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THE DEVELOPMENT OF CIVIC HERALDRY IN DORSET

EDWARD TEATHER

Abstract

This paper explores the evolution of a distinct heraldic county identity in the twentieth century based on the usage of certain distinct heraldic charges. It considers how this came about, and questions to what extent these developments might be considered as regional or geographical as opposed to county specific.

Introduction

Pevsner's architectural guide to Dorset begins by stressing its mediocrity: "The county has indeed never been in the front rank since the heroic days of the prehistoric hill-forts."[1] These comments ring as true for heraldry as they do for architecture. The municipalities of Dorset boast a selection of ten coats of arms granted or registered by the College of Arms, plus six attested only by time or usage, and twelve quasi-heraldic symbols in official use. Beyond this there are a number of institutional arms, again a mixture of granted and assumed, and predominantly educational. Despite a weaker show in comparison to other regions, heraldry in Dorset, however, often demonstrates distinctive features, heraldic motifs which have become increasingly visible over time. The grant of arms to the County Council in 1950 is pivotal in establishing the main features of Dorset heraldry, from which a series of trends can be discerned. Interestingly these trends are apparent both in granted and in assumed arms, as well as in the quasi-heraldic emblems.

The primary motifs of Dorset heraldry, as I have identified them, are as follows: *barry wavy* to represent the sea; lions passant, fleurs-de-lis, Saxon crowns, dragons or wyverns (the latter two intended to represent Wessex), and references to the attributed arms of Edward the Confessor.

Early Dorset Heraldry

The only civic arms included in the 1565 heraldic visitation of Dorsetshire were those of Bridport and Dorchester,[2] but the heralds certainly overlooked others. The crescent and estoile later found on the arms of Wareham were present on its common seal appended to a deed dating 1422-3.[3] Local legend has it that its arms *Gules an increscent surmounted of an estoile of six points or between three fleurs-de-lis reversed or* (**Figure 1a**) were already in use around the turn of the thirteenth century, and that the fleurs-de-lis were inverted in abatement after the town snubbed King John. This story must be discounted since fleurs-de-lis were absent altogether from the 1422/3 seal, while King John was most certainly never snubbed by the town which he visited on four occasions, staying there for a total of ten days.[4] The coat of arms of Poole is also medieval, dating from

1 John Newman and Nicholas Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Dorset* (Harmondsworth, 1972), p. 13.

2 Walter C. Metcalfe (ed.), *The Visitation of Dorsetshire AD 1565 by William Harvey* (Exeter, 1887), pp. 7,12.

3 John Hutchins, *The history and antiquities of the county of Dorset*, 3rd ed edited by William Shipp and James Hodson, 4 vols (Westminster 1861-70), vol. 1, p. 82.

