

SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Notes on the Priory Shield

The Priory Shield – or as it should be called – the Coat of Arms, has a very long history going back to the Middle Ages, reflecting the history of the monastic community at Saint Louis Abbey.

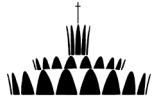
Heraldry was originally used to differentiate armored knights on the field of battle. A system developed of symbols and colors so that heavily armored men could be recognized by their followers. These symbols and colors were painted in the knights' shields as well as being made into colorful tunics that covered the knights' armor.

The system of arranging these "coats of armor" was supervised by professionals called Heralds who knew the meaning and symbolism of the colors and figures. Heraldry was a highly developed science and neither the colors nor the symbols were arbitrary.

Coats of Armor were originally the personal possession of individuals – thus there is no such thing as a "family coat of arms." Rather, Arms were passed from father to son just like other titles or property. However, younger sons very often used their own coats of arms that were based on the father's shield slightly adapted. This process of adaptation is called "differencing" and thus coats of arms used in one family often developed with clearly recognizable similarities – much like brothers and cousins often physically resemble each other.

Over time, institutions like monasteries and cathedrals as well as colleges and universities started to use heraldry as well. This type of heraldry was sort of like modern corporate logos, and was used on seals and to decorate buildings and other objects as belonging to the institution as a whole. This is the tradition in which the Priory Coat of Arms comes.

The Priory Shield was granted to the Abbey and School by Queen Elizabeth II and was designed by a monk from Portsmouth Abbey, Dom Wilifrid Bayne, in the 1960s. It was not designed in an historical vacuum though and like medieval heraldry shows "family" resemblance to the shields used by the Abbey's "mother house" and "grandmother house." To understand the symbolism of the Priory Shield, you need to look at the shields from which it descends. Priory's "grandmother" house is perhaps the most famous monastery in the English-speaking world – Westminster Abbey in England. This monastery was established probably in the 9th century outside London and has been the site of the coronation of the kings of England since William the Conqueror. Its most treasured possession was – and still is – the relics of St. Edward the Confessor, the last Anglo-Saxon King of England and one of the Abbey's greatest benefactors. The abbot and monks of medieval Westminster used several different shields, but one of the most important and earliest contained the basis for all the heraldry used later. This shield which can still be seen in stained glass and carved in various places in the Abbey is represented by Figure 1. The shield is divided into two halves – a gold half and a blue half – by a jagged line. This jagged line is said to represent the River Thames. The two symbols above in the gold section are an abbot's crosier and miter which represent the power and authority of the abbot of Westminster, who was one of the richest and most influential churchmen of the Middle Ages.



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When Westminster Abbey's monks were dispersed at the time of the Protestant Reformation in England, they fled to the continent in Europe and tried to continue their monastic life. Even though at one point it looked like what was left of the community was going to die out – there was only one monk left at the beginning of the 17th century – the survivors of Westminster continued and grew in numbers as young English Catholics left England and moved to France to follow their monastic vocation. For 200 years the monks of Westminster lived in France. While the community was in France, it used the coat of arms in Figure 2. This coat of arms kept the crosier form the medieval shield but otherwise was very different.

After the French Revolution the monks were forced to return to England as refugees. These monks settled eventually in Yorkshire at Ampleforth, and this community was the one that founded Priory and is thus Priory's motherhouse. The shield Ampleforth uses was more clearly based on the one from medieval Westminster. The jagged dividing line continues, but instead of the crosier and miter, the Ampleforth shield incorporates other heraldic symbols. See Figure 3. In the upper left corner is a pair of crossed keys, one gold and one silver. These keys are the heraldic symbols of St. Peter, whom Christ gave the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven to loose and bind. They are also used on the papal heraldry that Pope John Paul II has made so familiar. The reason they are used on the Ampleforth shield is that the medieval Abbey at Westminster was dedicated to St. Peter, and the monks of Ampleforth wanted to make a statement about their association with medieval Westminster. On the right side are a cross and five small birds. This is itself another complete coat of arms that was used according to tradition by St. Edward the Confessor.

Priory's shield (Figure 4) is very obviously descended from Ampleforth's. It is differentiated by replacing the symbols at the top. Instead of the keys of St. Peter, our shield has a white rose – symbolic of Our Lady St. Mary who is our principal patron saint as well as being symbolic of York and Yorkshire (as in the White Rose of York and the Red Rose of Lancaster during the English dynastic War of the Roses, since these were the heraldic signs of those two factions). The symbol on the right side is the Royal Arms of France, since St. Louis is our secondary patron. So instead of the coat of arms of the Anglo-Saxon kings of England, we have the coat of arms of the great

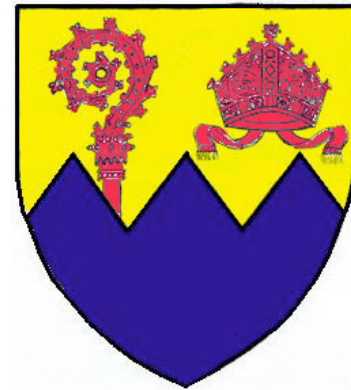


Figure 1. Medieval Westminster

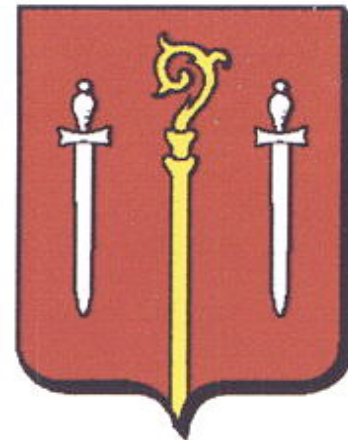
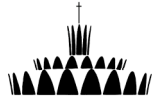


Figure 2. Dieulouard





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medieval crusader king of France!

Priory also uses a motto, which is also a common practice in heraldry. Our motto – *Laus Tibi Domine* – is taken from the Lenten liturgy, being the phrase which replaces the Alleluia during the divine office – *Laus tibi Domini Rex aeternae gloriae* – reminding us of St. Benedict's admonition in the Rule that the life of the monk should be a perpetual Lent.

Figure 3. Ampleforth



Figure 4. Priory