

RESEARCH GUIDE

11 - The City Arms

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Introduction

Information about the arms of the City of London from the earliest times to the present day is given below.

The Arms of the City of London

The earliest specific mention of the armorial bearings of the City of London appears on 17 April 1381, when it was ordered that the old mayoralty seal should be broken as it was "ill-befitting the honour of the City". St Thomas Becket and St Paul featured in the design of the old seal and they were also incorporated in the new one. A contemporary description records that it was commissioned by the Mayor, William Walworth, and depicted "beneath the feet of the said figures a shield of the arms of the said City ... with two lions guarding the same". The shield contains a cross charged with a dagger or sword in its first quarter and is similar to the modern design.

This evidence means that the popular belief that the dagger or sword represents the weapon with which Walworth killed the rebel, Wat Tyler, during the Peasants' Revolt cannot be true. The seal was designed and executed several months before Tyler's death in June 1381 and the sword almost certainly represents the sword of St Paul.

The use of the saint as a symbol of the City can be traced in several reliable sources. A reference in *Liber Custumarum* (COL/CS/01/006) refers to the service of Robert Fitz-Walter, Castellain of London, who died in 1235, in which he receives from the Mayor the banner of the City "of bright red, with a figure of St Paul in gold, with the feet and hands and head in silver and a sword in the hand of the said figure". The saint is also depicted, sword in hand, on the obverse of the Common Seal of the City, which dates from the early thirteenth century, and on two embroidered seal bags of 1319 (COL/CH/01/25, COL/CH/01/26). The City Arms are also mentioned in a reference to jousting in 1359, but there is no description and it is impossible to tell if the full figure of St Paul was still used, as the earlier evidence of the seal bags suggests. The disappearance of the full figure of the saint and its replacement by his emblem only is paralleled in the case of St George, whose figure in conflict with the dragon disappeared from his banner as early as the 13th century, leaving only his cross.

The mayoralty seal of 1381 also provides an example of the practice of placing emblems and badges at the side of the shield, which later developed into the employment of animals and figures as full heraldic supporters. Two lions are shown on either side of the City Arms on the 1381 seal, but it is

interesting to note that dragons appear flanking the shields with the figure of St Paul on the 1319 seal bags referred to above. The earliest illustration of dragons as supporters of the present arms occurs in a manuscript of 1609 (Ms 02077) and they can also be seen in the frontispiece of John Stow's Survey of London (4th ed., 1633). Both these sources also provide evidence of the earliest use of the City motto Domine Dirige Nos ["Lord Direct Us"].

There were many variations in representations of the arms in succeeding centuries. The cross frequently took the form of a "cross quarterly quartered" [i.e. divided by lines], implying that the cross itself was depicted in two colours, of which there is no record whatsoever.

Evidence of a crest first appears when a new design was made for the reverse of the doublesided Common Seal of the City in 1539. It consisted of a fan-like object charged with the cross of St George and this later developed into the dragon's sinister [left] wing in use today. The Swordbearer's fur hat or cap frequently appeared as an alternative crest or occasionally below the dragon's wing crest or the motto. The reverse of the 1539 seal also provides the first example of the use of a helmet surmounting the arms. Other symbols which appear with the arms are the sword and mace as symbols of the mayoralty and the Chamberlain's purse [?] and a cap of liberty on a pole, the latter objects possibly associated with John Wilkes, Lord Mayor in 1774-75 and Chamberlain of London from 1779 until 1797. The letters SPQL [Senatus Populusque Londinii - literally, The Senate and People of London] also occasionally appear in imitation of the SPQR of ancient Rome.

Confusion about the correct form of the arms was probably made worse by the fact that there had never been any official grant of arms to the City as they were in use prior to the foundation of the College of Arms in 1484 and the crest and supporters were not recorded there. The Corporation therefore resolved to obtain a formal grant of crest and supporters and a confirmation of the arms "anciently recorded as of right appertaining to them" from the College. The grant is dated 30 April 1957. Please note that requests to reproduce the City Arms should be made in writing to the Town Clerk, PO Box 270, Guildhall, London EC2P 2EJ.

Full Heraldic Description

The full heraldic description of the arms is as follows:

- Arms - Argent a cross gules, in the first quarter a sword in pale point upwards of the last.
- Crest - On a wreath argent and gules a dragon's sinister wing argent charged on the underside with a cross throughout gules.
- Supporters - On either side a dragon argent charged on the undersides of the wings with a cross throughout gules.
- Motto - Domine Dirige Nos - Lord Direct Us.

Further reading

- *Report, General Purposes Committee to the Court of Common Council on Armorial Bearings of the City of London* Ordered to be printed 6 April 1911 COL/CC/07/01/A/48H
- Jewitt, L. and St John Hope, W. H., *The Corporation Plate and Insignia of Office of the Cities and Towns of England and Wales* (vol II, esp. pp 118-122, London, 1895). (Library S 41.4 JEW)
- *Age of Chivalry: Art in Plantagenet England 1200-1400*. Exhibition Catalogue, Royal Academy, 1987 (nos 194 and 195).