4 Ibid, p. 79. Unfortunately Hutchins' description of the seal is less than adequate, and it can no longer be traced.

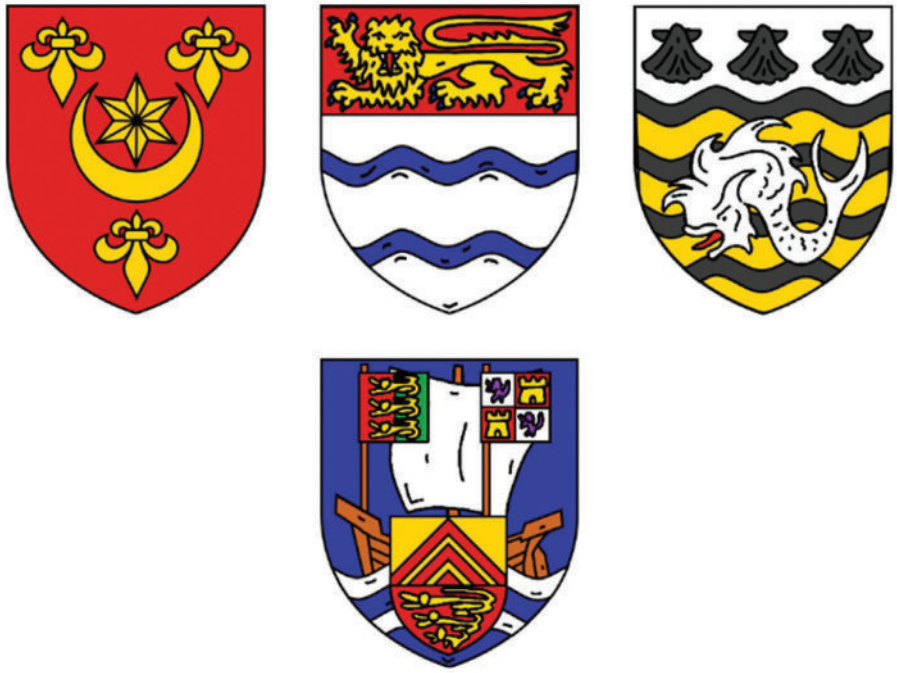

Figure 1, the earliest civic arms in Dorset. Top row left to right, 1a: Wareham;1b: Lyme Regis, 1c: Poole with the tinctures assigned in 1948; bottom, 1d: Weymouth and Melcombe Regis.

the fourteenth or fifteenth century,[5] while that of Lyme Regis: *Two bars wavy azure, on a chief gules a lion passant guardant* (**Figure 1b**) might well be late fifteenth or early sixteenth century in date, since it is to be found in stonework of the parish church of St. Michael, likely carved during the church's reconstruction around the end of the fifteenth century.[6]

The next visitation took place in 1623, and recorded the civic arms of Poole and Weymouth (**Figure 1c and d,** the latter granted in 1592) alongside those of Bridport (**Figure 2a**), and the seal of Dorchester (**Figure 2b**).[7] The final visitation in 1677 did not include civic arms.[8] Heraldic visitations came to an end, and it was not until Burke's *General Armory* that a similar attempt to collect civic bearings would be made. Burke included Shaftesbury (**Figure 2c**) and Wareham, and provided a blazon for Dorchester, though not one which has been generally accepted, since Burke has just applied tinctures

5 The arms are on the mayoralty seal of the fourteenth or fifteenth century, *BM Seals* no. 5305.

6 *Hutchins*, op. cit., vol 2, p. 68.

7 John Paul Rylands (ed.), The Visitation of the County of Dorset taken in the Year 1623 *(Harl. Soc*., vol 20, 1885). The original grant of arms to Weymouth of 1592 is still extant and in the possession of the town, *Hutchins*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 432 gives the text. There were no arms for the town on the Dorchester seal.

