

## THE USE OF ARMORIAL BEARINGS BY LONDON ALDERMEN IN THE MIDDLE AGES

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The use of devices on shields and standards in warfare is of great antiquity and their continuance during the early medieval period is proved by contemporary chronicles and other sources.<sup>1</sup> In the 12th century, apparently as a result of the gradual acceptance in feudal law of the heritability of the fief, the association of the banners used to distinguish the contingents of the feudal host was transferred from the the fief to the holder. Thus heraldry, which has been defined by Dr. A. R. Wagner as: "the systematic use of hereditary devices centered on the shield",<sup>2</sup> came into being. In the course of the next two centuries the use of such devices spread among all the ranks of medieval society including women, merchants, and even peasants and Jews.<sup>3</sup> This gradual widening of the theory of heraldic capacity, that is the capability of bearing arms, and the consequent developments in the law of arms have not been given such close attention by English heraldic writers as they have abroad. Doubtless this is due in part to the absence of published collections of seals from town archives which makes any study of the subject difficult.

In London, however, we are fortunate in that the evidence from seals for the use of arms by merchants is supplemented by various ordinances beginning in the 13th century. It is with these that the present essay is principally concerned. The important, indeed frequently decisive, part played by the citizens of London in the dynastic wars of the 12th century suggests that there, if anywhere in England, early evidence for the use of arms by the citizens would be found.<sup>4</sup> A collection of documents relating to London and Middlesex, compiled by some person unknown in about 1215, provides the starting point for our enquiry. The terminus post quem of the collection is established partly by paleographic evidence and, more closely, by a list of sheriffs ending with those for 16 John (1214-15). Selections from this were published by Miss Mary Bateson, but the passage with which we are concerned was incorrectly transcribed.<sup>5</sup> This occurs in a series of ordinances for the host, probably drawn up at the time of the Barons' war against John culminating in the granting of Magna Carta in 1215, which provided: . . . "in every parish let there be a penoncelle, and let the alderman have his own banner, and let the men

of each parish, with their penoncelles, follow the banner of their alderman, when the aldermen have had a summons, to the place ordained for the defence of the City”.

These banners would be personal to the aldermen and bear distinctive devices, but nothing is known of their design. It is evident then that by 1215 the aldermen of London were using banners for military purposes in the same fashion as the barons. This antedates by several decades the use of arms by citizens seen on surviving seals either in London or abroad.<sup>7</sup> The explanation of this early date doubtless lies in the status of the citizens who, in chronicles, writs, and charters, as well as on their common seal, are called Barons of London (*Baronibus Londonie*). The exact meaning to be attributed to the word *baro* in documents of this age is a matter of debate. In 1141, following upon the capture of Stephen, the Empress Maud held a council at Winchester under the presidency of Henry of Blois, Papal Legate and Bishop of that city, who referred to Londoners attending it as “those who were especially regarded in England as noblemen (*proceres*)”.<sup>8</sup> The identity of the 12th and 13th century barons of London with the aldermen, while not absolutely certain, is strongly suggested by a passage in Bracton who wrote, in connexion with the assize of mort dancester: “In truth the *barons* of London and the burgesses of Oxford determined what may be bequeathed as a chattel, both property inherited and property purchased, and therefore it is true that in boroughs no assize of mort dancester lies”.<sup>9</sup> Since the aldermen alone took part with the mayor in determining pleas and giving judgments in the Court of Husting, the identification suggested would appear to be correct.

Certain it is that in the 14th and 15th centuries the aldermen of London enjoyed privileges proper to parliamentary barons for, in the *Liber Albus*, compiled about 1415, we read that the aldermen were anciently called “Barons” and were buried with the honours of that rank even after 1350 but, on account of the pestilences and frequent changes in their ranks, this fell into desuetude. A man armed and bearing a banner of the deceased’s arms, with his shield and helm, would go to the church where the alderman was to be buried.<sup>10</sup>

This ancient usage of burying aldermen with baronial honours, although fallen into desuetude in 1415, was later revived for, in the will of Sir Hugh Brice, knight and onetime Mayor of London, we read:—

“Nor I wolle haue noone armes Sworde Helmett nor cote of armes borne offered ne sett vp as it is vsed within the Citie but only myne armes vpon Papers in certeyn places of the church for the

better remembraunce of my soule . . . And I woll that the Herold of armes haue his dewtie as it is accustomed".<sup>11</sup>

We may conclude, therefore, that from at least the beginning of the 13th century the aldermen of London had used arms and were allowed in the 14th and 15th centuries baronial honours at their funerals.

