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A RARE ST. GEORGE BADGE ON A COLLAR OF SS, FROM THE TOMB OF SIMON DIGBY (d.1520) IN COLESHILL CHURCH, WARWICKSHIRE

MICHAEL P. BODMAN

Abstract

The curious case of a pendant usually associated with the Order of the Garter attached to a Lancastrian livery collar, for which possible explanations are propounded.

Today, we automatically associate the greater and lesser ‘St. George slaying the dragon’ with being a part of the insignia of the Most Noble Order of the Garter, the world’s oldest National order of knighthood in continuous existence, founded in 1348, by King Edward III. Nonetheless, a forgotten badge of St. George slaying the dragon being appended to a Lancastrian livery collar of SS has recently come to light. The subject is Simon Digby’s funeral effigy, in the Church of Coleshill St. Peter and St. Paul, Warwickshire (**Figures 1 and 2**). In the Victorian era, James Robinson Planché was sent a drawing of such a collar, but was unable to report its source. He wrote: “The collar of the order of the Garter with the great and lesser George, as now worn, was added to the badge of the order apparently by King Henry VIII., in portraits of whose time at least it is first depicted. Previously to that period the figure of St. George slaying the dragon was worn appended to family collars or simply gold chains. I have unfortunately lost a drawing made by a friend, now deceased, of a rare example of a St. George appended to a collar of SS., and cannot remember in what church he found the effigy.”¹

In the earlier fifteenth century the SS collar was typically held together with an ornamental trefoil connector known as a turet, sometimes with a ring suspended. Other types of pendant are known, including the royal badges of the swan and the lion.² After 1461 the Yorkists introduced their own suns and roses collar, with the Lion of March badge, a personal emblem of King Edward IV, forming the pendant. Richard III kept the same collar but replaced the lion with his own boar badge. Henry VII then reinstated the SS collar, and in the later Tudor period a variety of pendants were used, all of them royal badges, including the rose and the portcullis.

¹ James Robinson Planché, *A Cyclopaedia Of Costume, or Dictionary of Dress*, 2 vols (London 1876–79) vol 1 p. 123.

² C.E.J. Smith, ‘The livery collar’, COA no 151 (1990) pp.238–53. For a recent in depth analysis of the social milieu see Matthew Ward, *The livery collar in late medieval England and Wales: politics, identity and affinity* (Woodbridge, 2016).

A BADGE OF ST GEORGE



Figure 1: Simon Digby and the chain of his collar of SS. Photograph by Paul A Fox

The monument was recorded in the 1920s in the journals of two archaeological societies, but without comment on the strangeness of the observed attachment of the figure of St George slaying a dragon to a Lancastrian livery collar.³ The earliest known example of the pendant of St. George slaying the dragon appended to a collar of a Knight of the Garter is that worn by Robert Lord Willoughby of Broke, K.G. (d.1502) on his tomb in the Church of Callington St. Mary, Cornwall (**Figure 3**). The pendant, of the type which later came to be known as the Great George (**Figure 4**), is quite similar in design to that on Digby's tomb (**Figure 5**). It is generally considered that the Garter Collar, which had red roses encircled by representations of the Garter alternating with golden knots, was invented during the reign of King Henry VII.⁴ There is literary record of other such collars being worn in 1502, while another was dispatched to the Emperor Maximilian the following year.⁵

³ P. B. Chatwin, 'Monumental effigies in Warwickshire; Part III, *Trans Birmingham Archaeol Soc*, 48 (1922) pp 136–168 (147); *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle-upon-Tyne* vol 10 (1923) p.207. For a detailed account of the Digby heraldry see Charles Crisp 'The Digby tombs at Coleshill' *COA* no.16 (1953) pp.287–93.

⁴ Guy Stair Sainty and Rafal Heydel-Mankoo, *Burke's Peerage World orders of knighthood and merit*, 2 vols (Wilmington DE, 2006) vol 1 pp 241–55 (249).

⁵ Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas, *History of the orders of knights of the British Empire* 4 vols (London, 1841–2) vol 2 pp.349–50.