8 G.D.Squibb (ed.), The Visitation of Dorset, 1677,made by Sir Edward Bysshe (*Harl. Soc.,* vol. 117, 1977).

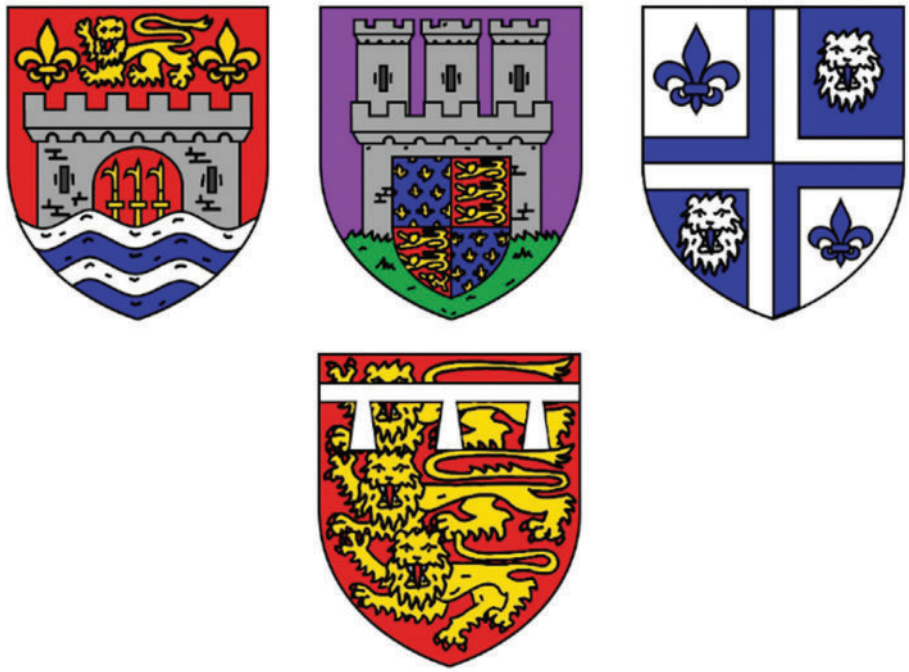

Figure 2, the earliest civic arms in Dorset continued. Top row, left to right, 2a: Bridport; 2b: Dorchester with the currently used tinctures; 2c: Shatfesbury; bottom, 2d: Blandford Forum, from its seal.

to the seal documented in 1623.[9] Fox-Davies added Blandford Forum (**Figure 2d**), and Bournemouth, and interestingly stated that Lyme Regis 'has no armorial bearings.'[10]

For a coastal county it is natural that *barry wavy* to represent the sea would find a role in Dorset heraldry. It is found on the arms of Bridport: *Gules a gateway with two towers argent, in base barry wavy argent and azure, in chief a crowned lion passant guardant between two fleur-de-lis or, in the portway three spinning hooks palewise in fess or*.[11] The spinning hooks reference the town's medieval ropemaking industry. The choice of the gateway upon the sea in the design of the arms probably follows the design of a medieval seal of the town before it had arms, which was in use in 1381-2.[12] Bridport as a royal town also employs the royal symbolism of the lion passant guardant and the fleurs-de-lis, both commonly found in early civic heraldry.[13]

The arms of Dorchester, which were never formally granted, share common elements with those of Bridport. Burke blazons as *Gules on a rock proper a castle triple towered*

9 *Burke GA*.

10 Arthur Charles Fox-Davies, *The Book of Public Arms: A Complete Encyclopædia of all Royal, Territorial, Municipal, Corporate, Official, and Impersonal Arms*, (London, 1915), p. 110.

11 Geoffrey Briggs, *Civic and Corporate Heraldry* (London, 1971), p. 72.

12 *TNA* C146/2885 with a description in QFA 1/7.

13 *Boutell, rev JBL*, p. 324.

Figure 3: arms of the Dorset County Council, granted 1950, in use 1950-2009.

argent surmounted by an escutcheon of the royal arms of England (England quartering France modern).[14] Fox-Davies corrects Burke, stating that these are not arms, but a seal confirmed to the borough in 1565. In the absence of any official confirmation the arms have been through various designs, with the notable change being the royal arms on the escutcheon. The version used today depicts the arms of the medieval English kings, and it is from this seal that the arms of the Dorset County Council (**Figure 3**) possibly trace their origin. Other Dorset towns to include references to the royal arms are Shaftesbury with lions heads and fleurs-de-lis; Lyme Regis with the lion, and Wareham with fleurs-de-lis. The arms used by Blandford Forum Town Council are the three lions of England with a label of three points argent overall.

Barry wavy

These early civic arms demonstrate the beginnings of the county's heraldic tradition: Bridport, Poole, Lyme Regis, and Weymouth all include *barry wavy*. This is in common with national trends: the four major groups of early civic heraldry, as defined by *Boutell*, include 'tokens of maritime interests.'[15] The ongoing use of this heraldic charge demonstrates well the lasting influence of these arms.

