



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 confirmed. Such grants were and are made by the appropriate heraldic authority. These are for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the [College of Arms](#), Queen Victoria Street, London EC4V 4BT and for Scotland, the [Court of the Lord Lyon](#), HM New Register House, Edinburgh EH1 3YT. In the Republic of Ireland, 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 ancestry through a direct male line back as far as possible and then to examine the official records of the heraldic authority concerned.

The full 'achievement of arms' includes the shield, crest and, in the case of corporations and certain individuals, supporters. The design of the coat of arms, which appears on the shield, must be unique.

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 when a tax was levied on the use of armorial bearings (1798-1944), those paying the tax did not need to have an established right to arms.

The 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) 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 descent through either the male or female line. 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 and 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 mentioned, although the reasoning behind designs may have been recorded in later years.

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 periodically toured the country 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. Many of these editions can be found at the [Society of Genealogists](#). 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.

C R Humphery-Smith's *Armigerous Ancestors* (1997) catalogues and indexes the surnames recorded at the Visitations and shows in which county a family of that name was recorded. 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.

There are a number of published armorials in existence, listing descriptions of arms by surname. The most comprehensive and regularly used is the *General Armory*, compiled by Sir Bernard Burke, Ulster King of Arms (last edition 1884). This contains arms, both of official and unofficial, but its coverage is not exhaustive and contains virtually no genealogical information. 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 is not possible to determine a right to arms through these books alone but they may provide a starting point for research. In the case of arms adopted without authority, these may be traced through looking at earlier heraldic directories, such as William Berry's *Encyclopaedia Heraldica* (4 vols. 1828-40). 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 'blazon' 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'. This 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 Armorials* (1874, reprinted 1977) 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 (the portion appearing above the helmet) may be identified from the series of plates in James Fairbairn, *Book of Crests* (4th edition, 2 vols. 1905, reprinted 1986). The same crest may have been used by several unrelated families. Thus, this part of the heraldic device cannot always be used to identify a specific family. 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 two in a series of four 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 a name index, 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. Since mottoes do not form part of an English grant of arms, they can be adopted and changed at will, but in Scotland they form an integral part of the grant and must be unique. 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 to Scotland and the records of grants and matriculations of arms only begin 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, reprinted 1969, and 1977). The wrongful assumption of arms in Scotland is punishable by fine and imprisonment. Access to the digital images in the Register from 1672 to 1907 is now available through [ScotlandsPeople](#).

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. Photographs 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) and *A Catalogue of Manuscripts in the College of Arms, Vol. 1* (1988) by Louise Campbell and Francis Steer) is therefore limited. However, the heralds do undertake searches in its 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 and Martin Robinson (1990)
Boutell's Heraldry, last revised J B Brooke-Little (1978)