

AN INSCRIBED SILVER-GILT CHAPE OF THE 16TH CENTURY

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SUMMARY

In 1989, an inscribed chape (a protective metal cap for a belt end) was recovered from the Thames foreshore. A chance find of exceptional interest and historical significance, the chape can be dated with some confidence to the first half of the 16th century. It is now in the collections of the Museum of London.

DESCRIPTION

The chape has been constructed from three pieces of sheet silver, soldered together to form a 'box' frame. The front plate of the chape (Fig 1) has been cut down and shaped along the upper surface; and in the remaining peltate crescent, there are opposing incised motifs of a rose and pomegranate. The ornamentation is enclosed within a chased border: within which, and divided by the cast relief soldered-on figure of St Barbara, is an engraved, inverse inscription +RAF+FEL+MIGHAM. There is a decorative finial, below the Saint, on the outer edge. Patches of gilding remain on the rose and pomegranate motifs, the Saint, and along the lower border edge and finial. Enough remains to suggest that the entire front plate was gilded. The back plate shows signs of abrasion, but is otherwise plain.

THE INSCRIPTION

The object is decorative, but why so remarkable? The answer lies in the inscription. So far as we know, no chape of similar magnificence exists which has the name of the owner inscribed upon it. In English collections it would appear to be



Fig 1. Silver-gilt chape (42mm high; 53mm wide; 7mm deep). Top: front plate; bottom: back plate. Museum of London acc no. 90.295

without parallel. The following details emerge from rather sparse documentary evidence which has enabled us to establish the identity of this individual. The inscription seems to be an abbreviated form of the name Ralph Felmingham, who is recorded in the *Letters and Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, as a Sergeant-at-arms;

present at the trials of Lord Dacre in 1534 and Anne Boleyn and Lord Rocheford in 1536.

The first reference to Felmingham occurs in correspondence between John Williamson and Thomas Cromwell on 5th September, 1529.¹ In this letter, Williamson reports that he has fulfilled Cromwell's demands, has done what he ordered, except concerning a Mr Eston and Mr Felmingham, who are not in town.

The next reference, for 30th June, 1534² is more significant. It concerns the Indictment of William Lord Dacre and Sir Christopher Dacre for treasonable communications and alliances with the Scots. In this matter, the Precept of the Lord High Steward, the Duke of Norfolk, was addressed to Ralph Felmingham, Sergeant-at-arms, commanding him to summon such and so many of the Lords, Proceres and Magnates, of the kingdom of England, in effect, a jury of Peers for the arraignment of Lord Dacre. The Warrant returnable at Westminster on 'Thursday next after the Feast of the Translation of Saint Thomas the Martyr' (9th July, 1534). A schedule of the names of the 18 Peers returned, each having been severally summoned, is appended to this document. Ralph Felmingham returns his writ in person.

The third reference concerns the trial of Anne Boleyn and Lord Rocheford.³ Again we find a Precept issued to Ralph Felmingham, detailing his office as Sergeant-at-arms, to summon such and so many lords of the kingdom, peers of the said Queen Anne and Lord Rocheford, by whom the truth may appear. The pleas to be held before Thomas Duke of Norfolk, Treasurer and Earl Marshal, Lord High Steward of England at the Tower of London on the 15th May, 1536. Felmingham duly summoned the peers: 26 in all.

Herein lies the importance of the chape. It is remarkable, because it bears a name, and moreover a name which can be traced; not only to an individual in the first part of the 16th century, but of greater significance, to a member of the royal household. The quality of the material and choice of decorative motif in the form of rose and pomegranate, the royal badges of Henry VIII and Katherine of Aragon, also support the view that this piece was made for someone of high degree with royal association. There is no sign of any hall or maker's mark, but perhaps the absence of the former is significant. The personalised nature of the chape and the inclusion of royal badges suggest that the piece was a special commission; possibly even

made to royal order. It was usual to dispense with the formality of a hallmark for items not offered for sale, and it is quite possible that the chape was given as a New Year's gift. But this supposition is pure conjecture, and there is no substantive evidence to support it. The *Gift Rolls* do however show that small pieces of plate were given to the humblest members of the royal household; 'Maiftres Golding', for example, received 'iij sponnes weing xiiij onz'.⁴ Occasionally gifts seem to have been chosen with particular care; thus Thomas Alwerd received 'a fhirte wrought w^t blake worke' a 'coverpayne of diaper' and a 'penne and an inkhorne w^t ij fandboxes of Alliblafter'.⁵