Variants of Poole's arms have appeared across the borough. In 1924 arms featuring *barry wavy* were granted to nearby Canford School, *Barry wavy of six azure and argent, an oak tree eradicated and fructed proper, on a chief argent an open book proper* (**Figure 4a**). The ancient arms of Poole were confirmed with a new grant in 1948, when the *barry*

14 Burke GA; Fox-Davies, *Public Arms*, p. 238

15 Boutell (1963), pp. 227-8.

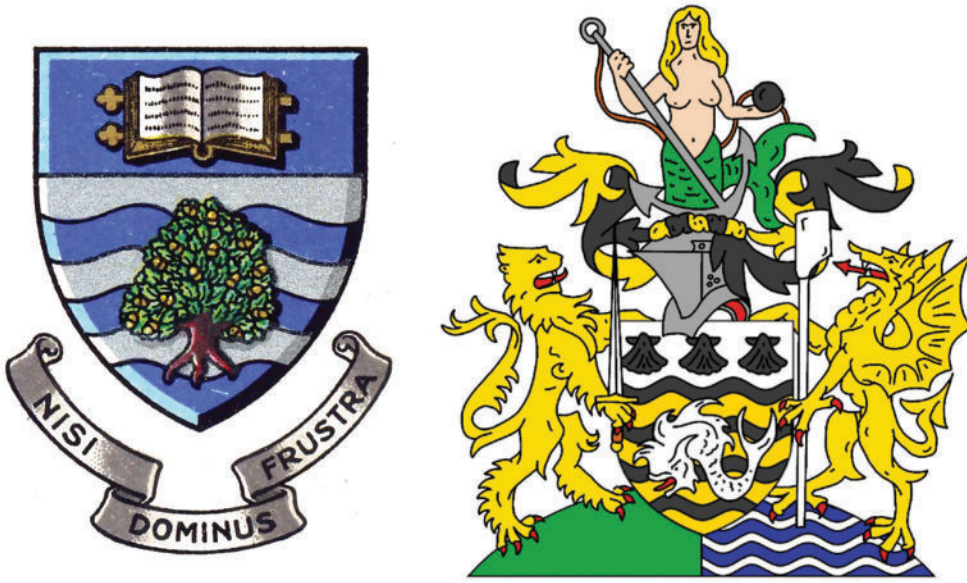

Figure 4, left, 4a: Canford School; right, 4b: arms of the Borough of Poole, the medieval shield was confirmed in 1948, with crest and supporters added in 1976.

wavy of the shield became *Barry wavy of eight sable and or*, the tinctures having been omitted in the 1623 Visitation. The crest, which had been in use by the Corporation since the late eighteenth century, was at this same time made official (**Figure 4b**). The debate over the colours of the Poole arms was, in theory, settled. Despite this, great discrepancies continue, a consequence of the plethora of earlier examples with incorrect tinctures still on public display.

When in 1976 Poole received a grant of supporters the sinister half of the compartment was made *Barry wavy azure and argent*. West Dorset District Council utilised an assumed coat of arms for a number of years prior to its official grant in 1990 which included *barry wavy* (**Figure 5**). *Barry wavy* perhaps found an alternative expression in the *saltire wavy* of Sturminster Newton, granted in 1961 (**Figure 6a**), its arms also featuring the motto of the County Council translated into Latin. Similarly the shield of the Dorset Fire and Rescue Service features a *Pale wavy azure cotised argent*.

The County Council Arms

The arms of 1950 are blazoned as: *Argent three lions passant gardant in pale and in base a fleur-de-lys gules;* the crest*: a mural crown towered or;* the supporters: *two dragons or wings elevated and addorsed and gorged with Saxon crowns gules*.[16] They were based upon the council's seal of *Three lions passant gardant in pale*, which had been in use since 1888, but there is debate as to where the three lions originated. Young suggests the

16 Briggs, op. cit., p. 138.

Figure 5: the arms illegally adopted by West Dorset in the 1980s. Wikimedia Commons.

medieval seal of Dorchester [17] whereas Fox-Davies[18] postulates that they derived from the seal of Melcombe Regis, which appears as the lower part of the inescutcheon featured on the arms of Weymouth (Figure 1d).[19] The County Council arms are not as complex or overcrowded as civic grants can be[20] and have pleasingly matching supporters: dragons to represent the ancient Kingdom of Wessex.[21] Neither dragons nor their cousins the wyverns feature in any early Dorset arms, and it is not until the council grant that they became a prominent feature of the county's heraldry. While they have not appeared as frequently as other motifs I have identified, being a significant part of the County Council arms they have since been used specifically to represent Dorset. The motto

17 R.D.W Young, www.civicheraldry.co.uk/south_west. This would be the early-fourteenth-century seal of Dorchester which features the three lions of England, BM seals no. 4870, but not the two later-fourteenth-century seals nos 4876-8, which have quarterly arms.

