

# Wyverns of Leicester

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The wyvern is a mythical beast which appears on gables, gates, gravestones, bridges, boundary markers, walls, weather vanes and even chairs in Leicester. This article sets out to answer three questions: What is a wyvern, where does it appear in Leicester, and lastly do wyverns feature in other towns?



*A splendid two-legged wyvern threatening unwanted visitors to No. 2 University Road. (Reproduced by permission of Colin Hyde, East Midlands Oral History Archive).*

The wyvern is part of the family of British heraldic beasts which includes the dragon, griffin, cockatrice, unicorn and opinicus. (1) Interestingly, European heraldry does not include the wyvern, instead calling these beasts 'dragons'. In British heraldry the wyvern is distinguished from the dragon by having two legs or no legs; whilst a dragon always has four legs. As for the rest of their bodies, wyverns and dragons both have membraneous wings, scaly bodies, barbed tails and arrow-headed tongues. In its heraldic form, the wyvern can appear on the shield as a 'charge', or as a crest atop the shield, or on either side as a supporter.

Heraldic mythical beasts are attributed with positive qualities and in this respect wyverns are regarded as a sign of strength to those who bear the symbol. Wyverns also symbolise power and endurance. However, in the bestiaries of the Middle Ages, the wyvern was used as an allegory of Satan, being associated with war, pestilence and sin. It was especially said to spread plague, this being a heinous charge in a medieval Europe which was reeling from the horrors of the Black Death. The medieval alchemists who 'dressed their knowledge in obscure codes and allegories' used the

wyvern to represent matter in its basest of state, the alchemist himself being 'depicted as the worthy knight overcoming the beast, that is, transforming it into gold.' (2)

Today in Leicester, there are ample wyverns to justify the City Council creating a 'Wyvern Trail'. A walk around the Town Hall, Guildhall and market areas in the central area of Leicester alone takes in over 20 wyverns. There are also other hot spots a little further out of the city centre. These include Freeman's Common, the New Walk area and thirdly around the London Road station. With input from Gwyn Jones and Colin Hyde (3) a list of wyvern sightings has been compiled and no doubt there are other examples to be found. The wyverns in Leicester fall into three categories. Firstly 'civic', which are associated with public buildings such as De Montfort Hall; secondly those with railway associations and thirdly a category best described as 'individual' to cover those on buildings which were originally the homes of individuals and business properties.

A major reason for the proliferation of 'civic' wyverns in the centre of Leicester is not hard to find, since the Borough of Leicester's arms are a cinquefoil and wyvern. The Leicester arms were confirmed at the Heraldic Visitation of 1619, but had been in use long before then as the personal devices of the Earls of Leicester. (4) An early document in the Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland Record Office shows the 'Armes and Town Seales used by the Mayor and Burgesses'. Dated March 1681, this document includes a painting of the Borough arms, including the wyvern crest, and the cinquefoil device, although not the wyvern on the several seals.

Both Leicester's old and 'new' town halls prominently feature wyverns. The Guildhall in Guildhall Lane was Leicester's Town Hall from the late fifteenth century so not surprisingly it has wyverns in a variety of forms. When the Mayor's Parlour was 'new built' in 1637 the highly ornamental fireplace surround included the Borough arms with a wyvern crest. In the Great Hall is a ceiling panel also incorporating the wyvern crest, whilst both the Great Hall and Library have chairs topped by carved wyverns. Outside, the weather vane on the building can be seen to incorporate a golden wyvern, this having recently been restored during refurbishment works in 1993, whilst close by, the Borough arms are finely carved on a slate gravestone commemorating Joseph Smith, Macebearer for the Borough for 25 years who died in 1826.



A golden wyvern is incorporated in a ceiling panel in the Great Hall, Leicester Guildhall.



Carved wyvern on chair in the Great Hall, Leicester Guildhall.



Carved wyvern on chair in the Library, Leicester Guildhall.

A selection of sightings at the ‘new’ Town Hall of 1876 in Town Hall Square include a carved wyvern on the opening memorial stone dated 1874, two wyverns carved in stone above the Horsefair Street entrance, whilst in the main entrance are two brass plaques which list the Honorary Freemen of Leicester (1892-1956 and 1961-2001), both of which incorporate the arms with wyvern crest. A particularly accident-prone sandstone wyvern sits on top of the gable to the main façade. On 27th February 2008 the *Leicester Mercury* reported that ‘Part of Leicester Town Hall was damaged when the wing of a stone wyvern - a mythical creature fell off the building’. This was not the first occasion that this particular wyvern posed a health and safety risk: in May 1970 the *Leicester Mercury* reported that ‘the imposing figure of the Leicester Wyvern which dominated the gable over the front entrance to the Town Hall was, seemingly, decapitated. The stone head and beak, weighing some 30lb crashed on to the roof of the building and then fell over 60 feet on to the bonnet of a parked Rover 2000 car, which belonged to the Clerk of the Peace.’ (5)



Stone frieze carved with wyverns, Horsefair Street entrance, Town Hall, Leicester.

