

THE COAT OF ARMS

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THE HERALDIC COMPARTMENT

YVONNE HOLTON
Dingwall Pursuivant

Abstract

The heraldic compartment has its origin in Scotland, where it has developed the sense of being a representation the land or territory held by the bearer. The principal alternative to it is the 'gas bracket' arrangement underneath the supporters. This is common in England, but much less used in Scotland. Of the numerous examples here provided from the Lyon Register over the last one hundred or so years, about half of the compartments are given no specific structure in the blazon, although an increasing tendency to provide such instructions can be discerned. This lack of direction has proved to be fertile territory for the heraldic artist.

The definition of a compartment in the context of an artistic design is that of an ornamental subdivision. The term was first used in the heraldic context by Guillim in 1610 with reference to an ornamental scroll bearing a motto.¹ Nisbett defined the compartment as the figure upon which the shield and supporters usually stand or rest.² As recently as a hundred years ago use of the heraldic term compartment was more or less confined to Scottish heraldry, the evolution of this device to become something quite significant in its own right having been an innovation of the Lyon Register.³ There are Scottish seals from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries which support an early origin to the idea that the compartment was occasionally used to represent the territory of the bearer, and might therefore be charged with specific devices pertaining to that particular territory. The design of the compartment came increasingly to reflect the fact that it represented a piece of land or stretch of water on which the supporters of the shield rested. Perhaps because the concept of the compartment has never fully acquired heraldic respectability, there has been a disinclination even in Scots heraldry to formally blazon the compartment, so that, in the words of Fox-Davies, its design often becomes one of mere artistic fancy, with no fixed rules to regulate or control, nothing to check the imagination of the heraldic artist, who is thus allowed considerable latitude.

This article surveys this Cinderella topic, taking examples of the use of the compartment from the Public Register of Arms in Scotland over the past one hundred

¹ Guillim, *Display of heraldry* (London, 1610)

² Alexander Nisbett, *A system of heraldry, speculative and practical, with the true art of blazon* (2 vols Edinburgh, 1722) vol 2 pp 133-6 (133).

³ Arthur Charles Fox-Davies, *The art of heraldry* (London, 1904) pp. 324-6 (324).

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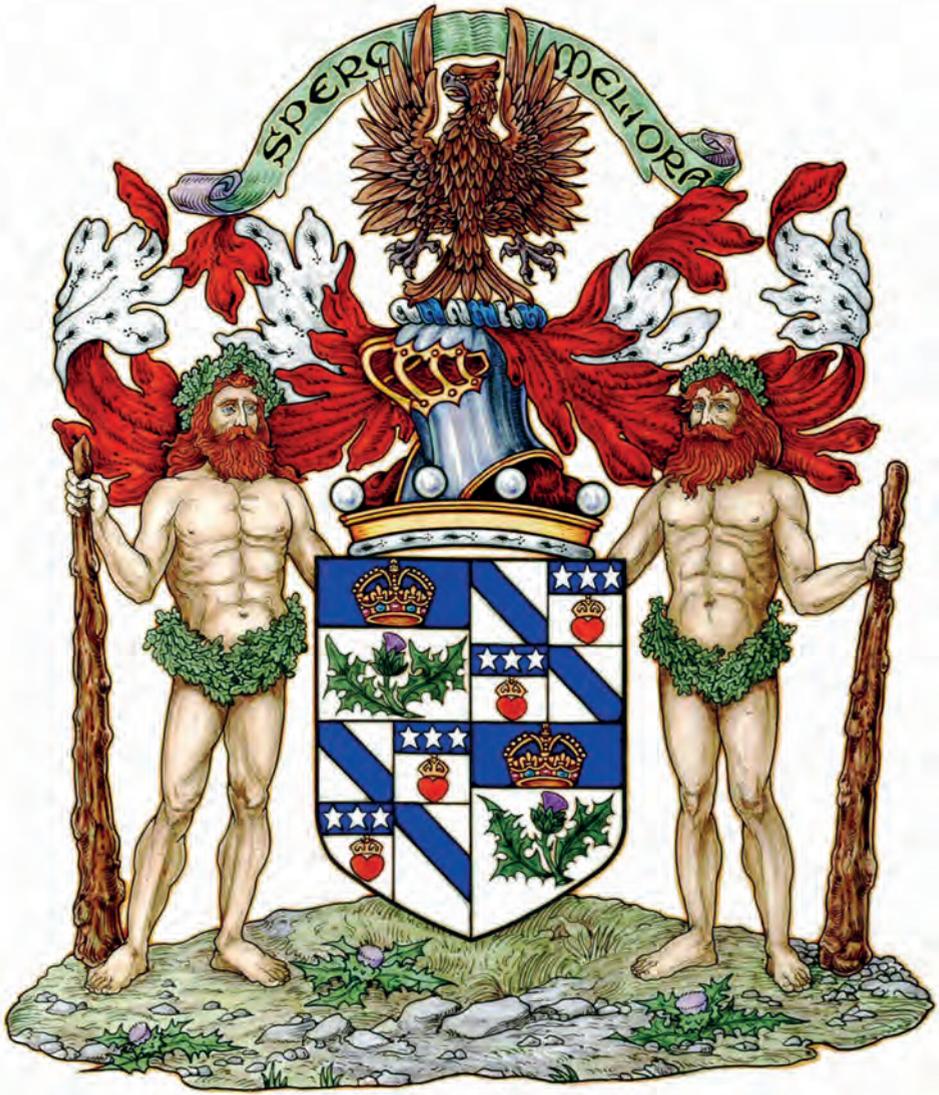


Figure 1: The Right Honourable James Walter Sandilands, Baron Torphichen
Lyon Register Vol 21 f. 15.
April 1912

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Figure 2: Donald MacLaren of MacLaren and Achleskine
Lyon Register Vol 42 f.119
February 1958

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years. From my personal perspective as an heraldic artist the compartment offers a freedom of expression in a discipline which is otherwise pretty constricted by blazon. The modern development of the compartment is a subject which has never really been addressed or studied in any great detail, yet is rich with interest. Examples will be given of the work of numerous artists, myself included.

Normally in Scotland, compartments are comprised of a ‘grassy’ mound or of hills unless the blazon dictates otherwise. I have come across quite a few that depict plant badges, the sea, buildings and animals as well as some other most surprising elements. I decided to compartmentalise this article (please excuse the pun!) and to start with plant emblems, a particular favourite of mine because there are some lovely examples where the artists have shown the plants associated with the various clans and their chiefs.

Plants and plant badges

There are many examples of compartments in the Registers that have a floral character, and I have selected a few from my favourite volumes dated from the 1920’s. That of The Rt. Hon. James Walter Sandilands (d.1915) who was the 12th Baron of Torphichen (**Figure 1**) shows gentle washes of colour on a background with small meadow like plants including thistles in sharper relief. The details of the compartment are not specified in the blazon. The application of washes of colour is not easily done on vellum as it will buckle if too much water is applied. Pre-stretching of vellum can be carried out but it would be almost impossible when the vellum is bound in a heavy book with more than a hundred leaves. Just as another observation, the outlining of the painting has been carried out by a mapping pen.

I came across quite a few images where plant badges were shown according to the blazon. The next two achievements show beautiful artwork, where the artist has shown plants on a landscaped background, using gouache paint. Having read carefully through all of the correspondence between the petitioners and the Lord Lyon of the time, I have not managed to glean if the lands shown represent any particular area, but they may well show a view of ground held by both of these gentlemen. These two paintings are amongst the very best examples, in my mind, held in the Public Register of Scotland. The first is of Maclaren of Maclaren (**Figure 2**) whose blazon dictates a compartment *semy of laurel leaves proper*, laurel branches being additionally present on the crest, and also carried by the mermaid supporters.⁴ The next is of Ferguson of Kilkerran (**Figure 3**), a clan which traditionally wears a sprig of poplar. The blazon specifies a compartment “*embellished with poplar seedlings being the proper plant badge of Ferguson*”. The plant badge is an important aspect of Scottish clan culture, customarily worn on the bonnet.

A couple more examples of plant badges are firstly the wallflowers of Urquhart of that Ilk (**Figure 4**), the compartment to be “*embellished with wallflowers having four petals of yellow*” and the boxwood (box) plants of McBain of McBain which have been given the proportions of supporters! (**Figure 5**). The blazon here specifies “*two boxwood plants proper being the proper plant badge of the clan McBain*”.