18 Fox-Davies, *Public Arms*, p. 240.

19 Fox-Davies alludes to the thirteenth-century seal of Melcombe, *BM Seals* no. 5487.

20 H. Ellis Tomlinson, 'The Heraldry of Manchester,' *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* (1944), vol. 28, pp. 207-227. (p.208).

21 *Boutell's Heraldry* (1963), p. 81.

"*Who's afear'd*" is that suggested to the Society of Dorset Men by local writer Thomas Hardy in 1905, which was translated into the Dorset dialect by the society in 1908.

The County Council arms did not initially feature a crest, instead the shield was ensigned with a mural crown, a reference both to the cap badge of the Dorsetshire Regiment, and to the right of a county council to use the mural crown.[22] In 2009 a county council without the full array of armorial bearings was increasingly rare, and the council applied to the College of Arms for the addition of a crest and badge. In 2019 the Dorset County Council was formally abolished and replaced with the unitary Dorset Council, so these arms are in abeyance. The new council immediately applied to the College of Arms for the old arms to be transferred to it, and a transfer was made in that year. When approached the council did not have an image or blazon for the 2009 grant of arms.

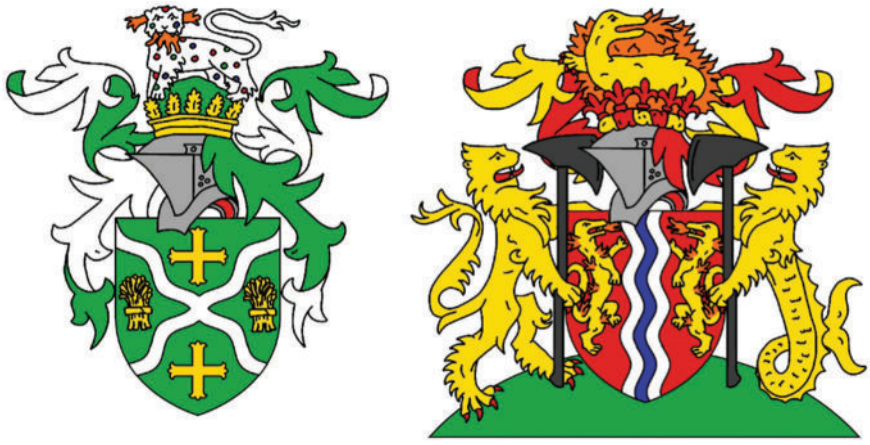

Figure 6, left 6a: Sturminster Newton Town Council, granted 1961; right, 6b: Dorset Fire and Rescue Service, granted 1998, in abeyance from 2016.

Impact of the County Council grant:

From 1950 to 2009 there were twelve additional grants of civic arms in Dorset, seven of which were to councils. Of these, three were grants of additional elements to existing arms. During this period many of the features of Dorset heraldry were developed, all of which evolved from the County Council arms with its lions, dragons, and Saxon crowns.

1. Lions

As we have seen, lions have been a feature of public heraldry in Dorset for many centuries, but their particular usage since 1950, particularly as supporters, is worthy of note. Lions were granted as supporters to several of the newly created borough councils in the 1970s; and also in a few instances as crests. An example of a lion supporter is that granted, together with a sealion, to the Dorset Fire and Rescue Service in 1998 (**Figure 6b**). These arms further reference those of the county in having fleur-de-lis crown fleurons on the crest. The borough of Weymouth and Portland received lions on its crest, holding a Portland stone, and sealion supporters in 1977 (**Figure 7**).

