History and Insignia of the Mayor

The Borough Arms

The Arms of the Borough of Reading were granted by the College of Heralds in 1953.

The Shield is supported by two white rams with golden horns and hooves. They represent the early wool trade of Reading. The ram on the left-hand side of the shield bears a portcullis on its shoulder, which represents the Borough. The sign on the shoulder of the other ram represents two springs, symbolic of the rivers Thames and Kennet, which flow through Reading.

The Crest is represented by an Abbot’s mitre encircled at its base by alternating gold escallop shells and lyres. The mitre commemorates the once magnificent Reading Abbey; the escallop shells (once used as badges by pilgrims) represent the pilgrims or palmers who came there: the lyres are symbolic of the Abbey’s musical fame.

Before this time the Arms consisted merely of the blue shield with the five maidens’ heads. The Motto is: A Deo et Regina (With God and Queen).

These arms were granted in 1566, and were based on the common seal of the town, which was in use as early as 1365. In this seal, still in use today, the heads are those of men, the middle one wearing a Saxon crown. It has been suggested that the central head represented Edward, King of the English (975-8), assassinated at the instigation of his stepmother, Queen Elfrida, in order that her own son should occupy the throne. In expiation of her crime, Elfrida founded a nunnery at Reading on the site of St Mary’s Church.

The letters ‘RE’ are found on the Arms of the 1566 grant but omitted in the one of 1623 and subsequently until they were restored in 1953.

The exact meaning of the letters ‘RE’ is not known. Some authorities consider that they stood for the first two letters of the name of the town. As their first known use was in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, some consider that they stood for Regina Elizabetha. Their re-introduction in the present Borough Arms may also be regarded as a tribute to Queen Elizabeth II, in whose coronation year these new arms were granted.

The Mayor continues to use the Borough Arms.
The Chain

Whenever the Mayor is carrying out an official duty, he/she wears the Chain of Office. It consists of 17 links, which are silver gilt, together with two coats of arms. Each link carries the name of a former Mayor on the front; the reverse is inscribed with the name of the Mayoress or escort, and a few words about the most significant event of the Mayor’s year.

Every year, a new link is added with the previous Mayor’s name. The chain used to get longer and longer, until in the 1920’s it went three times around the Mayor’s neck and became very heavy. Since then the oldest link has been taken off each.

In 1897, Queen Victoria sent a badge of the Royal Coat of Arms to every Mayor in England, to commemorate her Diamond Jubilee. The badge should have been returned the next year, but Reading failed do so. When Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh visited the old Civic Centre when it was first opened in 1978, the Duke noticed the badge and enquired why it was still in our possession. We sought permission to keep it and now Reading’s chain is the only one in the country now to carry this particular badge.

Below the Royal Coat of Arms there is a pendant with the Arms of the Borough of Reading. This pendant is fairly new, dating from 1953 when the present Arms were granted. The Deputy Mayor’s Chain of Office has the pendant with the previous Arms, and the Mayoress’ chain has a badge representing the ancient Common Seal of the Borough.

The Mace

The Mace is a symbol of Royal authority, and was developed from a weapon of war - without doubt the most primitive of all weapons produced by man. Today's ceremonial mace is an ornamental descendant of this club or bludgeon. Possibly the first representations of the mace as a weapon of war are those shown in the Bayeux Tapestry, which dates from the second half of the eleventh century. Here William is seen flourishing such a weapon in its simplest form and his half-brother, the Bishop of Bayeux, is similarly armed - the mace being the only protective weapon ecclesiastics were permitted to wield.

A blow from a mace in the hands of a powerful warrior proved a very effective weapon and mail armour did not provide much protection to its wearer. Steel plates and helmets were introduced and as a consequence more effective improvements were made to the mace. Many maces had balls at the hitting end which were sometimes fashioned with four or more spikes and capable when used with force of penetrating the armour.
The mace went out of use in England as a military weapon in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603).

As the civic use of the mace (as an emblem of authority) increased over its military use so did the bell with the royal arms grow in size becoming more and more elaborate.

Probably the two most notable and well-known maces are those of the House of Lords and the House of Commons. These are very similar, both being of silver and richly gilded.

Other countries with historic maces of note are America, Jamaica, Grenada, Ireland, Bahamas, Barbados, India and Sri Lanka.

The present mace dates from 1769 but it is only the latest of a series of such insignia.

The original mace was made in 1458 in the reign of Henry VI when one Richard Goldsmith was paid 3s.4d. for making a mace. However, the Mayor was forbidden the right to use it until 1487, in the reign of Henry VII. In 1525, in the reign of Henry VIII, there is reference in the corporation diary to "a mace garnished with silver" and in 1545 a note of the delivery of the plate with two silver maces, one of which is called, in 1528, "le new masse". In 1546 there is an entry recording the delivery of new maces, probably made from the metal of the plate and maces in the preceding year. Later the two maces were made into one.

In 1651, after the execution of Charles I, a new mace was made at a cost of £44.12s.0d. It was silver gilt, weighed 91½ oz, and the cross and the King's arms were removed, being replaced by the State's arms. The old mace was sold for £14.7s.0d.

In 1660, at the succession of Charles II, it was agreed that the King's arms should be replaced.

In November 1769 the present mace was ordered as the old one was damaged through age. The new one was to weigh about 160 oz. In February 1770 the new mace was approved and the old one disposed of.

The following description of the mace is given in Llewellyn Jewitt's "The Corporation Plate and Insignia of Office", Vol I, 1895:

"The insignia and plate consist of a mace, a Mayor's chain and badge of office, two tipped staves, a loving cup, a prize cup, a tankard, wardens' badges, sergeants'-at-mace clasp, and the borough seal.

The mace, which is of the usual form with open arched crown, is of silver-gilt, and is 4 feet 1 inch in extreme length. On the flat plate at the top, under the open arches of the crown, are the royal arms of George III, in high relief. The circlet is composed of four highly ornate crosses-pattées, from which spring the arches of the crown, and four fleurs-de-lis. Around the head, which is divided into four oval compartments by simple scroll work, are, respectively, the rose, the thistle, the harp, and the fleur-de-lis, each crowned and between the royal
The Mayoral Robes

When the Mayor is robed, the Mace is always present. It is carried before him/her in processions. Normally the crown is upwards, but in the presence of the Sovereign it is reversed to symbolise that the authority has gone back to the sovereign for the period she is in the borough. The crown should always be towards the Mayor.

On a small number of special occasions, about six times a year, the Mayor wears her official robes and is accompanied by the Managing Director and by the Mace-bearer with the Mace.

The Mayor's robes are of scarlet wool, and were trimmed with real fur. In August 2000 the robes were in need of repair and it was decided then to replace the fur with fake fur. The same robe is used, whether the Mayor is short or tall, male or female. The Mayor also wears a hat with a gold flash - a man wears it with the points to the sides, a woman with one point to the front.

The Deputy Mayor has a blue robe and a hat with a silver flash.

The Mace Bearer wears the third robe. The clasp on this robe is one of the oldest items owned by the Council. It was lost for many years, but turned up in a jeweller's shop, from which it was bought back for the Borough.