⁴ Probably a canting emblem based on the name of the progenitor of the clan, Laurin.

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*Figure 3: Sir James Ferguson of Kilkerran
Lyon Register Vol 42 f. 153
March 1958*

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Figure 4: Wilkins Fisk Urquhart of that Ilk
Lyon Register Vol 43 f. 44
April 1959

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Figure 5: Hughston Maynard McBain of McBain
Lyon Register Vol 43 f. 108
March 1960

Sea and seashore

There are various depictions of arms with a compartment showing the sea, seashore and seaweed. The achievement of Balfour of Balfour and Trenabie has otter supporters, and the artist has fittingly made the compartment one of a stream and bulrushes, not required in the blazon (**Figure 6**). In the correspondence between the petitioner and the Lyon Office, I have gleaned that the Petitioner was very pleased with his patent of arms and wrote ‘some little trouble has been taken to make the drawing true and to life after the animal has left the water’.

I have found a number of references to the sea. The Chartered Insurance Institute, a professional body setting standards for the insurance sector, was established by royal charter in 1912. It obtained English arms in 1933, when the supporters of a sea lion and a sea unicorn were drawn resting on brickwork. When the company registered its arms in Scotland in 1959 (**Figure 7**), the brickwork compartment was decked with seaweed, not specified in the blazon.

The Overseas League registered identical arms in both England and Scotland in 1960 when it became the Royal Overseas League, in recognition for its services to international friendship and understanding across the Commonwealth. Like the previous example the supporters are of a sea lion and a sea unicorn. In the Lyon Register (**Figure 8**) there is drawn a compartment of waves, not specified as such in the blazon, although the presence of a compartment is specified, which is not the case in the College of Arms records.

There are two nautical compartments from the 1960s in which the blazon is more specific. The original Forth Road Bridge opened in 1964 connecting Edinburgh to Fife across the Firth of Forth, at which time the Joint Board petitioned for arms (**Figure 9**). The bridge was then the longest suspension bridge in the world outside the USA. The supporters stand on the banks of the Firth on a compartment blazoned as “*rocks sable washed by waves azure ensurfed argent*”.

John Granville Morrison (d.1996) was ennobled as the first Baron Margadale of Islay in the County of Argyll in 1965, and was granted arms by the Lord Lyon three years later. For the compartment the blazon dictates ‘*the sea undy, with on the dexter a cresting wave and on the sinister a rock issuant from the water*’ (**Figure 10**). The rock is perhaps intended to signify the island of Islay, but I do wonder how successful this compartment is with its attendant woodcock supporters which do not connect with either land or sea. The one on the dexter appears to be at risk of drowning, and it might have been better to have the wings elevated.

The Royal Burgh compartment

The Royal Burgh compartment is an elaboration of the idea that a compartment represents a place in Scottish heraldry, in this case a town is signified through its walls. Such a compartment was first used for the burgh of Elgin in 1678, with a rectangle of stone walls surrounding a motto. Lyon Sir Thomas Innes of Learney revived the use of the Royal Burgh compartment in 1948, and since then seven Burghs have sought and have been granted such a compartment. The example shown here in **Figure 11** is that of the Royal Burgh of Montrose. The blazon is imprecise, simply specifying “*on a compartment suitable to a Burgh Royal*”, above which are “*mermaid supporters arising from the sea*

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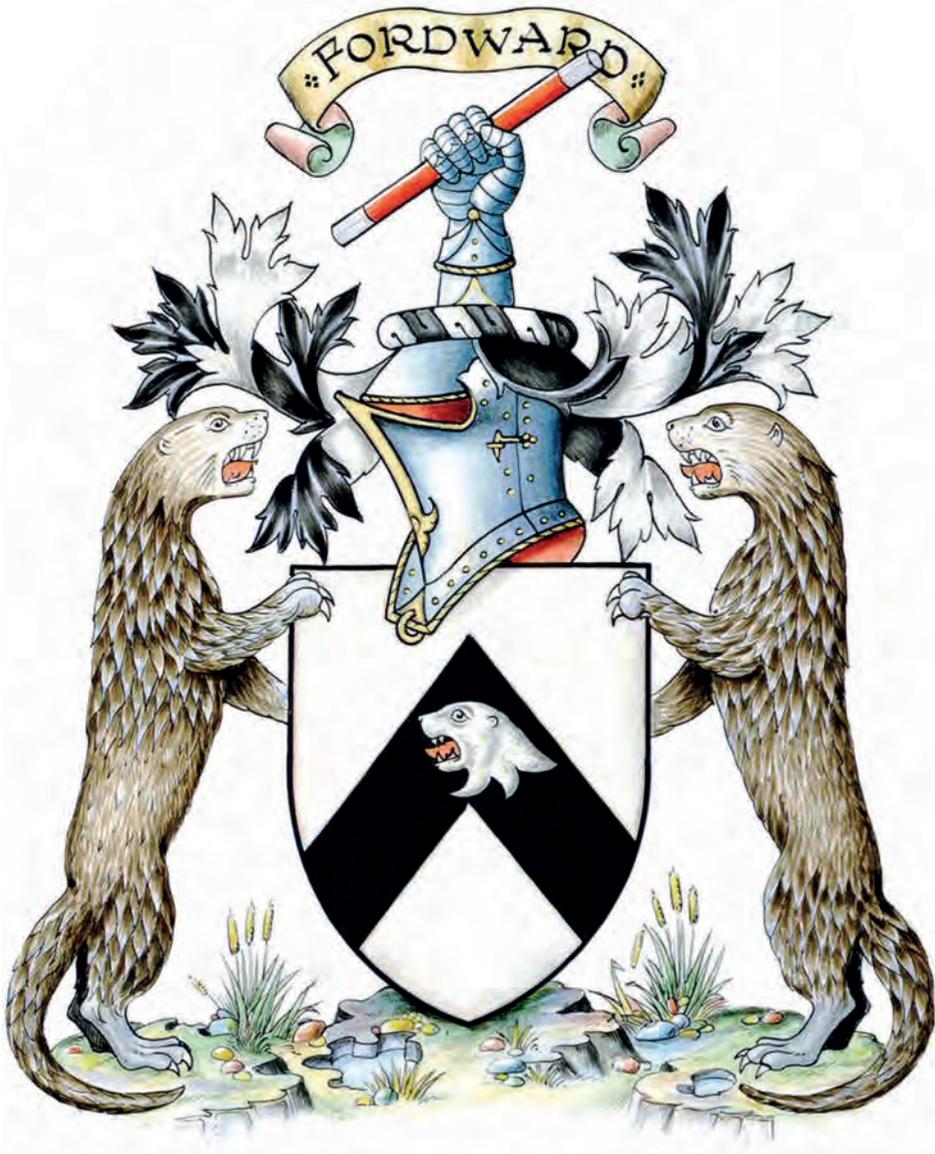


Figure 6: John Hubert Bramfield Balfour of Balfour and Trenabie
Lyon Register Vol 32 f. 16
May 1936