22 *Boutell, Rev JBL*, p. 236.

Figure 7: the Borough of Weymouth and Portland, granted 1977, and incorporating the shield of the combined boroughs of Weymouth and Melcombe Regis, granted in 1592.

2. Dragons.

The dexter dragon supporter given to Poole Borough Council in 1976 was nominally in reference to the arms of Queen Elizabeth I, changed from gules to Or in difference, but the golden dragon would have had no such connotation in the minds of local people familiar with the arms of the County Council. West Dorset District Council's illegally assumed arms included dragon supporters, and when it received an official grant from the College of Arms in 1990 it was given sea-wyverns as both supporters and crest, referencing Wessex, while continuing the County Council theme (**Figure 8**). While not all traditions develop from the same sources, the dragon had become enough of a Dorset feature that when in 1992 the newly created University of Bournemouth petitioned the College of Arms for bearings, they were asked to include a dragon supporter "as the

Top, *Figure 8*: West Dorset District Council, granted 1990 and in abeyance since 2019; bottom, *Figure 9*: Wimborne and Cranborne Regional District Council, granted 1959, transferred to East Dorset District Council in 1974, and in abeyance since 2019.

dragon is part of the bearings of the county."

Another reptile introduced to Dorset heraldry both in the arms of the Dorset Fire and Rescue Service and in the badge of its replacement the Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service, is the salamander. The latter body calls this the 'Dorset salamander,' though it seems more likely that the salamander was included on the previous arms because of its legendary fire-resistance rather than any association with the county.

3.The Saxon Crown

The Saxon crown, a reminder that Dorset was part of the heartland of the kingdom of Wessex, has seen significant growth since it appeared collaring the supporters of the County Council arms. Nine years later, in 1959, the crown would feature in the arms of Wimborne and Cranborne RDC (**Figure 9**), which also include a cross fleury in reference to Edward the Confessor, the re-founder of Wimborne Minster, and the fleur-de-lis, with reference to the County Council.

From this point the Saxon crown seems to have become considered a Dorset feature by the College of Arms, with subsequent grants progressively increasing the charge's frequency. Christchurch Town Council (**Figure 10**) was given lion supporters wearing Saxon crowns in 1970; Sherborne Town Council saw its supporters collared as with the County Council's, and the crest emergent from a Saxon Crown (blazoned as an 'ancient crown') in 1986 (**Figure 11**). Above the crown on the crest is a rare double-headed and double-tailed wyvern displayed in further allusion to the royal house of Wessex, specifically for St Aldhelm who founded Sherborne Cathedral in 705; but a secondary allusion to the county's two dragon supporters seems likely.

Collared supporters continued in the grant of 1990 to West Dorset District Council. The endpoint of this development, at least thus far, is the 1992 grant of arms to the University of Bournemouth, which feature no fewer than six Saxon crowns (**Figure 12a**). The three crowns in chief on the shield stand for Wessex and the ancient boroughs of Bournemouth, Poole and Christchurch. The three others are on the crest and crowning each supporter, the sinister supporting red dragon standing for Dorset. The increase of Saxon crowns in Dorset heraldry aligns to an increase in their use as a civic charge in the south-west of England. The 1992 grant of arms to Hampshire County Council featured its crest emergent from a Saxon crown, as did the 2004 grant of crest and supporters to Somerset County Council.

The Saxon Cross

A most striking Anglo-Saxon influence on Dorset public arms is the Saxon cross which stands as the single charge on the shield of the former West Dorset District Council. West Dorset's arms are significant too for their unique compartment, which is a representation of Chesil Beach (Figure 5), one of three major shingle structures in Britain. This is the best example of a specific geological feature appearing in granted Dorset arms, which has been argued is a 'compelling way of demonstrating to the public the crucial role of geological diversity.'[23]

23 Carlos Marques da Silva, 'Geodiversity and Sense of Place: Local Identity Geological Elements in Portuguese Municipal Heraldry,' Geoheritage vol. 11 (2019), pp.949–960.

