

THE INTRODUCTION OF ARMORIAL BEARINGS
INTO ENGLAND.

By J. H. ROUND, M.A.

The origin and antiquity of coat-armour has long been, with heralds and antiquaries, a favourite subject of inquiry. To mention only a few of those who have elaborately discussed the question, Mr. Planché, in his *Pursuivant of Arms*, denied an early origin, and was severely criticised by Mr. Smith Ellis in his clever but paradoxical work *The Antiquities of Heraldry*. Again, an article in the *Herald and Genealogist*,¹ on "The origin and development of coat-armour," probably from the pen of Mr. Gough Nichols, summed up the position thus:—

"It appears to be now unanimously conceded by all judicious and unprejudiced inquirers, that it was in the latter portion of the twelfth century that coat-armour was first adopted, and that it was scarcely prevalent, if at all, before the year 1180" (p. 5).

In Messrs. Woodward and Burnett's monumental work on *Heraldry*, our latest and best authority, we find the same view adopted. Mr. Burnett held that we "may regard the latter half of the twelfth century as the earliest period to which we can trace the use of arms in the proper sense" (I., 32). Mr. Woodward, on a careful review of the seals of the period, decides that that of Philip d' Alsace, Count of Flanders (1170), is the earliest armorial seal known, and that no others are met with till 1177 or 1178. "We have then here," he writes, "the first certainly authentic use of arms upon a seal towards the close of the twelfth century" (I., 48). This appears to be also the opinion of the best French authorities.

It may seem presumptuous to challenge *in toto* a conclusion now generally accepted, and based, it would seem, on exhaustive inquiry; nor would any but the

¹ Vol. III. (1866), p. 1.

clearest evidence justify one in so doing. I am about, however, to bring before you what I think you will accept as proof that a true armorial coat was actually borne in England before the middle of the twelfth century, that is to say, some thirty years before any armorial shield, it is said, is known.

The coat to which I would draw your attention is that of the house of Clare, and my conclusions are based, it will be seen, on evidence drawn from three distinct quarters. There is no bearing more familiar than that of the chevrons of Clare. Where do they first appear? Mr. Planche, discussing in his *Pursuivant of Arms* (pp. 70-1), the introduction of armorial bearings, wrote as follows of the shield pictured by Bysshe (1654) in his *Notes on Nicholas Upton* (pp. 88-9), and thus described by him:—

Gilbertus de Clare (Gilberti filius natu minor), cui Stephanus Rex Pembrokiæ Comitis titulum contulit, Scutum capreolis plenum habuit.

On this Mr. Planche thus comments:—

“Fortunately the seal of a Clare,—the family to which most of our English nobility and gentry are indebted for their chevrons,—enables us to answer the question: it is that of Gilbert de Clare, Earl of Pembroke, in the reign of King Stephen, and therefore of the period which immediately preceded the bearing of hereditary coat-armour. Instead of the three chevrons, so well known as the coat of Clare, we find the long kite-shaped shield of the Earl, divided into thirteen equal stripes or bands, which running upwards parallel to the line formed by the angular top of the shield (a very marked peculiarity in the shield of that period), on the dexter, or right-hand side, presented to us, descended, I naturally infer, with the slope of the shield, on the sinister or left-hand side, and that such was the opinion of Bysshe is evident, as he blazons the arms, in Latin, thus: “scutum capreolis plenum habuit,” considering them what is termed *chevronny*, that is, composed of as many chevrons as could be put of that breadth, into the field. Now it certainly appears to me evident that this shield was only strongly banded according to its form, the bands being gilt and painted alternately, and that their reduction to three, in conformity with a prevailing fashion, produced the coat of arms which we see on the seals of the later Clares, viz.—“Or, three chevrons gules.”

To this Mr. Ellis retorted (1869), in his *Antiquities of Heraldry* (p. 177), that “in the sketch in Lansd. MS., 203, these stripes are not drawn parallel with the shield, but in the form that chevrons would assume when seen on

half only of its surface." The accompanying reproduction of the sketch will show you that Mr. Ellis was right.¹

But we are not dependent on the evidence of this sketch, for I now produce from another quarter an engraving of the seal of the Countess of Lincoln. The parentage of this lady was formerly a subject of dispute, and the evidence afforded by her arms was therefore not understood. Mr. Ellis for instance, discussed it as "the chevrony coat of Rohais, the Countess of Lincoln, whose parentage remains undiscovered," and suggested that "it gave the clue to her origin by connecting her with the Earls of Chester, who bore, he held, "five chevrons." He



SEAL OF ROHAIS DE CLARE, COUNTESS OF LINCOLN.

therefore made her the daughter of Hugh, a brother of Ranulf, Earl of Chester (d. 1153).² But it is now known that she was a Clare, being in fact the niece of the above Earl Gilbert of Pembroke. In the light of this discovery I ask you to compare the shields they bore. You will find that the coat of Rohais, which is here reproduced, is absolutely identical with that of the Earl, the uncle's shield giving it in profile, and the niece's seal full-face.

¹ I would suggest that the representation of the Earl fighting on foot, so strange as of itself to make this seal most interesting, may point to some

then famous incident of the Earl defending himself when surprised at night.