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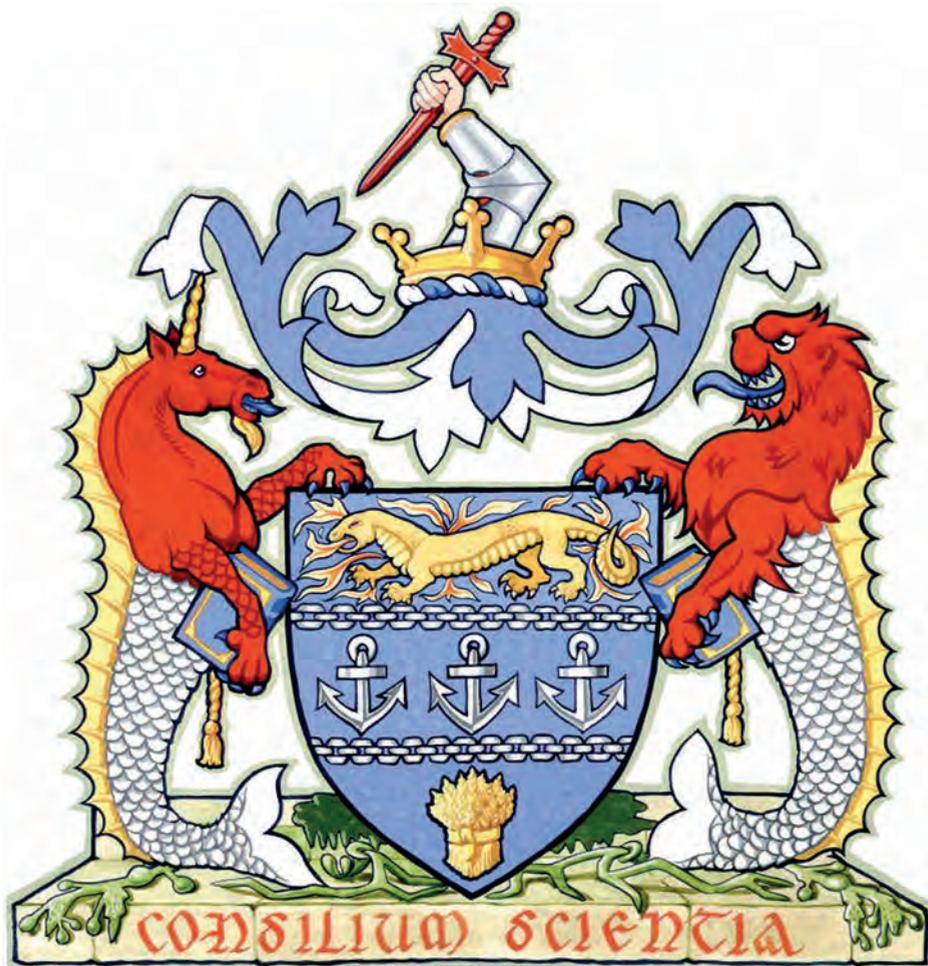


Figure 7: The Chartered Insurance Institute
Lyon Register Vol 41 f. 107
February 1959

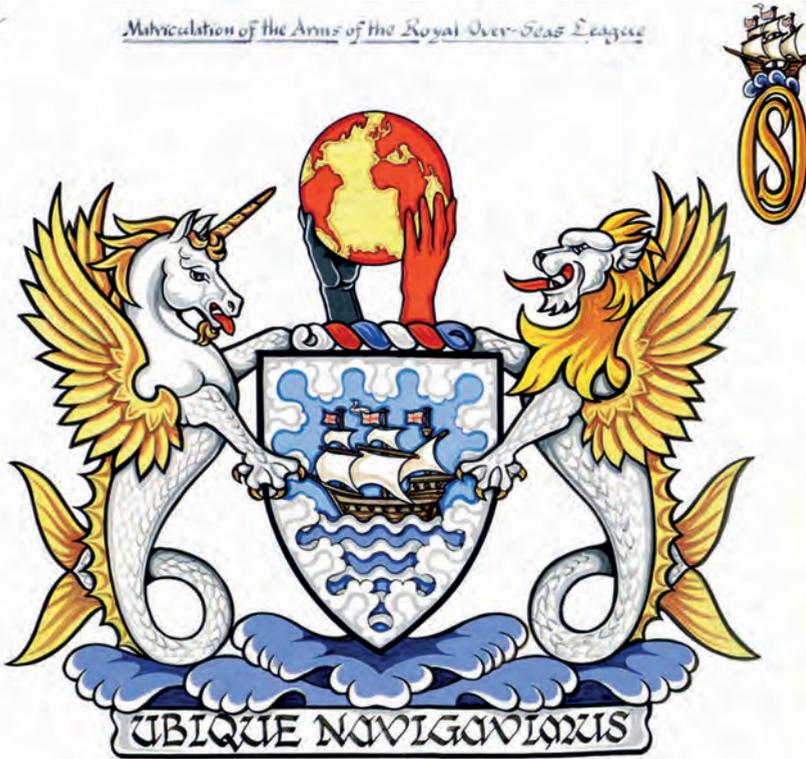
proper". The sea itself formed the compartment in the original grant of 1694, with the burgh compartment being added in 1953.

The achievement of the Imperial Tobacco Company (Figure 12) has obvious similarities to the previous examples. The company was founded in 1901, and registered arms in both England in 1975 and in Scotland in 1985, in each case the compartment being blazoned in like manner '*upon a grassy mount Or contained by an embattled wall argent*'. The correspondence in the Lyon Court reveals no explanation for the walls, perhaps because the English royal city of Bristol is intended, this being the headquarters of the company in the United Kingdom.

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Matriculation of the Arms of the Royal Over-Sea League



The General Secretary for Scotland of the Royal Over-Sea League having by Petition unto the Lord Lyon King of Arms of date 28th March 1960 for and on behalf of the said Royal Over-Sea League Sheweth - that the said Royal Over-Sea League was granted Ensigns Armorial by the English Kings of Arms which are recorded in the College of Arms; and the Petitioner having proved that the same might be matriculated in the Public Register of All Arms and Bearings in Scotland conform to the Act of Parliament 1674 cap. 11 and with such modification as may be required to conform to the Law of Arms in Scotland, the Lord Lyon King of Arms by an Interlocutor of date 3 June 1960 granted Warrant to the Lyon Clerk to matriculate in the Public Register of All Arms and Bearings in Scotland in name of the said Royal Over-Sea League the following Ensigns Armorial, videlicet - Azure a sea coney Argent and Argent an ancient ship in Sable sail with pennon and flag of the Union Flag of Great Britain flying above all within a bordure nebuly of the second; Above the shield on a wreath Argent, Gules and Argent in salt for Crest a dexter Sable the sinister Gules, supporting a argent arm bent with the hand and land Gules; On a Compartment below the Shield along with Motto scroll Gules "NAVIGAVIMUS" are set for supporters, dexter, a winged sea-monster argent, armed, crested and finned and the wings Or and sinister, a winged sea-monster argent, armed, crested and finned and the wings Or and sinister, armed, crested and finned; Matriculated the 5th day of August 1960.

*M. H. Lawrence
Clerk of the Lyon
deputy Clerk of the Records*

Figure 8: The Royal Overseas League
Lyon Register Vol 41 f. 158
August 1960

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*Excerpt of Letters Patent from Lord Lyon King of Arms, 31st August 1964, in favour of
THE FORTH ROAD BRIDGE JOINT BOARD.*



*Figure 9: The Forth Road Bridge Joint Board
Lyon Register Vol 45 f.113
August 1964*

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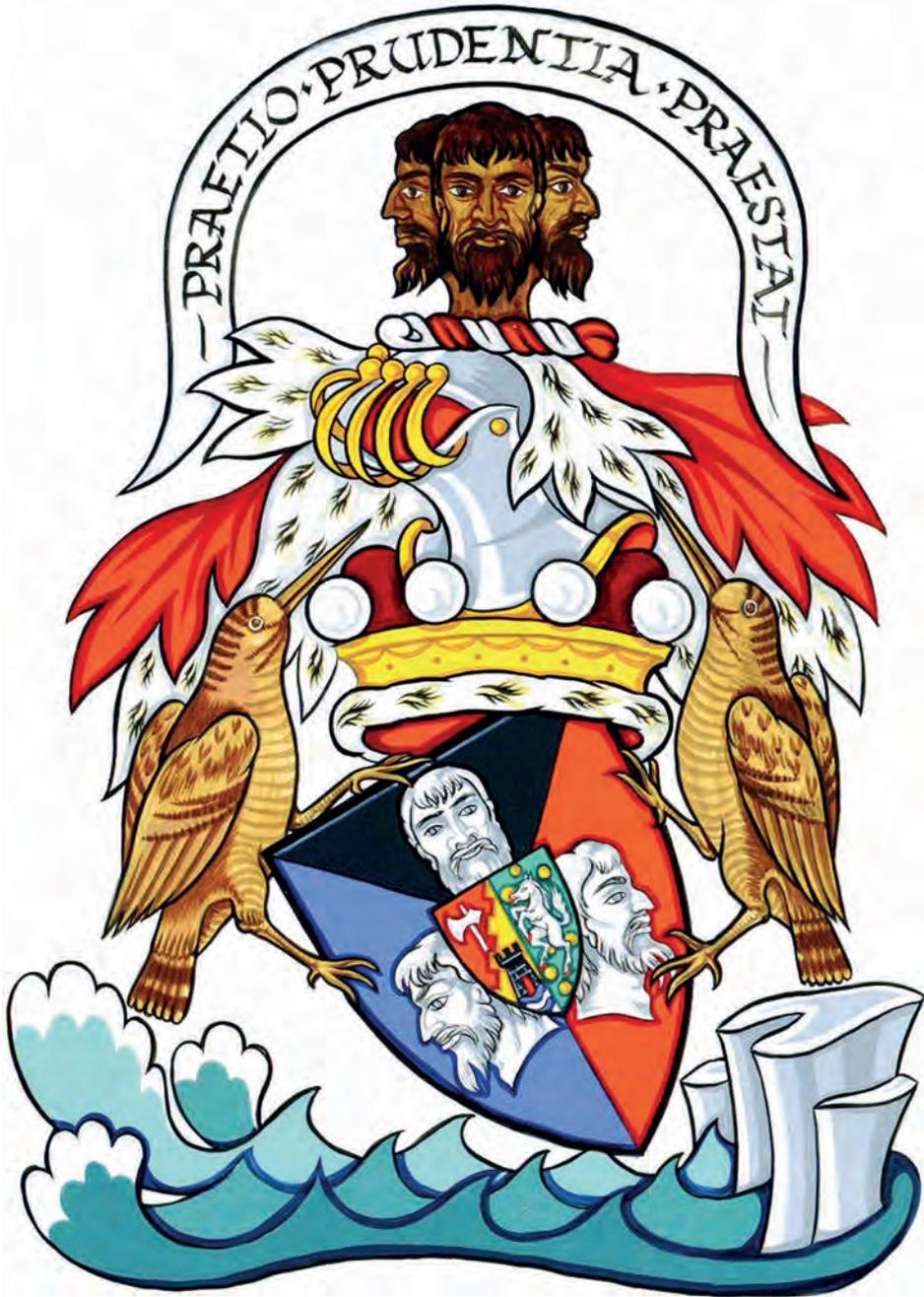