The figure of St Barbara occupies a prominent and central position on the chape. She has a halo and sits with a martyr's palm in her right hand, possibly an open book or sacramental wafer in her left, and behind, to her left a tower (Fig 2). What then is her relevance? St Barbara had attracted a cult following by the end of the 15th century. Veneration was such that Barbara was generally recognised as one of the *quattor virgines capitales*, and her miraculous powers were equated with those of St Catherine.⁶ The degree of interest in the cult of St Barbara was partly stimulated by the proliferation of manuscript compilations of her life and passion; but principally, one supposes, by her supposed powers to protect against gunpowder and sudden death. She was adopted as the patron saint of armourers; but artillerymen, architects, masons, quarrymen and miners were also amongst her devotees.

There are many and various accounts of the legend of St Barbara but most agree on the principal elements of her story. Barbara was the daughter of Dioscurus, a pagan Satrap of Bithynia, Egypt. According to some versions of the legend, Dioscurus built a tower with two windows to protect her from the attentions of suitors. During the process of construction, Dioscurus was called away on diplomatic business by the Emperor Maximius of Thrace. In her father's absence, Barbara converted to Christianity, and then, it appears, instructed the workmen to add a third window to the tower to symbolise the Trinity. Upon learning of her conversion, Dioscurus, enraged, tried to force his daughter to recant, even dragging her to the judge Marcianus, who submitted her to dreadful tortures. But Barbara held steadfast to her faith and Dioscurus eventually took her to a mountain



Fig 2. Panel detail showing St Barbara from Cologne/Frechen stoneware Schnelle c.1550. Found in Whitecross Street (Museum of London acc no. Z3453)

top and beheaded her. Divine retribution was swift and Dioscurus was killed by lightning. For this reason, Barbara was held to be a protectress against thunder, lightning, gunpowder, fire-arms and sudden death, especially if the *viaticum* (communion given to the dying) had not been given.

The image of St Barbara is frequently found in 15th and early 16th-century decorative and fine art; rings⁷ and pilgrim badges⁸ featuring prominently. There are innumerable stained glass panels: the St Barbara cycle at King's College Chapel, Cambridge, perhaps the most remarkable of these.⁹ The figure of St Barbara and scenes from her life are also engraved on a suit of German armour made for Henry VIII, presented to him in 1509 on the occasion of his marriage to Katherine of Aragon, in the collection of the Royal Armouries.¹⁰

The inclusion of St Barbara on the chape of

Ralph Felmingham is not surprising. St Barbara may have been added to this piece merely because of her cult status at the time. But perhaps, for a Sergeant-at-arms, the association of St Barbara as tutelary saint of armourers is significant and pertinent. Then again, a further connection, albeit somewhat tenuous can be drawn: the duties of a Sergeant-at-arms were occasionally those of a messenger and envoy, and in one version of the St Barbara legend, the Saint's conversion hinged upon the safe delivery of her messages by a trustworthy courier.