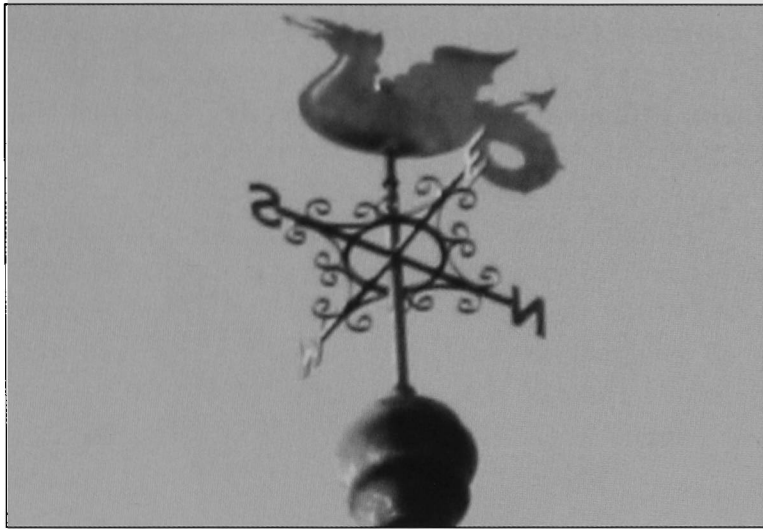
In 1919 Leicester was granted city status and in 1926 the College of Arms allowed two red Lancastrian lion supporters to be added to the original coat of arms, along with the motto ‘Semper Eadem’. These new City arms are included on the Bowling Green Street façade of the Town Hall, part of the extension built in 1925, and they also appear depicted in brick (1989) in Town Hall Square. Not far from the Town Hall, in the entrance of the Bishop Street Library, a metal plaque incorporating the Borough arms commemorates the opening on 8th May 1905 by Andrew Carnegie. (6) Nearby, the NatWest Bank on Granby Street has a stone plaque dated 1869 showing a coat of arms with lion and dragon supporters and a legless wyvern crest. This building was originally the National Provincial Bank, designed by William Millican in 1868. Perhaps this was the coat of arms of the National Provincial Bank, but it is strange that the form of the wyvern is a perfect match for that in the Leicester arms. Heading towards the Market Place, gold wyverns sit atop the clock outside Starbucks on Market Approach and on weather vanes on the Corn Exchange, the Clock Tower (1869) and over a building near British Home Stores on Gallowtree Gate.



Accident-prone wyvern on the main façade of the Town Hall, Leicester.

A second wyvern cluster can be seen by starting at Welford Road, opposite the New Inn public house near the Victoria Park Road junction, where a black cast iron boundary marker ‘Pursuant to the Award of the Commissioner dated August 1891’ incorporates a legless wyvern. Further along Welford Road the wyvern and cinquefoil motifs from the

Borough arms appear at 161 Welford Road on Freeman's Cottages which were built in 1856 and 1885. No. 161 also has a wyvern weather vane. A hundred yards away, the Welford Road Cemetery gates, erected in 1895 to prevent animals from the nearby cattle market straying in, are topped by some curiously oriental looking stone wyverns. These are 2007 replacements and of a different design to the original wyverns, which have disappeared. From this vantage point the golden wyvern atop the weather vane of the Counting House pub on the former cattle market site is visible.



*Freeman's Cottages, 161 Welford Road, Leicester, wyvern weather vane.*



*Oriental looking stone wyvern atop the Welford Road Cemetery gates, Leicester.*

Leicester also has a number of wyverns associated with its railways. A good example which is easy to view is on London Road on the bridge wall on the opposite side of the road to the entrance of the present-day railway station, this is a wyvern crest in the carved sandstone coat of arms of the Midland Railway. The arms include a six-panel shield which incorporates emblems of six of the largest centres that the company reached: Birmingham, Bristol, Derby, Leeds, Leicester (represented by a cinquefoil in the bottom left panel) and Lincoln. Interestingly, the crest for the Midland Railway coat of arms is a legless wyvern identical in form to

that in the Leicester arms. This raises the question, is the Midland Railway wyvern taken from Leicester's arms? This appears likely. One source (7) suggests that the Leicester & Swannington Railway, founded 1832, adopted for its badge the wyvern from the Borough arms. Then when the Midland Railway purchased the Leicester & Swannington Railway in 1845, it adopted the wyvern for the crest in its coat of arms. (8) However, the Midland Railway wyvern is green and red whereas the Leicester wyvern is silver or white.