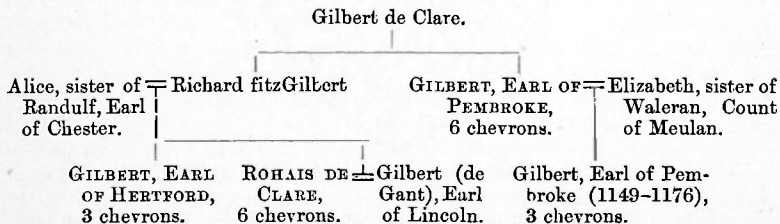
² *Antiquities of Heraldry*, pp. 185-6.

But observe that the coat is *not* “chevronny,” nor is it “five chevrons.” The difference in the width of the bands, when you examine it closely, proves that the true blazon is *six chevrons*.

Having been enabled to establish the coat by this singular coincidence, I now pass to the third “leg” on which my demonstration rests.

Among the Duchy of Lancaster charters, preserved in the Public Record Office, is one of Earl Gilbert of Hertford, nephew to Earl Gilbert of Pembroke.¹ It is this charter that gave me the key to the whole problem. On glancing at its seal, I was amazed to find the well-known coat of Clare clearly depicted on the shield. But this is by no means all. The contents of the charter *mutatis mutandis* are the same as those of the charter transcribed in the Lansdown MS. The two charters are complementary, they belong to the same transaction, and are witnessed by the same men. Internal evidence enables me to date this transaction as certainly not later than 1146, while it cannot of course be earlier than 1138, the year in which the Earldom of Pembroke is said to have been created.

The chain of my evidence being thus complete, I append a pedigree showing the relationship of the three persons to whom I have referred:—



On comparing this with Mr. Ellis's pedigree,² we may note that he assigns the first Earl of Pembroke (in error) “three chevrons.” There is no dispute as to the coat of the 2nd Earl, for Mr. Planché admitted that his—

“shield with the three chevrons on it is fortunately plain enough, and presents us with an interesting instance of the existence of what

¹ Grants in boxes, A. 157.

² *Antiquities of Heraldry*, pp. 199, 200, Cf. p. 177.



SEAL OF GILBERT DE CLARE, EARL OF PEMBROKE.

From Lansd. MS. 203.



SEAL OF WALERAN, COUNT OF MEULAN.

From Lansd. MS. 203.

may be called a truly heraldic shield, at that early period," [*i.e.* ante 1176.]¹

Even this shield of the 2nd Earl is of earlier date, you see, than any English one known, according to our authorities. Taking it in conjunction with the rest of my evidence, it points to the Clares having led the way in the use of armorial bearings, at least on their seals.

Among the points suggested by the conclusion we have reached is the possible differencing of the Clare coat by doubling the number of the chevrons; some such difference was certainly needed to distinguish the two contemporary Earls Gilbert of Clare. Mr. Ellis pointed out (p. 199), other developments of the coat.

The wife of the first Earl of Pembroke was the sister of Waleran, Count of Meulan, a great noble whose own coat may fitly be included in this paper. His descendants bore "chequy" or and gules, his nephew bore a chequy coat, and he is undoubtedly shown on his seal with chequy bearings in the days of Stephen. There are two of his seals in the British Museum, on which the chequy design is still to be distinguished on the lance flag and on the saddle-cloth. But according to a seventeenth century drawing of this seal, in the Lansdown MSS. which there is no reason to distrust; the surcoat and the shield were also represented as chequy, though the design is now obliterated.

Mr. Ellis was acquainted with the sketch of this "most important" seal (pp. 178-9) but failed to observe that the charter to which the seal belonged was addressed to Simon, Bishop of Worcester, and could not therefore be later than 1150. Thus we can assert that this coat also goes back to the days of Stephen, and is indeed virtually contemporary with that of his brother-in-law, the Earl of Pembroke. I may add that the attribution of the Earldom of Worcester to the Count, on this seal, is the sole confirmation known, I believe, of the statement (by the continuator of Florence of Worcester) that he had the style.

Before leaving this seal, we may note that from the

¹ *Journ. Brit. Arch. Assoc.*, x, 271. The authority is a sketch in the collections of Brooke, Somerset Herald.

Earl Warenne, half-brother of Count Waleran, descended the bearers of the well-known Warenne coat, chequy or and azure,—another case of collateral adoption.

According to Brooke's "Aspilogia" (in the College of Arms) the seal of Gilbert de Gant, Earl of Lincoln *temp.* Stephen, showed a shield barry of six. But as the impressions of it in the British Museum are too obliterated to show any such bearings now, I have not included it among my proofs. The evidence adduced in this paper agrees, it will be seen, with the view I advanced in my *Geoffrey de Mandeville*, namely, that so far as England is concerned, it was in the reign of Stephen that family coats of arms were, probably, in course of adoption.

The proved existence of the Clare coat at this early period is, in any case, sufficient to destroy the existing theory. But it may be said to go further, for it suggests that armorial bearings may have been widely in use before it became the custom to depict them on seals. The silence of the latter would thus be no evidence that bearings were not in use. For this omission the reason would be obvious: armorial bearings were intended to distinguish their wearers in the field. On seals they were distinguished by the legend, which made unnecessary the introduction of their arms. The practice, therefore, of depicting the latter would only be introduced subsequently and by degrees.