

## The History of the Family Crest

The family crest, also known as the coat of arms, enjoys a long and interesting history dating back to ancient times. In fact, the Greeks and African warriors were known to have put special markings on their shields long before Christianity ever existed. The family crest as we have come to know it, however, did not begin to develop until the time of the Crusades of the 1100's.

### Creating the Family Crest from Necessity

Though looked upon today as a novelty item or as a way to connect to past generations, the family crest was originally developed out of pure necessity. During the time of the Crusade, men from a number of countries joined together in battle. In order to survive, it became necessary to form a quick and easy method for visually identifying one another. After all, closed helmets and suits of armor made it virtually impossible to differentiate one person from the next.

In response to this basic need to survive, English knights began wearing special marks on their armor. These symbols were referred to as "arms". This idea caught on quickly throughout all of Europe. Over time, the family crest was added to the surcoats, which were pieces of cloth worn over the armor in order to help keep the armor cooler. The practice of embroidering the family crest, which included symbols and marks referred to as arms, onto these surcoats resulted in the term "coat of arms".

### The Rise of Heralds

As the number and variety of family crests began to grow, it became necessary to designate certain individuals to keep track of them. Those people who were responsible for memorizing the knight's arms and for announcing them to the public during special ceremonies and events were known as heralds. These heralds were considered to be the masters of ceremonies at all public competitions and, over time, they actually became appointed by the court to the position.

### Keeping the Peace

The job of the herald also slowly evolved into that of playing peacekeeper. As ideas for coat of arms designs diminished, it became increasingly common to duplicate family crests. As a result, the very knights that were called upon by the king to work together in protecting the royal crown were battling one another over the rights to the family crest. Obviously, this was not a desirable situation. As such, heralds were called upon by the king to settle these disputes by verifying and recording the coat of arms. In addition, the Royal regulation of 1419 as established by Henry V of England gave the heralds the power to deny the use of a particular family crest.

### Developing a Unique Language

In order to better keep track of the multiple family crests being created, heralds created their own unique language. This language was used to describe the symbols of the family crest, which were officially called the Blazon of Arms. Each of these descriptions was catalogued in the College of Arms that was used throughout the world. These historic records held the same legal binding as deeds. As such, their registration can be researched even to this day and used by anyone with the ability to understand the language developed by the heralds.

As an example, the Tierney family crest is catalogued as "Azure two lines rampant or, supporting a sword proper". In the heraldic language, this means the family crest is a shield with a blue (azure) background containing two gold (or) rampant lions that are holding a sword. Furthermore, these colors and symbols each have their own special meaning. The azure, for example, represents truth and loyalty while the or stands for elevation of mind and generosity. Similarly, the lions are representative of courage and of strength.

### Additional Uses of the Family Crest

In addition to being used by knights to identify one another in battle, the family crest was used for a variety of other purposes. For example, the family crest was generally easier to recognize than the written word. In addition, many people during the time of their development were unable to read and to write. Therefore, the family crest was routinely engraved in a ring, which the wearer used in order to create his or her official signature on documents.

The coat of arms was also routinely used in wedding ceremonies in order to symbolize the joining of two families. By displaying the family crest of both the bride and the groom, the importance of both families was easily demonstrated to the families and friends of the happy couple. Today, they

can be used in much the same way.

### About the Author

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