*Midland Railway coat of arms with wyvern crest, London Road, Leicester.*

The façade of the Leicester London Road station, designed by Charles Trubshaw in 1892, has many stone carvings incorporating urns, cherubs, cornucopia, dolphins but no carved wyverns. However the two splendid tiled 'DEPARTURE' panels are 'propped up' by a two-legged wyvern at each end. In 2008 a traveller emerging from London Road Station and turning towards the town centre will also encounter a wyvern on the wrought iron gates at each end of the pedestrian underpass: these are painted gold, in the same pose as on the Midland Railway crest, and on a red roundel, whilst in the opposite direction going out of town, south along London Road they will see the building 'Wyvern Court' above Shimla Pinks restaurant. A hundred years earlier in 1908 a traveller on the Midland Railway would emerge from London Road Station to see the 'Wyvern Hotel' a 'Commercial & Family Hotel' at 4 Station Road, designed by Arthur Wakerley for the travel agent Thomas Cook.

Not far from the London Road Station, a small flock of wyverns live in the New Walk area. The Museum includes the Borough arms in sandstone on its Waterloo Way and Princess Road West facades, dated 1876 and 1891 respectively. Number 2 University Road, on the corner with

New Walk, has a gable-end wyvern. This building was designed by Stockdale Harrison for Mr Harvey, solicitor, in 1878. The original wyvern was in terracotta but it was lost in 1990 and replaced in 2000 by a glass fibre version created by Graham Morgan, Principal Curator in the School of Archaeological Studies. A stones throw away at 154 Upper New Walk is a second wyvern atop 'The Friars' also designed by Stockdale Harrison (1889). As Stockdale Harrison designed both these wyvern-topped buildings one could conjecture the wyverns were his idea. Continuing to the top of New Walk, the gates near the London Road / Granville Road junction which are dedicated to Kate Eliza North (Lady Mayoress 1914-1918 and the wife of Sir Jonathan North), have metal plaques showing the City arms. The City arms also appear on two façades of the nearby De Montfort Hall (1913).

Other Leicester wyvern sightings require a drive or a rather longer walk around the city. The 1899 façade of the old Glenfield Hospital on Groby Road includes the cinquefoil and wyvern motifs: here the wyvern is painted green, perhaps to contrast with the white background. The Fire Station on Lancaster Road has Leicester's largest wyvern nestling on its roof. This white, cast metal wyvern dates from 1927 and was sculpted by Joseph Henry Morcom, who also designed the Liberty Statue which formerly topped the Liberty Buildings on Eastern Boulevard Leicester.



*Leicester's largest wyvern atop the Fire Station, Lancaster Road, Leicester.*

Colin Hyde has provided details of some further wyvern sightings: a former factory or warehouse on the corner of Southampton and Morledge Streets has a stone plaque over the entrance which includes a coat of arms. The shield is topped by a knight's helmet and on top of that is a cuter than usual legless wyvern.

Colin Hyde has also noted wyverns in Abbey Park: in plaques above the north and main east entrances and also on the pillars opposite the park on Abbey Park Road; at De Montfort University where there are at least three wyverns on the Hawthorn Building in the Newarke; on the bridge over the brook in Spinney Hill Park; wyverns in plaques on tram/bus shelters on Uppingham Road and Western Boulevard; West Bridge on the pillars; and finally in Newarke Street where a building has a wyvern on a little balcony above its entrance. Gwyn Jones adds two more wyverns to the list: on the gable of the Gatehouse Chaplaincy Centre opposite Mayors Walk, University of Leicester and in the design of a gravestone of a former mayor of Leicester at Belgrave Cemetery, near Red Hill Circle.



*Terracotta wyvern, 'Fernleigh', East Avenue, Clarendon Park, Leicester. (Reproduced by permission of Colin Hyde, East Midlands Oral History Archive).*

When a Victorian architect designed a property there was a range of terracotta creatures he could include to top the gable end with. Leicester has at least four such wyverns protecting its rooftops. These may have been chosen because the wyvern was already in people's consciousness through its civic associations or perhaps the architect or homeowner looked through their rooftop furniture catalogue and simply thought 'I'd like one of those splendid beasts'. The two excellent examples on New Walk have already been mentioned. The third example is 'Fernleigh', at 19 East Avenue, Clarendon Park. This was built in 1878 and in 1880 was occupied by Joseph Read, hosiery manufacturer. Its wyvern appears to be the original terracotta one, with patches of lichen. The fourth example is 'Hawthorns' at 12 Knighton Park Road, designed by Isaac Barradale c.1882.

