

## Shields and Armour

Shields have always been used to block hand weapons such as swords and axes as well as arrows. Over time shields have been made with a number of different materials such as wood, metal and even in the earliest times, from animal skins.

Different times and different weapons meant that shields had to develop to protect the soldiers using them, so there are many different examples of shapes, sizes and weights.

During the Middle Ages (in the time of William the Conqueror), kite shields were used. They were shaped like a kite, but more rounded at the top.

These shields were very heavy and because they were quite long, it meant that the soldiers couldn't move very quickly in battle, but they could protect their whole body with them. They could hold them over their heads to protect them from arrows, and they could hold them in front to stop axe, sword and spear attacks. But they were hard to use in attacking because one hand/arm had to be holding the shield while the other hand was used to fight back with a sword, axe or spear.

Eventually, the kite shield was given up and round shields became more common.

Because these shields were smaller and less heavy, the soldiers could move much more quickly on the battlefield whilst still protecting their bodies when fighting.

Shields were still used even after cannons and guns were invented, because they did sometimes help to protect the soldiers. As weapons became more advanced, so did shields.

Metal shields were made and even though they were very heavy to begin with, they became lighter as new metals and new ways of making them were discovered.

Shields are still used today by the police and armed forces; riot shields are widely in use around the world. They are made from more advanced materials such as thick bulletproof plastic which is light and easy to use.

The police and armed forces also have protection included in clothing, such as bullet proof vests, and their boots and gloves also have extra protection built in too.

## Coats of Arms

### So, how did shields become Coats of Arms?

The ancient Romans used various symbols called insignia on their shields so that they could identify their various military units of soldiers.

But the possible first real use of what we now know as coats of arms is portrayed in the Bayeux Tapestry which illustrates the Norman invasion of 1066, where some of the soldiers are carrying shields that have crosses and other symbols painted on them.

However, by the 1100's, coats of arms came into more general use by feudal lords and knights in battle to identify their soldiers and their opponents.

By the 1200's, coats of arms had become a flag or emblem for noble families and inherited from one generation to the next.

In Britain only the aristocracy had the right to arms, with their serfs, servants and knights having these emblems as part of their 'uniform' when fighting on the battlefield for their Lord and Master.

Eventually, the use of arms spread to the clergy, to towns, and to places such as universities and trading companies; and so flags developed from coats of arms.

The coats of arms that we are familiar with today were originally one person's emblem, and are legal property which are passed from father to son, however, wives and daughters could bear modified arms to show that they were related to the current holder.

Other relatives of the original bearer of arms could use the family coat of arms but with a little bit of difference; maybe a colour change or an extra emblem.

Coats of arms were very important in identifying people, and were used in seals on important legal documents, and so their use was closely controlled.

All coats of arms were tracked and recorded by heralds or agents to the King or Queen and so the study of coats of arms is called 'heraldry'

### Did you know that the colours, animal, fruits, flowers and other objects used on the coats of arms all have different meanings?

Here are some of the meanings of the most used colours:

- **White** stands for purity, innocence, peace and honesty
- **Gold** stands for wisdom, glory, generosity and grandness
- **Green** stands for happiness, love, and well-being
- **Red** stands for strength and bravery

- **Purple** stands for justice, and is a royal colour used by Kings and Queens
- **Black** stands for wisdom and sometimes grief
- **Blue** stands for truth, strength and honour

The animals, fruit and flowers on coats of arms also have special meanings, here are some of the most used ones:

- **Apples, berries and grapes** mean kindness, happiness and peace
- **Bay leaves** stands for a poet or triumph
- **Oak trees or leaves** mean great strength and age
- **Olive branches or leaves** stand for peace and harmony
- **Roses** are the mark of the seventh son - a **red rose** means grace and beauty; a **white rose** means love and faith
- **Bear** stands for strength, cunning and defending your family
- **Dolphin** means swiftness, love, charity and salvation
- **Dove** means love and peace
- **Eagle** is the sign for someone with a noble nature, bravery, strength and protection
- **Elephant** means strength, happiness, luck and royalty
- **Horse** stands for being ready for anything to do good for King and country
- **Lamb** means gentleness and patience
- **Lion** stands for great courage
- **Stag** or stag's antlers means peace, harmony, strength and stamina
- **Swan** means light, love, grace and perfection
- **Tiger** stands for fierceness, bravery and fury

Mythological creatures are also often used on coats of arms and these also have special meanings:

- **Dragon** stands for defender of treasure, courage and protection
- **Mermaid** means eloquence

- **Pegasus (a winged horse)** is the sign for inspiration and is considered a messenger of God
- **Phoenix** is a symbol of resurrection
- **Sphinx** stands for secrecy and knowledge
- **Unicorn (a horse with one horn)** stands for extreme bravery, strength and truth

Crosses and angels are a sign of Christianity, and stand for dignity, honour and glory – here are some other meanings of the different angels and crosses you sometimes find on coats of arms –

- An **angel** or a **cherub** means dignity, glory and honour and joyful news
- **Cross** is a sign for faith and service in the Crusades
- **Celtic Cross** shows heaven and earth as one
- **Cross Flory (flowered at each end)** means one who has conquered
- **Seraphim (angel with three pairs of wings)** means bearer of joyful news

Some other objects are also included on coats of arms, here are the meanings for some of these:

- **Anchor** means hope
- **Bells** mean the banning of evil spirits
- **Harp** stands for the bridge between heaven and earth and also for a person who has good judgement
- **Plume of feathers** is a sign of obedience and peaceful minds
- **Shell** stands for a traveller to far off places
- **Sword, dagger or dart** shows justice and military honour

We hope you have enjoyed learning a bit about shields and coats of arms.

Don't forget you can have a go at designing your own coat of arms or shield with our activity page.

Perhaps you can use some of the symbols and colours we've mentioned to describe you or your family?

Have fun!