Top, *Figure 10*: Christchurch Town Council, granted 1970 and designed by John Brooke-Little as Richmond Herald. The crest is the tower of Christchurch Priory, and the tree stump compartment is for the New Forest; bottom, *Figure 11*: Sherborne Town Council, granted 1926, with crest and supporters added in 1986. The crest has been wrongly drawn as a demi-wyvern. Both images from Wikimedia Commons.

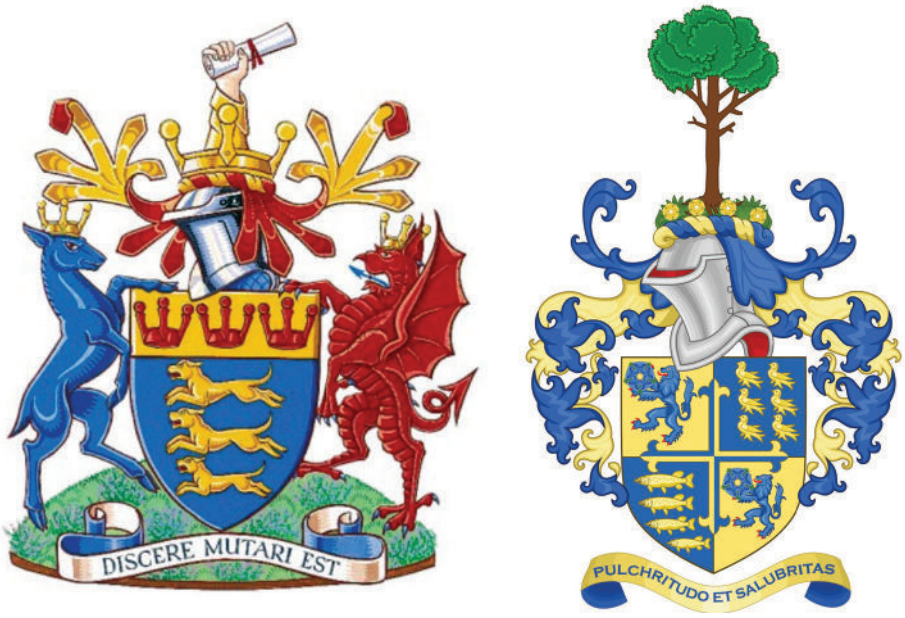

Figure 12: left, 12a: University of Bournemouth, granted 1992; right, 12b: Bournemouth Town Council granted 1891. Both images Wikimedia Commons.

Another Dorset theme: the arms of the Confessor

The attributed arms of Edward the Confessor are commonly seen in English public arms (University College, Oxford; Westminster Abbey; and West Suffolk County Council, to name a few examples), and from the late nineteenth century they have exerted some influence over the civic heraldry of Dorset. The first example of this appears in the first modern grant of arms to a municipality in Dorset, which was to Bournemouth Town Council, in 1891 (although at this point the town was mostly in Hampshire). The shield, *Quarterly or and azure, a cross flory between in the first and fourth quarters a lion rampant holding between the paws a rose, and in the second quarter six martlets, and in the third quarter four salmons naiant in pale, all counterchanged* (**Figure 12b**) with its six martlets and cross fleury, shows evident affinity with the arms of Edward the Confessor.

Continuation of trends in assumed arms into bogus and pseudo-heraldry.

As part of my exploration of heraldry in Dorset I also looked at the arms of educational institutions, which rather infrequently in England have been the subject of formal grants of arms, together with those of towns which have been adopted without heraldic sanction. The aim was to assess the impact of official arms on popular culture. The registration of the Wessex flag *Gules a wyvern passant or*, in 1974 (**Figure 13**) made the wyvern the county emblem, and its subsequent popularisation appears to have had its own impact on heraldic design every bit as important as the dragons on the arms of Dorset County Council. The unofficial West Dorset arms in use prior to 1990 featured not only dragon supporters, but also three wyverns or on a bend.

