

The Coat of Arms is Wrong!

(and what do I mean by that)

Well, for a start it can't actually be wrong - by definition. It is what it is and it was granted by the Royal College of Heraldry so that's that. But there is actually more to that than one might imagine and I shall explain why.

First, I must pay tribute to the author of the interesting article in the April e-Newsletter and for the interest it piqued in me. And we should all be most grateful to our Senior Past Master (and Father of the Company), Derek Foster, for the initiatives which have given us the Master's badge and the aforementioned coat of arms.

So why might the coat of arms be 'wrong'? The answer lies in some of our other treasure. Some years ago, when we used to store our treasure at the old Butchers' Hall, I was taking part in the annual audit and polish. I had in my hands one of the oldest and grandest of our many outstanding pieces of silver, a handsome and heavy, large, silver tankard. (I always thought of it as the Clerk's tankard and perhaps yearned for it to be filled.)



The tankard dates from circa 1700 (as does the Beadle's staff) and on both there are early (original?) iterations of the coat of arms, but herein lies the mystery. When the modern arms were granted in 1987 why were the supporters reversed? To explain: why was Adam put on the left and Eve on the right? Examination of the 1700 versions has them the other way round! Just to add to the confusion, if confusion there is, they are described as Adam on the dexter (right side) and Eve on the sinister (left side) which is as if they are looking at us and not us at them. To be strictly correct it is to the right or to the left as seen by someone carrying a shield with the escutcheon on it.

When Adam and Eve made their first entrance is not known. Examination of our original 1656 documents shows that the Cromwellian charter has no badges or coat of arms while the original Ordinances have a blue shield with the familiar three needles surmounted by three coronets. It is the same with the Royal charter of 1664 and their later Ordinances. (All of these are beautifully illustrated in the most recent history by Liveryman Rodney Edrich, and not least on the front cover.) So, between

1664 and 1700 someone with biblical knowledge came up with the idea of a coat of arms and this was regularly introduced onto pieces of silver though it was never official.

Examination of the old Master's jewel (also illustrated in the same article) shows that the rot had set in by the time it was made, ie Adam is on the left. It predates the grant of arms. The case for that jewel is not improved by the fact that the shield with the three needles is wrong too! It is quite clear from their earliest appearances that the three needles are not the same: the middle one is longer than the other two. Oops! Another bit of artistic licence (or something).

I have also seen reference to an early coat of arms which had as a crest the figure of a Moor. It was said that the art or mystery of needlemaking had its origins in North Africa or at least somewhere in the middle east. This figure disappeared a long time ago and I can think of no case for its restoration, even if the Royal College could be persuaded. The facts about the origin of the trade do not point in that direction anyway. Whether it refers to Arabs plying their trade in Toledo where some manufacturing is said to have begun, would not justify it.

So beware anyone who goes down the road of new items or new prints or any representation or reproduction of our badges, shields or coats of arms. The pitfalls are many and future generations will be grateful if you navigate them successfully. Meanwhile, why and when was the swap made? It's not very gallant for Adam to stand on the right: that's where the lady should be, always.

Philip R Grant