METHOD OF ATTACHMENT

The overall style and dimensions of the chape suggest that it was probably designed to form a protective and decorative cap for a belt. But the form of this chape is unparalleled in British collections and not represented within the published archaeological corpus. It does however compare in general style and size to an example depicted in Jan van Eyck's painting of St George, dated 1436 and shown in detail in Fingerlin's *Gürtel des hohen und späten Mittelalters*.¹¹ How was the chape fastened and secured? The precise method of attachment is unclear and there are no rivet holes in the back plate. Would simple clamping of the metal framework over a leather belt suffice to hold the chape in place? Adhesive could have been used to supplement the metal casing of the leather; but if so, no physical trace remains. It is possible that the chape is incomplete. There are two transverse grooves at the top of the back plate, visible on both sides, but no other sign of breakage or damage, apart from a jagged piece of metal extending out from the inner edge on one side. This curious tab is aligned with the plane of the frame and forms an integral part of it. Did this irregular piece of sheet metal serve to secure the leather belt? If so, it is difficult to see how. It is possible that the tab is part of a much larger foil backing, but if so, one would expect signs of damage to the border elsewhere. Even if the tab was originally recurved inwards to catch the belt and hold it in position, there is no evidence of a similar feature on the opposite side. In short, the tab is an intriguing puzzle in an otherwise finished object. Viewed as a whole the chape is attractive, but when examined in detail the individual elements vary in quality and skill of execution. The inscription is particularly crude, and one wonders

whether this was added at a later date, to personalise the object.

THE FIND SPOT

The chape was recovered from the Thames foreshore at Vintry (Fig 3) and the anaerobic conditions of burial have ensured its remarkable preservation. Although the actual circumstances of deposition are unknown, the function, material value and location of the find suggests accidental loss, and the apparent absence of any secure method of attachment may well have been a contributory factor. Since the duties of the Sergeant-at-arms required frequent river travel, it is possible that the chape was lost in transit when a high tide prevented recovery. The conjunction of the badges of Henry VIII and Katherine of Aragon would suggest that the

chape was made between 1509 and 1526/7; and as member of the royal household it is unlikely that Felmingham would have continued to wear an object with obvious Aragon association after Henry's divorce.

THE OFFICE OF THE SERGEANT-AT-ARMS

For the Tudor period we have no other example of a belt accessory, perhaps sword belt accessory, which points to a member of the royal household in our national collections.¹² What does it tell us in general terms about the office of Sergeant-at-arms for this period, and by implication Ralph Felmingham?

Sadly, nothing is known of Ralph Felmingham beyond the few details referred to above; and every effort to add to this information has so far