Figure 10: The Honourable John Granville Morrison, Lord Margadale
Lyon Register Vol 48 f. 96
January 1968

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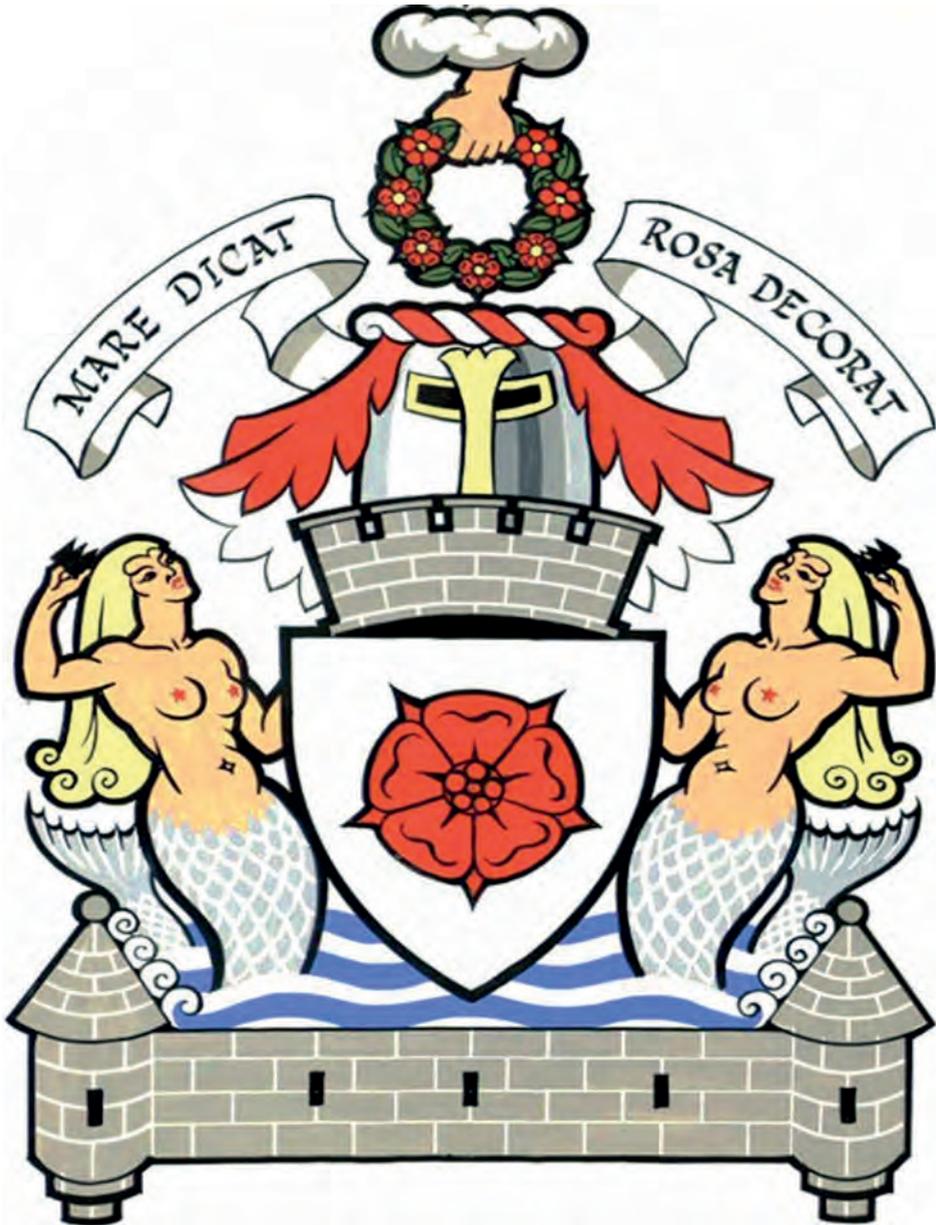
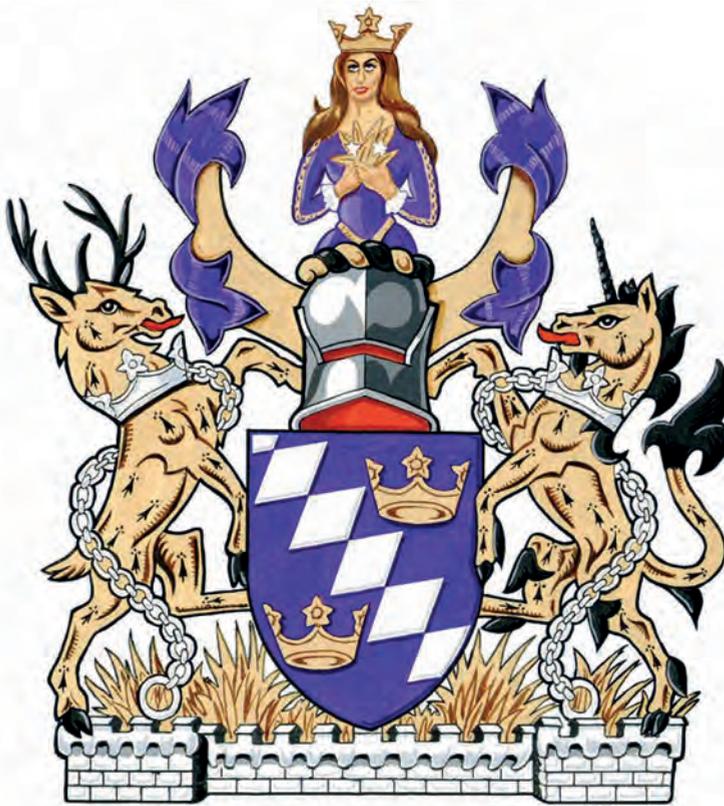


Figure 11: The Royal Burgh of Montrose
Lyon Register Vol 39 f. 53
January 1553

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Whereas Imperial Tobacco Limited having by Statute
 unto Us of date 10 July 1911 *Shewn*; *That* Imperial Tobacco Limited was incorporated as a limited
 company of date 16 February 1913 under and by virtue of the terms of the Companies Act
 1914 and 1964; *That* certain *insigns* *Armoial* were recorded in the College of Arms, London,
 by Letters Patent under the hand and seal of *Georges* *Clarenceux* and *Morroy* and *Usher*
Kings of Arms of date 30 October 1975 in favor of the said Imperial Tobacco Limited AND the
Petitioners having prayed that the above said *insigns* *Armoial* might now be *Maintain-*
ed, *Ratified* and *Employed* unto *them*, *Know Ye Therefore* that conform to Our
Mandate of date 15 October 1984 We have MAINTAINED, RATIFIED and CONFIRMED, *in*
Us by These Presents MAINTAIN, RATIFY and CONFIRM unto the said Imperial Tobacco
 the following *insigns* *Armoial*, as depicted upon the margin hereof and matriculated of
 even date with These Presents upon the 113.66 page of the 62nd Volume of Our Public