On the death of Edward III in 1377 the Mayor and Aldermen issued a series of ordinances for the defence of London against the possibility of an invasion from France amongst which we read that "each Alderman shall have a pennon of his arms boldly displayed, so that, when the alarm is given in the City, he shall immediately cause his pennon to be borne to the place assigned to assemble the men of his Ward".<sup>13</sup> Again, on 13th September, 1386, ordinances for the defence of London were issued again laying down that the aldermen were to have pennons "de vos armes bien & convenablement arraie".<sup>14</sup> These ordinances show quite clearly that, apart from their personal status, the aldermen were required to use arms by virtue of their office.

Among the duties of the kings of arms, enjoined by their oath from the 15th century and apparently exercised from at least the middle of the 14th century, was that of having knowledge of the arms borne in their province.<sup>15</sup> The inventory of Clarenceux Benolte's books, made after his death in 1534, includes among them "a booke of Visitation of many shires with Lond. and peinces painted with men of armes made by Roger Leghals, Clarencieux king of armes".<sup>16</sup> The portion of the book relating to London is probably to be identified with a manuscript now preserved in the Guildhall Library. Three leaves, detached from the manuscript, were presented to the library in 1932 and the remainder was identified in the Clumber MS 189 purchased by the British Museum in 1938.<sup>17</sup> The relevant section was detached and is now in the Guildhall Library. Each page was painted with a conventional portrait of an alderman with his shield, and sometimes a crest, and supporting a frame containing blank shields for the arms of his successors in the ward. The form of the record derives from Bruges' Garter Book compiled about 1430<sup>18</sup> but the panels, with a few exceptions, were not used until the 16th or 17th century when the arms of various aldermen were tricked in them upon no discernible plan. The writing and style of painting is consonant with an early to mid 15th century required by Benolte's attribution of his visitation to Clarenceux Legh (1435-60) and the appearance of John Olney "maior Colnew (sic) strete warde" at fo. 2 gives a precise date for the collection as he was Mayor of London in 1446-7. All the twenty-five wards are represented, Portsoken without Aldgate by the Prior of Holy Trinity

bearing a banner Azure, the verbal emblem of the Trinity Or, lettered Sable, presumably for his priory. All but five of the remaining aldermen have their personal arms, six of them with crests, but of the latter one is uncoloured and another painted over with a white wash to delete it. The last page is occupied by seven coats for various civic officials—the Recorder, Chamberlain, Common Clerk, Sword-bearer, Bailiff of Southwark, and Serjeant at Mace. In view of the ordinances cited above the absence of arms for one fifth of the total number of aldermen in an official record of their arms is interesting. Arms are in fact attributed to all but one of these aldermen in the 17th century armorials of London Mayors, Sheriffs, and Aldermen,<sup>19</sup> and the case of Stephen Forster, alderman of Bread Street, suggests, moreover, an explanation for this. In 1478 he used a non-armorial seal bearing a merchant's mark including a broad arrow and, in Stow's *Survey of London*, we read that his arms, three broad arrows, were to be seen on London Wall near Ludgate.<sup>20</sup> It would appear, therefore, that these omissions may have resulted from Clarenceux Legh disallowing arms composed from merchant's marks in accordance with the Law of Arms as later used in England.<sup>21</sup>

Reference has been made to the 16th and 17th century London armorials giving the arms attributed to mayors, sheriffs, and aldermen several examples of which are to be found in the British Museum and other libraries. The most important of these was compiled c.1607 by Nicholas Charles, Lancaster Herald, and refers to arms in churches which have been subsequently destroyed. The arms of the sheriffs are given twice, first in chronological sequence, and secondly by companies—an arrangement also found in a later collection.<sup>22</sup> In William Smith's Description of London c.1588 the order of the Mayor's procession is described and we read that this was headed by:—