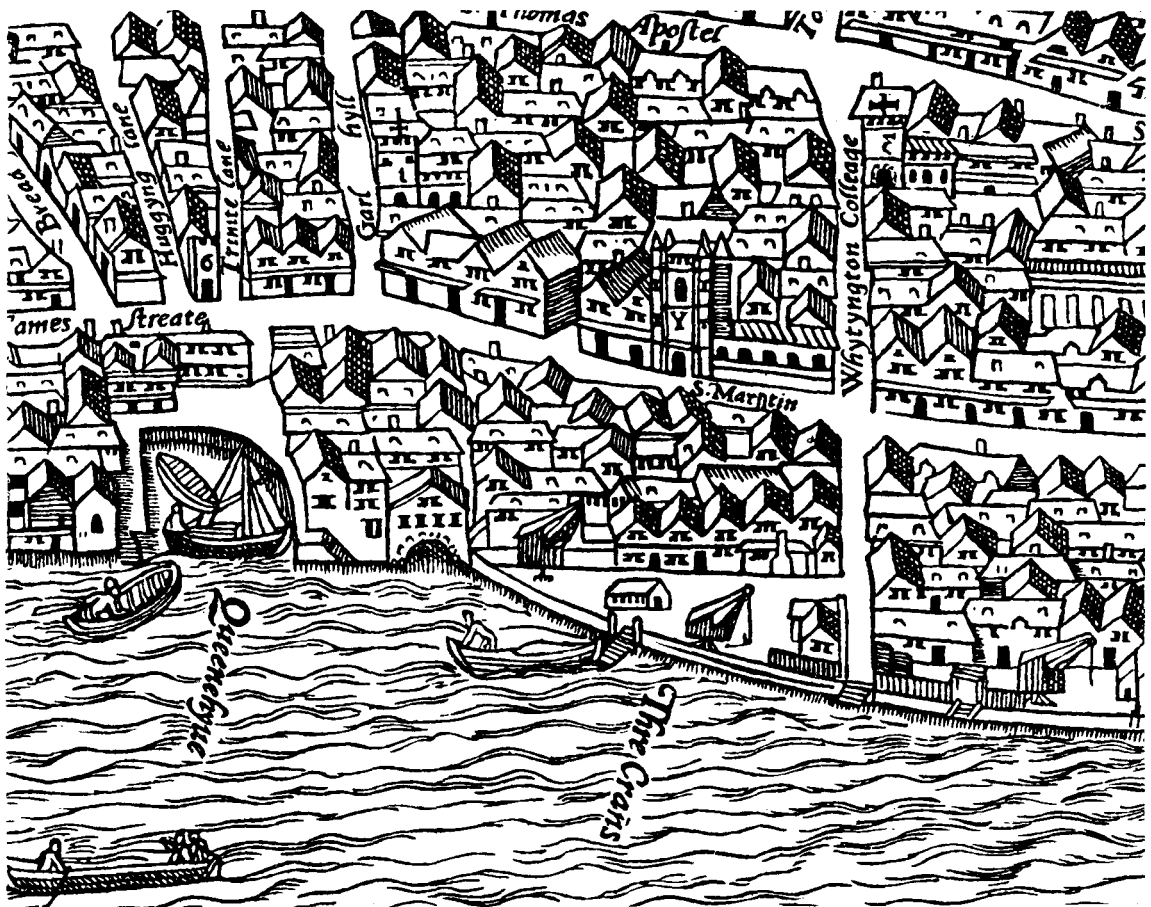


Fig 3. Detail of the Vintry foreshore from the 'Agas' map (Guildhall Library)

failed. However, the name Felmingham is extremely unusual; associated largely with the county of Norfolk. There are scattered references to the name in the 13th century, but the first reference which the author has been able to trace for London is dated 6th June, 1368; a will proved at the Court of Husting, London for a Thomas de Felmyngham 'chaundler', leaving among other things, his tenement in the parish of St Mary Magdalen in the Old Fish Market to his wife and her sister.¹³ Thereafter, the name, with one exception, seems only to be found among the wills proved in the Consistory Court of Norwich. The first of these, in 1429, to a Roger Felmyngham of the village of Blychyng. Then in 1504 to Edmond Felmyngham, parson of Brampton. A Robert Felmingham in 1506 of Raundworth, St Helen, and in 1524, reference to Elizabeth, 'late the wif of Robert Felmingham, gent.'. There is also a Thomas Felmingham, 1531 gent of Greate Hobbeys.

Among the Visitations of Norfolk¹⁴ under the name Croftes, we find a reference to Sir William Felmingham of Felmingham in Norfolk, his arms represented as sable, a chevron ermine between three covered cups or. Finally, recorded among the marriage licences granted by the Bishop of London, for 29th January 1574-5,¹⁵ is a Richard Felmingham, Gent., and Alice Lewes, widow, of St Mildred, Poultry. Since the name is so unusual, one can assert with a reasonable degree of confidence, that Ralph Felmingham, the Sergeant-at-arms, was probably related to these people; even though the precise nature of that link is unknown.