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*Figure 2: The Great George appendant to Simon Digby's Lancastrian livery collar.
Photograph by Paul A Fox*

A BADGE OF ST GEORGE

Simon Digby was not a Knight of the Garter and in fact he was never knighted, but he did nevertheless enjoy exalted status as a member of the royal household and as a close associate of Henry VII. Coming from a Leicestershire–Rutland knightly family it is not too surprising that he and three of his brothers fought for Henry VII at Bosworth Field in 1485, their father Sir Everard Digby having died fighting for the House of Lancaster at the Battle of Towton in 1461. Between 1486 and 1495 the king granted his servant Simon Digby, esquire, manors in Warwickshire, Rutland, Yorkshire, Surrey and Suffolk, together with a forestership in the Sherwood Forest.⁶ By 1495 he also held the important position of lieutenant constable of the Tower of London. Both constables of the Tower during his lieutenancy, namely John de Vere, earl of Oxford (d.1513), and Sir Thomas Lovell (d.1524) were Garter knights, elected in 1485/6 and before 1503, respectively.⁷ Digby served as sheriff of Notts and Derbys in 1504–5 and twice as sheriff of Warwicks and Leics, in 1509–10 and 1517–18.⁸ One possibility, suggested to me by Timothy Duke, is that Simon Digby's St George was some sort of personal badge, a reflection of the authority of his powerful employers. It is a matter of record that the figure of St. George slaying the dragon was notably popular in Nottinghamshire during Digby's lifetime. To quote James Thompson, "Originally pertaining to the Earls of Leicester, it was in time adopted by their vassals, the ancient burgesses, and no doubt it figured on the flag under which they served in war. We find it, indeed, distinctly alluded to in an ancient ballad, composed immediately after the coronation of Edward IV., by a Yorkist, principally relating to the Battle of Towton. It enumerates by their banners the chief towns which sent men to aid the victorious party, and to avenge the invasion of the South by the Northerners. After naming various places by a reference to the badge or crest used by the inhabitants in their corporate capacity, it proceeds in the following manner, the phraseology being adapted to the present day

*The wolf came from Worcester, full sure he thought to bite,
The dragon came from Gloucester, he bent his tail to smite,
The griffin came from Leicester, flying in as tight,
The George came from Nottingham, with spear for to fight.*"⁹

It is also of some interest that at Digby's principal manor of Coleshill in Warwicks during his lifetime there was an inn called *The George*.¹⁰

It might be objected that the Lancastrian livery collar was the personal gift of the king, and that for a man who was frequently in the king's presence to attach a personal

⁶ CPR Henry VII vol 1 pp 91, 127,222,252, vol 2 pp 44,65. For a detailed account see Michael P. Bodman, 'The parentage of Simon Digby (d.1520) from Leicester, deputy lieutenant of the Tower of London', *Foundations* vol 11 (2019) pp.85–101.

⁷ James Ross, John de Vere, Thirteenth Earl of Oxford (1442–1513): the Foremost Man of the Kingdom (2011) p.99; Steven Gunn, *Henry VIII's new men and the making of Tudor England* (Oxford, 2016) pp 125–6; Harold Sands, 'Extracts from the Documentary History of the Tower of London' *Archaeological Journal*, 70, no. 277 (1913): pp 17–32 (19).

⁸ PRO Lists and Indexes vol 9 (London, 1898) pp 104,146.

⁹ James Thompson, "The Early Heraldry of Leicestershire", in: *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, 1 (1855) pp. 43–53.

¹⁰ Andrew Watkin, *Humphrey Ryddell and the Swan at Coleshill*, (Univ Leicester Research Publications, 2016 online at ira.le.ac.uk).

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Figure 3: Effigy of Robert Lord Willoughby of Broke (d.1502), Callington church Cornwall showing his Garter Collar and Great George. Source: Wikipedia.

A BADGE OF ST GEORGE



Figure 4: Great George made for William Compton 1st duke of Northampton in 1628–9 © Trustees of the British Museum

device would have been to show great disrespect. Moreover, the Great George had become established as one of the badges of a Garter Knight. Perhaps then *the George* was given to Digby by the king himself with instructions to attach it to his livery collar. Only one context has so far suggested itself in which such a gift would have been appropriate and that would be if Digby had served as Usher (or deputy usher) of the Black Rod to the Order of the Garter. The list of those who held this position is fragmentary during this period, and thus the possibility cannot be ruled out.¹¹ The special badge of a rose to be worn by the Usher about his neck was devised in 1543, while in 1566 it was stipulated that the postholder's badge thereafter would be a knot within a garter, suspended from a gold chain.¹² In any case, Simon Digby's Lancastrian livery collar of SS terminating in

¹¹ Nicolas op cit vol2 appdx p.lxxxvii

¹² Nicolas vol 2 pp 464–7.

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Figure 5: Detail of Simon Digby's Great George. Photograph by Paul A Fox.

a pendant of St. George slaying the dragon, is an anomaly, and the only one of its kind ever to be found in Great Britain.¹³

¹³ The author wishes to thank Timothy Duke, Norroy & Ulster King of Arms, Professor Steven Gunn, of Merton College Oxford, and Dr. Tobias Capwell, Curator of Arms and Armour at the Wallace Collection for their interesting discussions on the pendant; and final thanks to Mike Walpole the acting secretary of Coleshill parish church, who provided photographs. Author's contact email: mikcat@sbcglobal.net