat of Arms for the benefit of his children (this was called **Escutcheon of Pretense**). The male children then displayed both Coat of Arms, which were quartered on the shield.

Genealogy and Armory

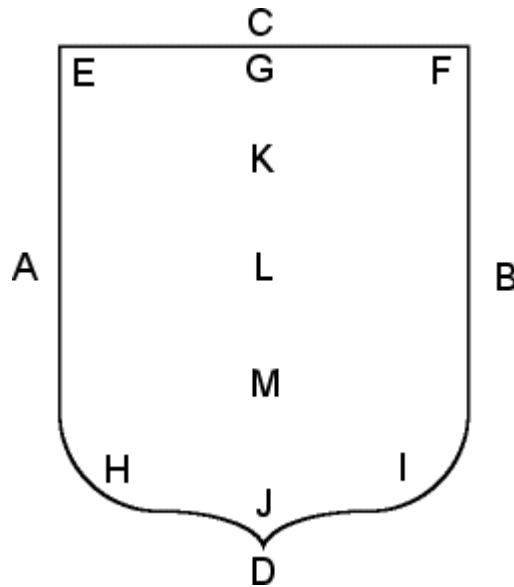
It cannot be assumed that you are descended from a particular person just because they had the same surname and had Armory granted to them. Generational evidence would be needed to prove that. There is really no such thing as a “family” Armory, as they were granted to individuals, and not families! With the help of a genealogist you may be able to trace your line back very far. But beyond the early 1500’s there were no, or few, written records kept. So getting back that far is very difficult. There were official surveys made on a county-by-county basis in England and Wales, by heralds, in the 16th and 17th centuries. A herald’s duty was to see that Armories were being used, recorded, corrected and granted correctly. These surveys were known as the “Heraldic Visitations”. Many have been published and contain detail pedigrees of Armory bearing ancestors. The King of Arms or a herald assistant would set up shop in a local location and call everyone in who claimed official Armory, to present proof. A fee was necessary to get your Armory and pedigree recorded. If proof could not be given, you would be forbidden to display Arms.

To be entitled to use Armory official, by inheritance from an English line, a family must prove legitimate descendancy from an ancestor whose records are in the College of Arms. In Ireland and Scotland the rules are similar but come under the ruling of different organizations.

It is however fascinating to find the oldest known “Coat of Arms” of a noble born person with the same surname as you! It is always very possible that you descend from them, only remaining to be “officially” proven. At some point **you are** a descendant of the very interesting historical past.

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Position Terms Used on the Armory:



A - Dexter side
B - Sinister side
C - Chief
D - Base
E - Dexter Chief
F - Sinister Chief
G - Centre Chief
H - Dexter Base
I - Sinister Base
J - Centre Base
K - Honour Point

L - Fess Point
M - Nombriil Point

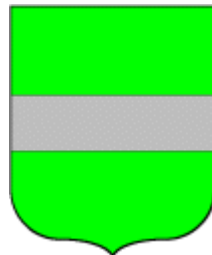
Colors used in Heraldry:

Or - yellow or gold	Argent - silver
Gules - red	Azure - blue
Sable - black	Vert - green
Purpure - purple	Proper - brown
Ermine - white fur	Ermines - black fur

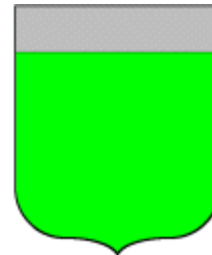
These diagrams show the main shapes used in heraldry. The feature and its name is in bold. The description below shows how that shield would be described. Each effect could have [line styles](#) added.



Bend
Vert bend argent



Fess
Vert fess argent



Chief
Vert chief argent



Chevron
Vert chevron argent



Cross
Vert cross argent



Saltire
Vert saltire argent



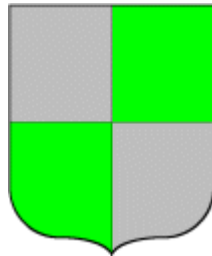
Bend Sinister
Vert bend sinister argent



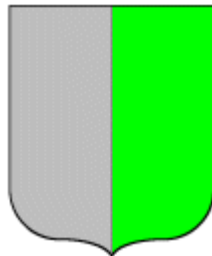
Barry
Vert barry of five argent



Pally
Pally of six vert and argent



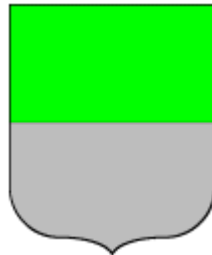
Quarterly
Vert quarterly argent



Per Pale
Per pale vert and argent



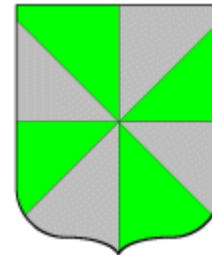
Per Bend
Per bend vert and argent



Per Fess
Per fess vert and argent



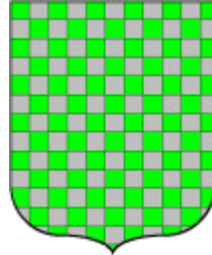
Per Saltire
Per saltire vert and argent



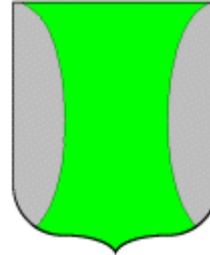
Gyronny
Gyronny of eight vert and argent



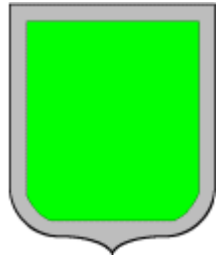
Fretty
Fretty argent and vert



Chequy
Vert chequy argent



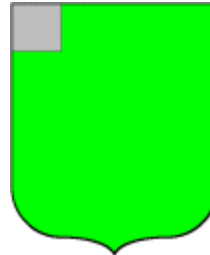
Flanches
Vert flanches argent



Bordure
Vert bordure argent



Pile
Vert pile argent



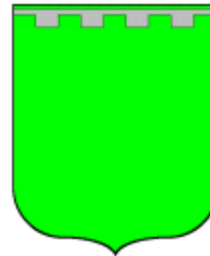
Canton
Vert canton argent



Orle
Vert orle argent



Fret
Vert fret argent



Label of Points
Vert label of four points argent

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