If we know nothing about Ralph Felmingham as a man from the documents, what can we deduce from his office, of his bearing and status in society? The title of Sergeant-at-arms suggests the military origin of the office, and the *Black Book* refers to 31 'sergeaunts of armez sufficiauntly armed and horsed, rydyng before his highnes (Edward ..) whan he iourneyde by the cuntrey, for a gard corps du roy'.¹⁶ The reference to 'sufficiauntly armed' must refer to the Sergeant-at-arms' mace, originally borne as a war mace, as befitting the Sergeant's bodyguard rôle. Towards the end of the 15th century, as St John Hope has argued,¹⁷ the mace assumed a more decorative, symbolic function, the lower end was enlarged and embellished with engraved and/or enamelled royal arms. By the Tudor period, maces seem to have been reversed, thereby giving prominence to the end with the royal

arms, and emphasising the authority of the bearer; whilst the flanges, originally designed for offensive purposes, became vestigial and ornamental, losing all functional significance. This reversal is clearly demonstrated on the memorial brass of John Borrell (1531) one of the Sergeant-at-arms of Henry VIII (Fig 4). The ceremonial use of the mace is supported by pictorial evidence.¹⁸

'Serjeauntes of armez' are described in the *Black Book* as 'chosen prouyd men of conduction and of honour'.¹⁹ From *The Ordinances* of 1526 made for Henry VIII's household and chamber, we learn that officers must be 'both honeft in their yefture and behaveour and alfo experte in fuche rourmes and offices as be duputed unto theym'.²⁰ Further evidence concerning the status of Sergeants-at-arms comes from a manuscript in the British Museum entitled 'The Office of a



Fig 4. Memorial brass of John Borrell (d. 1531), Sergeant-at-arms (Broxbourne, Herts)

Seriante at Armes Attendinge the Kings Ma^{tie}²¹ which states:

... and knowe that in Tymes paste Noe gentleman performed the servis of a Sericante of Armes nor was evere Sworne to the kinge yf hee wear not the sonne of a knighte at the leaste, but of late tyme it hath pleased our soveringe to ellecte the worthie sonne of a gentleman therunto without Reproche.

The number of royal Sergeants-at-arms was usually limited to 30, although this number was exceeded by Henry VIII. Appointments were usually for life, and normally made by Letters Patent, but sometimes by Lord Chamberlain's Warrant. The following entry from the *Calendar of Patent Rolls* is typical:

Grant for life to Thomas Penyngton, King's Servant, of the office of one of the King's Serjeant-at-arms, with 12d a day at the receipt of the Exchequer and other emoluments and a gown at Christmas of the suit of Serjeants or esquires of the household.²²

There are many references in the State Papers and Calendars to the duties of the Sergeant-at-arms. In essence, the duties of the Sergeant-at-arms may be divided into three areas: their function admirably defined by Giles Jacobs in 1772 'to attend the person of the King to arrest persons of condition offending, and give attendance to the Lord High Steward of England, sitting in judgement on a traitor'.²³ But the duties were far more comprehensive and wide-ranging than this definition probably suggests. As Major-General Sitwell, in his detailed study of 'Royal Sargeants-at-arms and the royal maces' has shown: 'In addition to arrest, a Sergeant-at-arms was used to impress arms, transport, or men in the King's Service, as a messenger or envoy, and in war as a harbinger. He also served on Royal Commissions concerned with smuggling, piracy and similar matters.'²⁴ The Sergeant-at-arms also provided escort duties for the Sovereign on state and ceremonial occasions.²⁵

No letters patent or warrant of appointment survive for Felmingham; neither is he included in the fairly frequent listings of sergeants in post, for new appointments upon a vacancy arising.

In addition to the wages of 12d per day, the Sergeant-at-arms was entitled to incident fees for his most important responsibility, that of arresting and escorting prisoners. These fees were levied upon immediate execution of duty, and the amounts are specified in Harley 297 and Rawlinson B120, the latter is transcribed in the Appendix.

What do we know of the appearance of the Sergeant-at-arms in the 16th century? Harley

297 states that every Royal Sergeant should stand before the king 'in suche fashion attired his head bare and all his Bodye armed to the feete with the armes of a knighte Ridinge with a peione [feathered dart] Roiall or mace of Silvere in his Right hande and in his Lefte hande a litle Troncheane'.