“ . . . ij great estandarts, one hauinge the armes of the citie, and the other the Mayor's company; . . . and then about lxx or lxxx poore men marchinge ij and two . . . euery one bearinge a pyke and a target, wheron is paynted the armes of all them that haue byn Mayor of the same company that this newe mayor is of. Then ij banners one of the kynges armes, the other of the Mayor's owne proper armes”.<sup>23</sup>

It is evident that to provide these arms collections would be required and that the manuscripts under discussion appear to fulfill the requirements. While in many cases arms appear to have been invented, some derive from monuments and glass now destroyed and it is hoped that further research will provide more information on this point.

My thanks are due to Dr. A. R. Wagner, Richmond Herald and Registrar, and the Chapter of the College of Arms for the block used for the illustration and to the Corporation of London for permission to reproduce it here.

## NOTES

- 1 J. A. Giles, *The History of the Britons*, by Nennius, 1861, p. 24; J. R. Clark Hall, *Beowulf*, 1950, pp. 35 (l. 303-6), 72 (l. 1021-2), 129 (l. 2152-3), and 158 (l. 2767-9); D. L. Sayers, *The Song of Roland*, 1957, ll. 707-9, 3093-5, and 3265-7.
- 2 *Heralds and Heraldry in the Middle Ages*, 1956, p. 12.
- 3 D. L. Galbreath, *Manuel du Blason*, 1942, pp. 45-58.
- 4 W. Page, *London its origin and early development*, 1923, passim.
- 5 "A London Municipal Collection of the reign of John," in *English Historical Review*, vol. 17, 1902, p. 480 et seq.
- 6 Brit. Mus., Add. MS 14252, f. 125r.
- 7 H. Spelman, *Glossarium Archaologicum*, 1664, p. 74; cf. J. Selden, *Titles of Honour*, 1672, p. 570; and Sir J. Doddridge, *The Magazine of Honour*, 1642, pp. 54-5.
- 8 Quoted by Spelman, *op. cit.*, p. 74, col. ii.
- 9 H. de Bracton, *De Legibus et consuetudinibus Angliae* (Rolls Series), vol. iv, p. 265.
- 10 *Munimenta Gildhallae Londonienses* (Rolls Series), vol. i, p. 33. For the use of "baron" to denote "an alderman of London" see *Liber Albus* (Richard Griffin and Co., 1861), pp. 13, 45, 67, 71, 92.
- 11 Prerogative Court of Canterbury Register. 2 Horne, dated 30 August, 1496, the probate act is omitted.
- 12 Corporation of London, Letter Book H, f. 63r.
- 13 R. R. Sharp, *Calendar of Letter Books H*, pp. 64-6—cf. Bodleian Library, Douce MS 271, f. 71, of early 16th century date, has a list of fees paid to heralds in certain circumstances including "whan eny Duc doth releve or display his baner".
- 14 Letter Book H, f. 201r.
- 15 Wagner, *Heralds and Heraldry*, pp. 52-60.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 150, no. 4.
- 17 Now Add. MS 45133, v. Wagner, *A Catalogue of English Mediaeval Rolls of Arms*, 1950, pp. 92-7, and *Heralds and Heraldry*, pp. 111-5.
- 18 Wagner, *Catalogue of . . . Rolls of Arms*, p. 83-6.
- 19 Brit. Mus., Stowe MS 860 passim.
- 20 Brit. Mus. Harl. Ch. 50 D 21; J. Stow, *Survey of London*, Everyman edition, p. 38.
- 21 G. D. Squibb, *The High Court of Chivalry*, 1959, pp. 162-90.
- 22 Brit. Mus., Harl. MS 1349, cf. Harl. MS 1464, and Stowe MS 733.
- 23 William Smith, Description of London, published in Sir E. Bridges, *The British Bibliographer*, 1810, vol. i, p. 539.