Continued on next page

Figure 12: The Imperial Tobacco Company
 Lyon Register Vol 62 f. 113
 February 1985

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Metal work

When there is no compartment the supporters not infrequently rest directly on the motto, but an alternative scheme is to have everything joined together with a metal assemblage reminiscent of a Victorian gas bracket. This arrangement is very prevalent in English heraldry, and is sometimes to be met with north of the border. The arms of Glasgow City Council is well known, especially in Scotland because of the interesting and unusual iconography of St Mungo's fish. Here a metal bracket work provides a vehicle not only for the fish supporters, but also for the motto scroll (**Figure 13**). Although not metal work, I have found the example of the arms of the City of Dundee District Council which shows two green dragon supporters whose tails are entwined to provide a compartment which is entwined by a motto scroll. Here the Blazon reads '*two dragons, wings elevated, their tails nowed together underneath vert*' (**Figure 14**). The achievement of The Right Honourable Sir James Carnegie (d.1905) 6th earl of Southesk, (**Figure 15**) comes from an earlier Register and has a very different form of bracket work for which I have not managed to glean the reason. It is possible that it takes as its inspiration the seal of his predecessor James Carnegie (d.1730) the 5th earl, a Jacobite who was attainted for rebellion in 1716 and fled to France (**Figure 16**). The seal has gothic panel around its circumference on which the supporters rest, forming the equivalent of a compartment. The 6th earl obtained a reversal of the attainder in 1855 and was restored to the earldom.⁵

Other interesting compartments

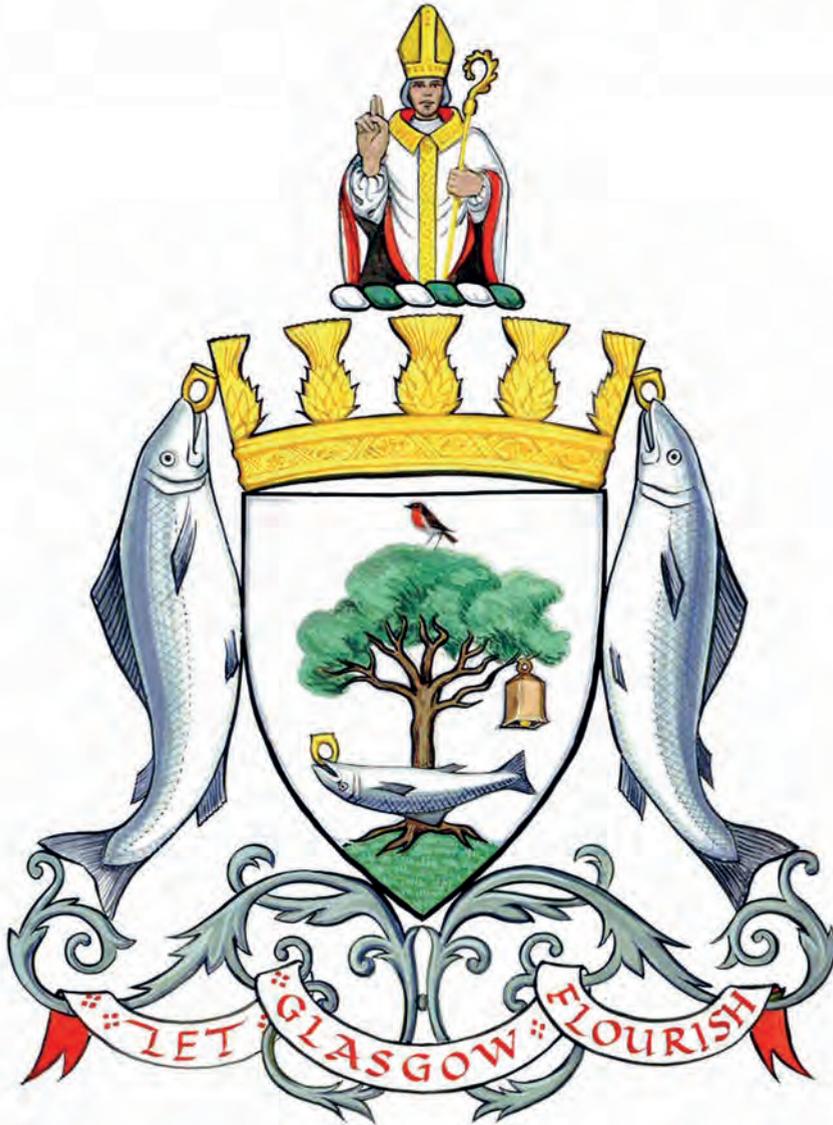
Dr Patrick Carnegie, from the other noble branch of the Carnegie family, matriculated his version of the arms of his ancestral earldom of Northesk in 1968 (**Figure 17**). The Lyon of the time was content that there should be a number of images shown on the compartment. The petitioner wished for a mountain landscape, and the more Scottish the better. Initial sketches showed both a treble and a base clef on the side of a writing desk, a pair of opera glasses, a bust of Shakespeare and also one of Wagner! He is a polymath who studied engineering and mechanical sciences at Cambridge before turning to journalism and writing. He became a senior editor at Faber's, was the Stratford theatre critic for the 'Spectator' and produced a book on 'Wagner and the art of theatre', as well as writing columns on Shakespeare. During the process of devising his achievement he mentioned that he found it a challenge harder than Desert Island Discs to concentrate his life into a handful of emblematic images. The final version that emerged has a book, a writing desk with pen, a micrometer to symbolize his continuing interest with engineering, and some tulips, the favourite flowers of his wife.

The arms of the Burgesses of the Guild of Aberdeen (**Figure 18**) represents an organisation which was given the first surviving Scottish royal charter, granted by William the Lion. This charter refers to the rights that burgesses had during the reign of David 1 (1124 to 1153). It gave the Aberdeen Burgesses the sole right to form a Guild. The arms shown here were created to be presented at the 800th Anniversary Dinner in February of 2014 in Aberdeen. There was a discussion over the bridge to be shown as the compartment. It is a seven arched bridge meant to represent the Bridge of Dee, and is described in the blazon as an '*entrance crossing to the city*'. It is a fairly true version

⁵ GEC vol 12A pp.145-7.

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THE CITY OF GLASGOW DISTRICT COUNCIL.



*Figure 13: Glasgow District Council
Lyon Register Vol 59 f.3
February 1975.*

In March 1996 a boundary change necessitated a new grant. At this time the city of Glasgow was granted the same arms but with a mural crown.

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Excerpt of Letters Patent from Lord Lyon King of Arms, 2 October 1975, in favour of
THE CITY OF DUNDEE DISTRICT COUNCIL