On Christmas Day Sergeants were issued with a gown from the Great Wardrobe. In 1538 John Knottesford²⁶ was appointed to the office and granted six yards of 'tawny melley' (brownish purple) with trimmings of good 'boge' (lambs' wool) for a cloak. The colour tawny was much used in liveries and when Henry VIII entertained the French King at Calais in 1533 all the 'seruyng menne of England' wore coats of French tawny.²⁷ 'Melley' or murrey was a favourite colour and there are frequent references to its use in the Great Wardrobe.²⁸ The only other indications of appearance come from pictorial sources, and by and large these depict state or ceremonial occasions of formal splendour. The marvellous painting of *The Field of the Cloth of Gold* in the Royal Collection at Hampton Court, shows Gentlemen flanked by mounted mace-bearers: Sergeants-at-arms. The clearest and most intriguing image of a Sergeant-at-arms comes from the Great Tournament Roll of Westminster. The tournament was held at Westminster on New Year's Day, in 1511, to celebrate the birth of a son to Queen Katherine and Henry VIII. The scenes were commemorated on a huge vellum roll. Membrane 3 (see cover illustration) shows a Sergeant-at-arms holding a silver-gilt mace surmounted by an open-work crown in his right hand.

APPENDIX

Transcription of Bodleian Library Rawlinson Manuscript B120 11491 221V

A perfect demostrocion of all fuch infident fees and duties as belongeth to a Serjant at armes to be always levied at y^e execution of y^e fd office

A Serjant at Armes may arreft any Subject in the fower feas. The kinges eldefte fonne and alfoe the Ladies his daughters onlie excepted

And for the arreft of a Duke, Archby[hopp] or Bif[hopp] the fayd ferjant at Armes ys to have the fome of v^{l^h}, and 10^s for his gard by day

Item he is to have for the arreft of any Marquesse, Barron, Abbott or Prior the fome of x markes and on[e] pound for his gard by day

Item he is to receave every day, that he rideth to take or fecke any offendor the fome of xj^s and xiiij^s

Item yow muft note that the horfe faddle and Bridle of everyon arrefted by the Serjant at armes if he rideth the fjant at armes ought to have them

Item yow muft note, that any man arrefted by the Sjant at Armes that pfon is infranchised from all manner of arrefts whatfoever

Item he is to receave of a knight Batchelar or Banneret the fome of 3 markes for his arrefst and a pound for his gard by day

Item he is Receave of a gentleman for his arrefst, one pound and half a pound for his gard by day

Item, yf any be made againft a Serjant at armes in doing of his arrefst, he may rayfe the frengthe of the Countie to affitt him for fo accomplishing his arrefst, yf otherwise he cannot he may breake downe houfes castles and houlds

Item when a Serjeant at Armes is fent of a meffuage of truft to conferr and not to arrefst, then he may not take of a Duke but xx^s and of a Baron as much and alfoe of a Knight gentleman or verlit half a pound

Item, if a fjant at armes be gonn to arrefst any man whom he cannot find yet all times after the price that fhoude gave him arrefsted must pay unto the Serjant all fuch fees as he f'ould have donne if he had him arrefsted

Item if any man fhall denye or with any kind of violence with ftand him in fuch wife as the fayd Serjant cannot make his arrefst that pfon foe mifbehaving himself fhall pay unto the fayd S[er]jant as much as the perfon ought to doe whether he be arrefsted or not

Item yf the fayde Sarjant at Armes fhall fuffer an arrefsted willingie to efcape the shalbe amerfede greevouffie and ranfomed at the Kinges' pleafure

NOTES

¹ Cal. S P Dom. Henry VIII, Vol IV pt 3, Appendix 237.

² Cal. S P Dom. Henry VIII, Vol VII no 962 (ix); Cal. Baga de Secretis (M 6) 30 June, 26 Hen. 8.

³ Cal. S P Dom. Henry VIII, 15 May 1536, no 876 (6).

⁴ PRO E101 420/4 xix.

⁵ PRO E101 421/13.

