

Beginners Heraldry

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The first point that should be made about heraldry is that there is no such thing as a "Family Coat of Arms". This is a form of marketing used by the "Heraldry for Sale" bucket shops and websites that are becoming a common sight, both on the internet and at highland games all over the world. Armorial bearings, which is a more formal description of a coat of arms, are, at least in Scotland, the personal property of one person only. Displaying arms which are not registered to you, or which you do not have a right to, can lead to prosecution in countries such as Scotland, where heraldry is carefully regulated. In other countries you could just look foolish.

In Scotland all things armorial are governed by the laws of arms administered by the Court of the Lord Lyon. The origin of the office of Lord Lyon is shrouded in the mists of history, but various Acts of Parliament, especially those of 1592 and 1672 supplement the established authority of Lord Lyon and his brother heralds. The Lord Lyon is a great officer of state and has a dual capacity, both ministerial and judicial. In his ministerial capacity, he acts as heraldic advisor to the Sovereign, appoints messengers-at-arms, conducts national ceremony and grants arms. In his judicial role, he decides on questions of succession, authorizes the matriculation of arms, registers pedigrees, which are often used as evidence in the matter of succession to peerages, and of course judges in cases when the Procurator Fiscal prosecutes someone for the wrongful use of arms.

Arms should not be used in Scotland unless they are recorded in the Register of all Arms and Bearings in Scotland. Armorial bearings can be acquired by petitioning the Lord Lyon, but only if you come within his jurisdiction (<http://www.lyon-court.com>). However, in England you would approach the College of Arms (<http://www.college-of-arms.gov.uk>).

A person who has arms is called an armiger (figs1 & 3) and his family is considered armigerous. Men bear their arms on a shield and women on a lozenge or more recently on an oval, although this is not a binding rule. A woman usually uses her husband's arms on a shield (fig1) while he is alive and on an oval or lozenge (fig2) after his death. A daughter may also use her father's arms on an oval or lozenge (fig2). If a daughter marries an armigerous man, she may impale her arms with his (fig4); the impaled arms are usually displayed on a shield, but to be absolutely correct the wife would use a lozenge. If she is an heraldic heiress, that is she has no brothers, her children may then quarter their father's and mother's arms together (fig4a).



fig 1



fig 2



fig 3



fig 4



fig 4a

The next member of an armiger's family with a right to bear their father's arms is the heir; this is the person who will inherit the arms on the death of the armiger, usually the eldest son, unless specified otherwise in the Letters Patent. The heir has the right to use and display the arms but must display them differenced by a label of three points (figs 5,6 & 7). This label stays on the heir's arms during the lifetime of the holder. This shows that he is the heir and that the holder is still living; the label is simply removed when the heir inherits. The label can be of any design or colour as long as it is clearly visible upon the arms.



fig 5



fig 6



fig 7

According to the Scottish laws of heraldry, a younger son has no right to his father's arms but must petition to matriculate from those of his father for his own arms, which will be differenced from his father's. This differencing is often done with a bordure, according to the Stodart system, depending on the birth order of the son: the second son would have a bordure Or (gold), the third Argent (silver), the fourth Gules (red), the fifth Azure (blue) and the sixth Sable (black). It is possible also to difference by the addition of a charge, perhaps from the mother's arms, or by changing the partition lines from perhaps straight to, for example, engrailed.



Bordure Or



Bordure Argent



Bordure Gules



Bordure Azure



Bordure Sable

Any descendant may choose to vary the crest and motto. The original motto would have been chosen at the time of the grant and might well say something about the family. The crest, which is mounted on top of the helmet, would also have done the same but in a symbolic way. Each matriculant can change these two parts of the achievement to refer to himself.



Full Achievement

As mentioned earlier, the armorial bearings are the personal property of the armiger and are protected by law. The arms can be used in many ways (fig 8), such as on silver, stationery, cups, T-shirts, badges, caps, plaques, banners and just about anything else. It is well worth checking with your heraldic authority before making any banners as the size of a banner may be regulated. Bearing arms is an honour and people who bear arms have something to be proud of; armigers are encouraged to display them in every way they can.



(fig 8)

If you have an ancestor who resided in the colonies while your colony was under the jurisdiction of the British crown, ie prior to September 1783 for the USA, and you are a descendant in the male line of that ancestor, then you can petition the Lord Lyon for a grant of arms in memory of that ancestor and also to matriculate those arms, suitably differenced for yourself.

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