By the early twentieth century a number of Leicester businesses were using the name 'wyvern', perhaps because of familiarity through its civic associations, or maybe a desire to be closely identified with the Borough. It was possible to buy a Wyvern pen, get ones laundry done at the Wyvern Sanitary Laundry, read *The Wyvern*, stay at the Wyvern Hotel and obtain a mortgage from the Wyvern Permanent Building Society. At least two of the above used the wyvern as a logo. A cinquefoil topped by a legless wyvern, very similar to the Borough arms, appears on pen boxes from the Wyvern Fountain Pen Co, Vulcanite Works, Woodboy Street which was founded in 1887.

*The Wyvern*, a 'topical, critical & humorous journal' which cost 1d and was published weekly at the Victoria Buildings, Bowling Green Street, included a legless wyvern and cinquefoil motif on its front page, again, similar to the Borough arms. Regular topics in the journal included 'The Wyvern Library', 'The Wyvern Speaks' and 'The Wyvern Wonders'. The latter sought articles from the public for a prize of five shillings, warning that 'nothing personal, scandalous or vulgar will stand a chance of winning the prize'.

Trade directories further show the proliferation of the name Wyvern. For example, between 1903 and 1916 we find the Wyvern Permanent Building Society, Alliance Chambers, Horsefair Street; Wyvern Sanitary Laundry Co Ltd, Barkby Thorpe Lane; Wyvern Publishing Co at 20 Halford Street (1903), St Martins (1916); Wyvern Works, Friday Street, home of David Hill, boot heel manufacturer until the 1920s. (9) None of these survive today, but there are later occurrences of the wyvern name.

By the late 1940s children attended the Wyvern Infants School on Wyvern Avenue (founded 1933) and their fathers, if freemasons, may have attended meetings at the Wyvern Lodge and driven a Vauxhall Wyvern motor car (however the Vauxhall badge is not a wyvern, but a griffin). Pupils at the City of Leicester Boys' School wore blazers with a wyvern badge and may have joined the 'Green Wyvern Yachting Club'. This was formed in 1947 and took its name from the two schools where the founders taught: the colour of the uniform of Alderman Newton's school, coupled with the wyvern from City Boys'. (10) In 2008 the Freemasons lodge survives, as does Wyvern Primary School which continues to use a wyvern in its badge: a two-legged version.

The wyvern is not solely a Leicester phenomenon: a two-legged wyvern was a symbol of the Kings of Wessex (including Alfred the Great) and the Wessex flag is a gold wyvern on a red background. Its appearance in the Midland Railway crest also results in wyverns appearing in station buildings and bridges elsewhere. A small sample of Internet

wyvern sightings follows: Swindon has a Wyvern Theatre, Herefordshire and Worcestershire folk may listen to Wyvern F M Radio Station or make their own music through purchasing a Wyvern Church Organ. Wyvern Business Systems are Hereford builders of bespoke PCs and Essex University students' magazine is called *Wyvern*. Where the wyvern motif is used, it is almost invariably the two-legged form and colours vary. The Internet also includes references to the legless Mercian wyvern. Whilst the wyvern name is used in business, schools etc., it has never become a surname and is very rarely used as a forename. Interestingly, 'Wyvern' was used as the nom-de-plume of Colonel Arthur Robert Kenney-Herbert of the Madras Cavalry who wrote *Culinary Jottings for Madras* in 1878, although no evidence has been discovered yet to link the Colonel and Leicester.

In conclusion, Wyverns have had a special association with Leicester for at least 400 years: long may they protect our rooftops!

#### Notes and References:

1. A Griffin is a cross between an eagle and a lion; a Cockatrice is a wyvern with a cock's head, comb and wattles; an Opinicus is a griffin with the tail of a bear instead of a lion.
2. Website: <http://www.mythicalrealm.com/creatures/dragon-wyverns.html> accessed January 2008.
3. Colin Hyde, East Midlands Oral History Archive, Centre for Urban History, University of Leicester. Website: [www.le.ac.uk/emoha/leicester/wyverns.html](http://www.le.ac.uk/emoha/leicester/wyverns.html), accessed May 2008. This website includes photographs of Leicester wyverns as well as wyverns further afield.
4. Derek Seaton, *Leicester's Town Hall*, (Leicester City Council, 2004).
5. *Leicester Mercury*. 21st May 1970.
6. Colin Hyde advises that at least one other Leicester library building incorporates a wyvern, including the Garendon Street library in Highfields which has a carved sandstone wyvern over its entrance.
7. Wikipedia Website: <http://www.wikipedia.org/> accessed May 2008.
8. C. Hamilton Ellis, *The Midland Railway* (Ian Allan, 1953).
9. University of Leicester Historical Directories Website: <http://www.historicaldirectories.org/hd/findbykeyword.asp> accessed May 2008.
10. Green Wyvern Yachting Club Website <http://www.users.zenet.co.uk/pmarshall/history.htm> accessed May 2008.