Figure 13, centre: flag of Wessex from 1974, then two school emblems left, 13a: Thomas Hardye School;; right, 13c: badge of Beaminster and Netherbury Grammar School (closed 1962).

A number of other bogus arms feature dragons or wyverns. The Thomas Hardye School (**Figure 13a**) uses arms which feature three dragon's heads, though these may have their origins in Jersey rather than Dorset. Beaminster School (**Figure 13c**) uses arms featuring azure wyverns, while the Shaftesbury School's heraldic emblem (**Figure 14a**) features a Wessex wyvern sable. The first two are – it seems – both founders' arms, however the latter is clearly a deliberate choice to represent Wessex.

The use of *barry wavy* is found in the assumed arms of Beaminster School, of the AECC University College (**Figure 14b**), of St. Edward's School (**Figure 14c**), of Gillingham Town Council (**Figure 15a**); and (though significantly less heraldic) of the councils of Corfe Mullen and Verwood. Edward the Confessor's influence is seen most prominently in the assumed arms of Wimborne Minster Town Council (**Figure 15b**), which show them in their entirety under a chief depicting Wimborne Minster proper. The assumed arms of the St. Edward's School have an azure field and a cross Or, though a Portuguese cross rather than a cross fleury. The school uses a different crown to the Saxon design, while Gillingham Town Council's emblem features a crown which is similar in design to the Saxon archetype. Dating such unofficial usages can be difficult, making it more challenging to map the spread of usage.

Figure 14, more emblems of educational establishments, left 14a: Shaftesbury School; centre, 14b: AECC University College; right, 14c: St Edward's School.

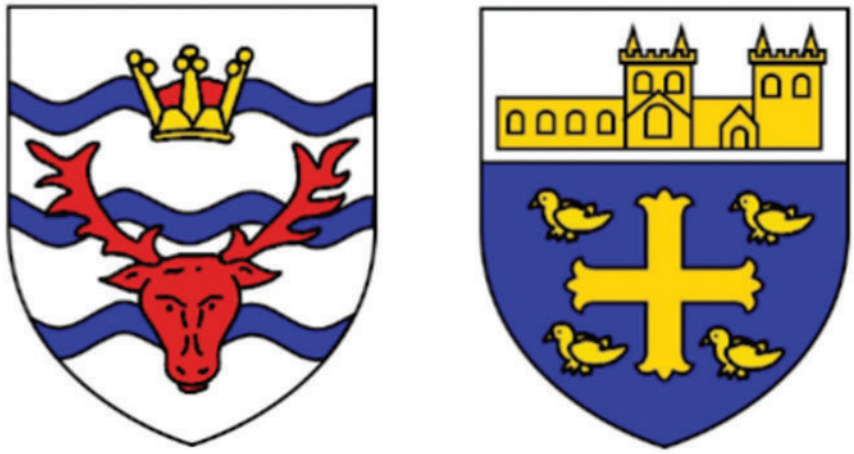

Figure 15, two illegally adopted shields. left, 15a: Gillingham Town Council; right, 15b: Wimborne Minster Town Council.

Conclusion

To view the development of heraldry in a confined area presents two different forms of heraldic lineage. The first is direct, where elements of arms are carried from one coat to the next deliberately. A prominent example of this would be the similarities between the arms of the London County Council and of the Greater London Council, or the adoption of sea-wyverns collared with Saxon crowns as the supporters of the arms of the West Dorset DC as a deliberate reference to the similarly collared dragons on the County Council arms. Direct descent such as this can build up a set of standard heraldic designs for an area, hence in 1992 the University of Bournemouth was granted a dragon as a supporter expressly because it had become representative of the county. The other kind is indirect descent, whereby the grantee is following non-regional trends, such as the usage of *barry wavy* as a design feature because of proximity to the sea. Modern usage of the same element might just as easily be viewed as influence from previous arms as from the sea itself. Whether the lion can be legitimately described as a Dorset emblem is less clear.