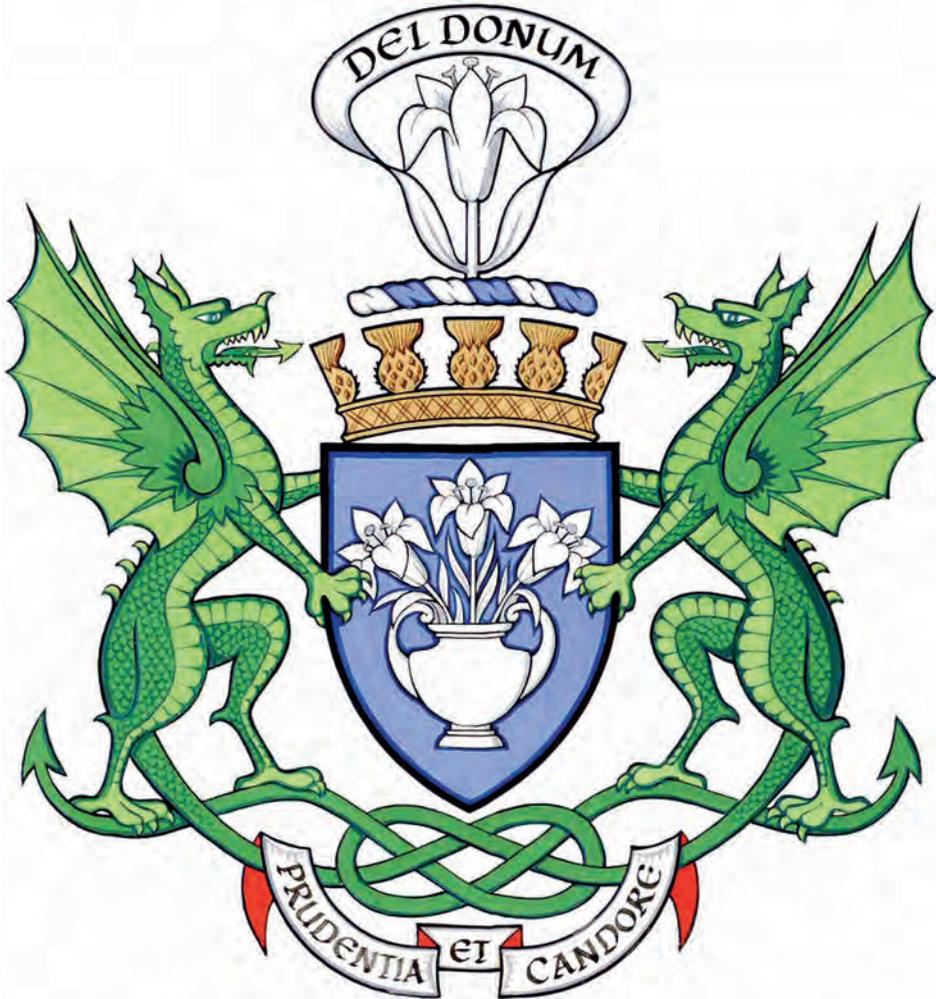


Figure 14: City of Dundee District Council
Lyon Register Vol 59 f. 5
October 1975.

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Figure 15: The Rt Hon Sir James Carnegie, Earl of Southesk
Lyon Register Vol 12 f. 69
January 1892

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Figure 16: Seal of James Carnegie (d.1730) 5th earl of Southesk, taken from William Anderson, *The Scottish Nation*, 3 vols (Edinburgh, 1878) vol 3 p.492.

of the actual bridge and it is shown in a mid grey colour rather than sable or Or which had been considered.

It was with some delight that I carried out the painting of the achievement of the Very Reverend Iain Torrance, Dean of the Chapel Royal and Dean of the Order of the Thistle (**Figure 19**). I was given the freedom to add a bit of humour in terms of the painting of the dog supporters. These were beloved pets and Maud shown on the dexter was the bossy one with Cassiopea being the quieter one. Maud always got the bone!

George Duncan Robertson of Struan was the head of the Family Struan and he petitioned Lyon for Supporters in 1954. The blazon specifies that lying on a compartment is 'a monstrous man chained' to commemorate the capture of the murderer of King

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Figure 17: Dr Patrick Carnegy, earl of Northesk
Lyon Register Vol 92 f. 1
July 2013

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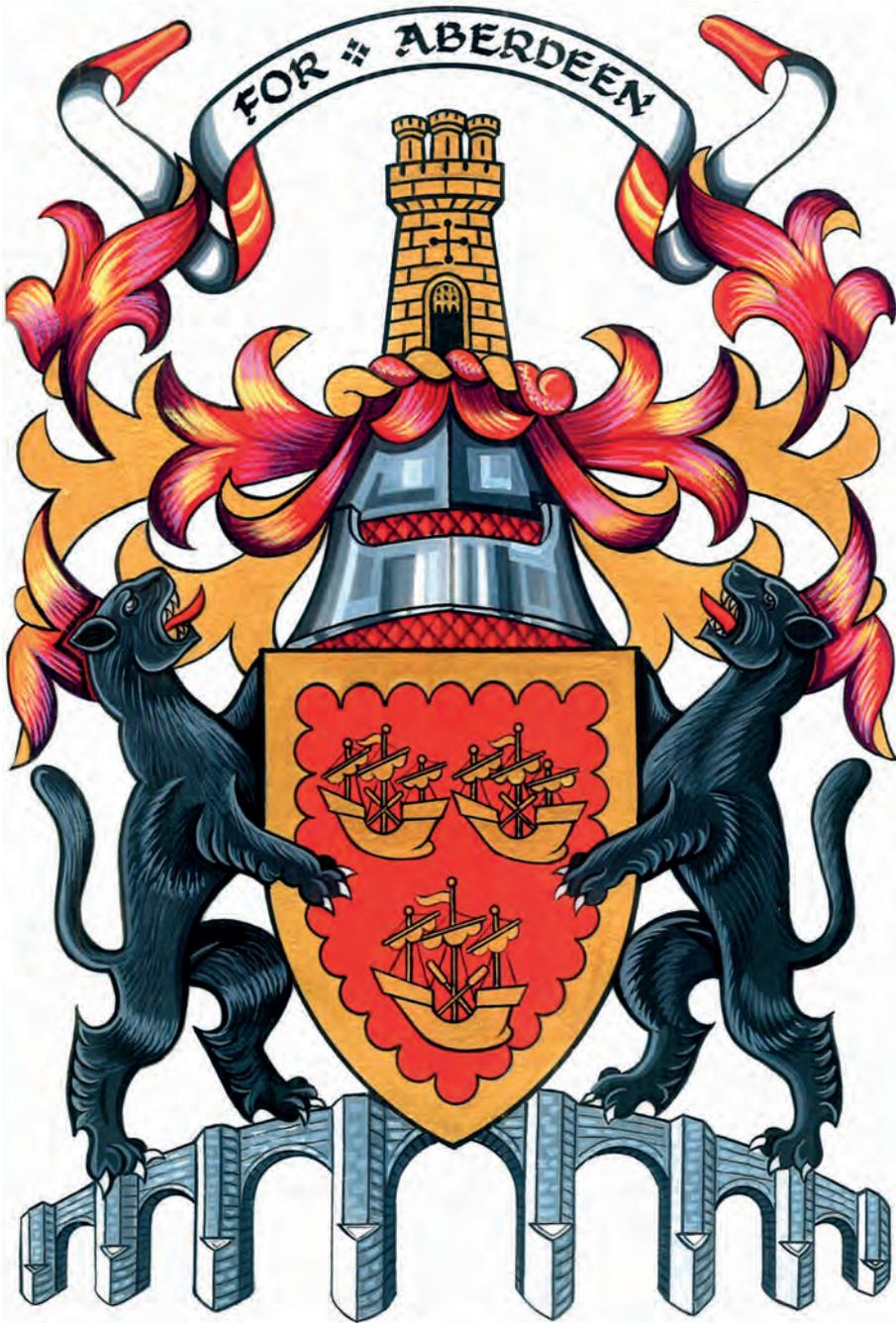
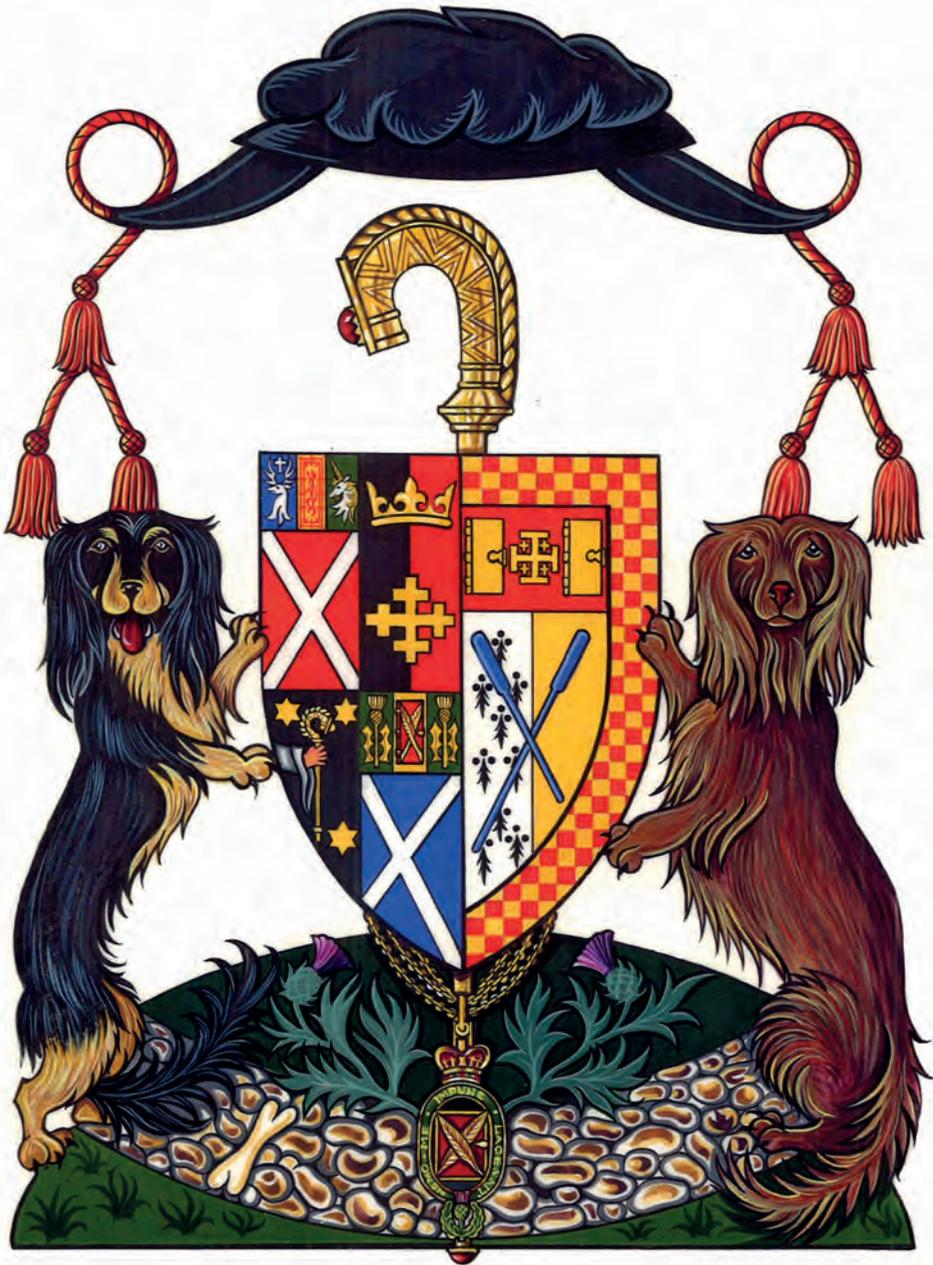