⁶ Decoration of Cologne stoneware Schnelle. Central panel Madonna and Child, flanked by panels depicting on the left St Catherine with her sword and St Barbara with her tower, 1500–50. Museum of London Accession number Z3453. See also left panel of large folding triptych, oil on wood, by Matthew Grunewald (c.1470/80–1528) in the Royal Collection.

⁷ Nos 721 and 722 both silver-gilt, 15th-century rings, and 723 15th-century gold decade ring, Waterton Collection, all depicting St Barbara in Oman C. C. *Catalogue of Rings F1 Religious subjects and emblems*, p 110, Victoria & Albert Museum, Department of Metalwork, 1930, HMSO.

⁸ Pewter badges, Acc Nos 81.160 and 8733, Museum of London, 15th century.

⁹ Wayment, H. *King's College Chapel, Cambridge: The side-chapel glass*, Ch. 8 'The St Barbara cycle', pp 31–35 and fig 27 f6, g6 and f7, Cambridge Antiquarian Society, 1988.

¹⁰ Blair, C. 'The Emperor Maximilian's gift of armour to Henry VIII and the silvered and engraved armour at the Tower of London' *Archaeologia* **XCIX** (1965), pp 1–52, and Meyrick, Sir Samuel 'Description of the engravings on a German suit of armour made for Henry VIII in the Tower of London' *Archaeologia* **XXII** (1829), pp 106–13.

¹¹ Cat no. 413 Ausschnitt vom Paele-Altar Jan van Eycks (1436) Schwertgurt des Heiligen Georg. zu S. 171, 189 p 365

¹² The hunting hangar or woodknife of Henry VIII, attributed to Diego de Çaias, 1544 bears a personal inscription, HENRICI OCTAVI ... , see Blair, C. 'A Royal Swordsmith and Damascener. Diego de Çaias' *Metropolitan Museum Journal* Vol 3/1970, pp 149–73.

¹³ Roll 103 (127) in *Calendar of Wills proved and enrolled in the Court of Husting, London AD 1258–AD 1688*, ed R. R. Sharpe, Part II, Corporation Record Office, 1890.

¹⁴ Harl. 1552, 186b and 180b, Harl. Soc 32, 1891.

¹⁵ Harl. Soc 25, 1887 Vol I, 1574–5 Marriage licences granted by the Bishop of London 1520–1610.

¹⁶ Myers, A. R. *The Household of Edward IV: Black Book* Manchester University Press, 1959, Section 52 'Sergeauntes of Armes, iiij, b 214, p 131.

¹⁷ Jewitt, L. (ed) Hope W. H. St John *The Corporation Plate and Insignia of Office of the Towns of England and Wales* Vol I Anglesey to Kent, London 1895, p xxxviii.

¹⁸ *A List of Monumental Brasses in the British Isles 1926/A* 1938 under Hertfordshire, p 182, Broxbourne IV John Borrell 'Serjeant-at-arms to Henry VIII, 1531, in arm, holding mace ...', fig 28.

¹⁹ Myers, *op cit* Section 52, iiij, b 214, p. 131.

²⁰ BM Landsdowne Ms Misc 597. The Ordinances of 1526.

²¹ BM Hanley 297 pp 254 *et seq.*

²² PRO Calendar of Patent Rolls Henry VII Part 1 Membrane 34(2) 1485 Nov 4th.

²³ Jacobs, G. *A New Low Dictionary* 1772, O. Puffhead & J. Morgan (eds), London p 335.

²⁴ Sitwell, H. D. W. 'Royal Sergeants-at-Arms and the Royal Maces' *Archaeologica* CII (1969), pp 203–38.

²⁵ Harl. 297.

²⁶ PRO *Great Wardrobe Accounts* HMSO, 1893, Vol XIII, Part II, Henry VIII-5B 11g 967 (5) 1538 3rd Nov.

²⁷ Hall, *Chronicle* 793

²⁸ E 101/209 (1524), E 351/3026 (1548)

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