Figure 18: Burgesses of the Guild of Aberdeen
Lyon Register Vol 90 f. 86
December 2015

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*Figure 19: The Very Reverend Iain Torrance
Lyon Register Vol 93 f. 1
January 2016*

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James I in 1437; the compartment to be “*embellished with (suitably giant) bracken, this being the proper plant badge of the clan Robertson (Figure 20)*”.

The blazon of the 1958 grant to Heriot Watt College, now a University (**Figure 21**), reads ‘*and on a compartment below the shield, being of brickwork Or masoned sable, are set for supporter, and as part of the same, a beam-engine, frame sable, cylinder, flywheel and beam vert, the cylinder and wheel garnished gules, the piston rod and the garnishing of the beam argent, guiding rods gules garnished argent*’. The arms are dimidiated with that on the dexter being Watt’s arms and that on the sinister being of George Heriot. The College had been using the George Heriot’s arms, but new and appropriate arms had to be quickly devised to coincide with the opening of the third extension to the College by the Duke of Edinburgh in 1958

The arms of Donald Howard (d.1959), 3rd baron Strathcona and Mount Royal (**Figure 22**) remind us an important moment in history, the driving of the last spike of the Canadian Pacific Railway on the 7th of November 1885. His grandfather Donald Alexander Smith (d.1913) 1st Lord Strathcona’s was a Scots Canadian industrialist and philanthropist who co-founded the railway, and himself drove in the spike. The dexter supporter is a trooper of Strathcona’s Horse, a celebrated regiment in the Canadian Army also founded by baron Strathcona, while the sinister supporter is a navy standing on a railway sleeper, chained and railed all proper. The details of the compartment with its grey cliffs and thistles are not specified in the blazon, but presumably allude to Lord Strathcona’s Scottish home, the island of Colonsay.

The final painting shows the arms of Anne Leask of Leask (**Figure 23**) where the compartment is rather strangely embellished with “*two roses Or barbed and seeded vert and issuant from these as many candles proper inflamed gules*”. There would appear to be a significant risk of the candles setting fire to the decorative rope work around the shield. Moira Anne Helgesen (d.2008) took the name Madam Anne Leask after the Lord Lyon granted her the chiefship of her clan in 1968, which is when these arms were granted.

In conclusion, I hope that from this eclectic mix of compartments and attendant supporters you might agree with me that the compartment is a pleasing device and one which deserves to be elevated to a higher status than it currently enjoys, even if that means the artist is given less scope for personal inventiveness.

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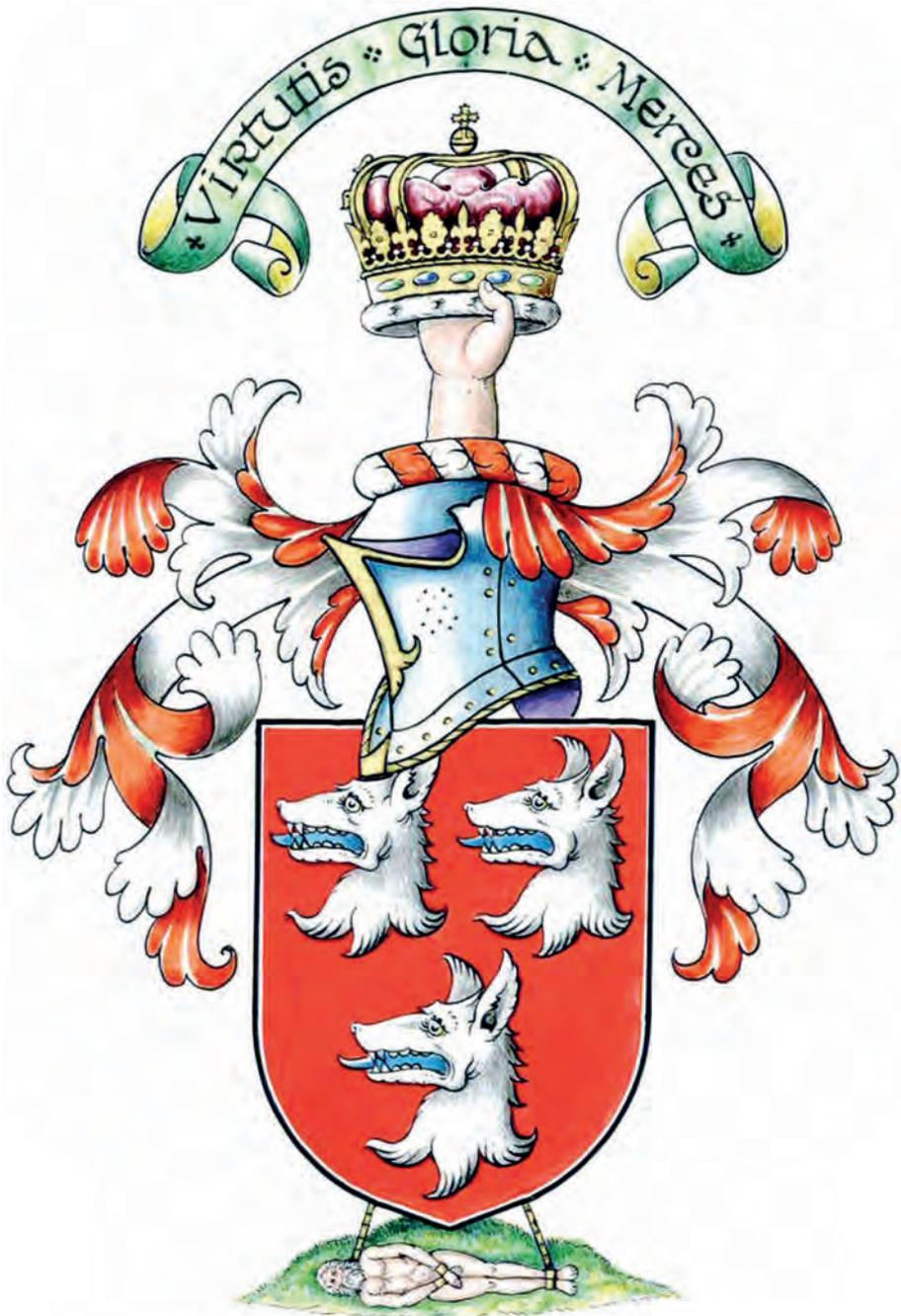


Figure 20A: George Duncan Robertson of Struan
Lyon Register Vol 32 f.15
May 1936

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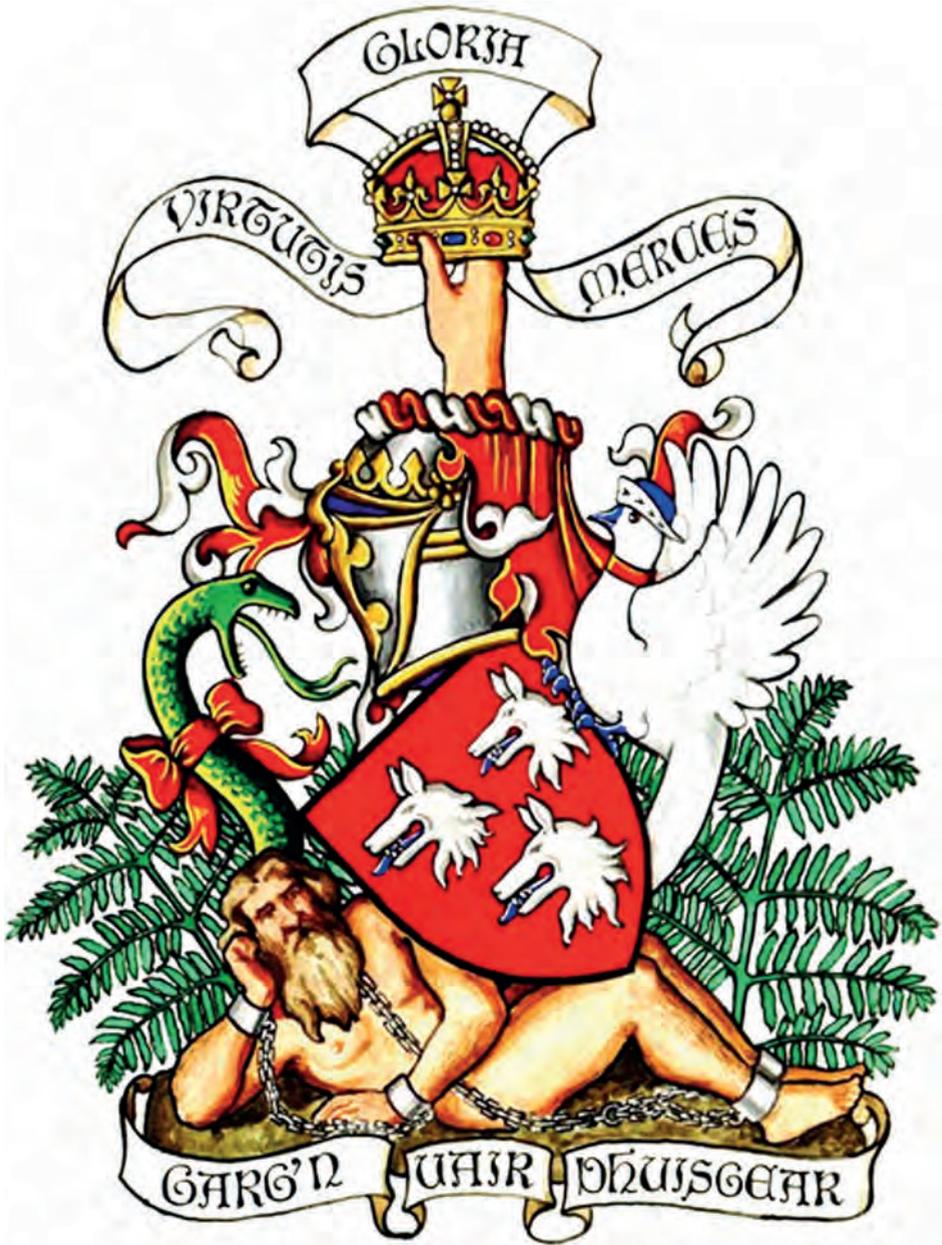


Figure 20B: Langton George Duncan Haldane Robertson of Struan
Lyon Register, July 1954

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Figure 21: Heriot Watt College
Lyon Register Vol 41 f. 99
August 1958

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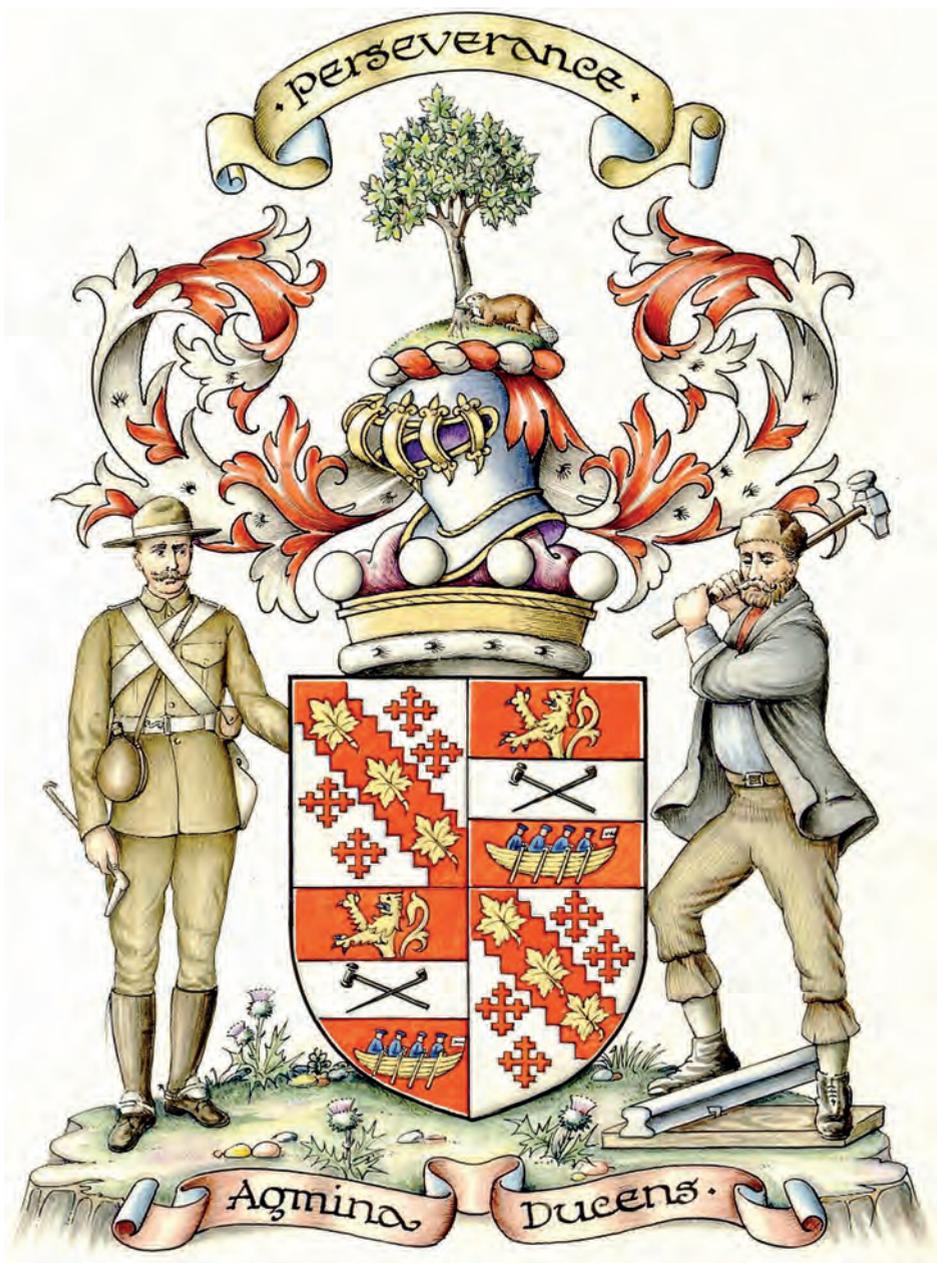


Figure 22: The Rt Hon Donald Sterling Palmer Howard, Baron Strathcona
and Mount Royal
Lyon Register Vol 29 f. 65
February 1931

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Figure 23: Madam Anne Leask of Leask
Lyon Register Vol 52 folio 16
December 1668