

THE KNIGHTS OF THE GARTER AT WINDSOR CASTLE



The Garter Throne Room at Windsor Castle is where the Investiture of the Knights of the Garter takes place. It is richly decorated in deep blues with ornate blue velvet chairs and wood-panelled walls. At the far end of the chamber sits the Ivory Throne which was gifted to Queen Victoria.



The Garter Throne Room

This room is home to grand paintings of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert in their Garter robes.



Queen Victoria and Prince Albert in their Garter Robes

King Edward III ascended the throne at the age of fourteen after his father's death in the 14th century. However, his mother and her lover, Roger Mortimer, had deposed Edward's father and ruled in the young Edward's stead. Once Edward reached the age of 17, he overthrew Roger Mortimer and declared himself king.



Edward III

Since his mother was French, Edward decreed that he was the king of France too, and so began the Hundred Years War. The title, King of France, remained until George III's reign in 1801.

Edward III decided that Windsor Castle was no longer needed as a defensive fortress and so he transformed the castle into a grand medieval palace displaying power through wealth rather than strength. Edward's new royal apartments were built where The Queen still has her private apartments today.



The entrance to The Queen's private apartments

In 1334 Edward III demonstrated his fascination with King Arthur, a paragon of kingly and knightly virtue, by staging a massive joust at Windsor, where he promised to renew King Arthur's fraternity of knights, the Round Table, and all its 300 men.



Representation of two knights jousting

Work began in the Upper Ward on a gigantic circular building – measuring 200 feet across – to house this Order of the Round Table. The war with France intervened but in 1348 the plans were revived in a different guise.

After defeating the French at the Battle of Crecy, Edward III founded a new College of St George at Windsor – a community of priests – and associated with it a small group of knights, each provided with a stall in the chapel. There were 24 men, plus the monarch and heir and they were entitled Knights of the Order of the Garter. Today, the college consists of a community who live and work together to offer worship to God, prayers to the Sovereign and the Order of the Garter, and service to society.



Symbol and motto of the Order of the Garter

In the late 12th century, King Henry II added a large new Chapel all around a Courtyard with a Cloister. This was added to by Henry III in the early 13th century. For a glimpse of the Chapel in Edward III's time rather than the St George's Chapel we know today, see:

<https://www.stgeorges-windsor.org/about-st-georges/history/the-order-of-the-garter/>



St George's Chapel

The Order of the Garter is the highest order of chivalry in England. Its motto: '***Honi soit qui mal y pense***' – means, '***Shame on him who thinks evil of it***'.



The Garter of the Order

St George's Chapel became the place where the Knights of the Garter pray for the monarch and it remains the Order's spiritual home. The diamond-encrusted garters, which men displayed on their stockinged legs, were made to draw one's eye to the wearer's muscly calf.

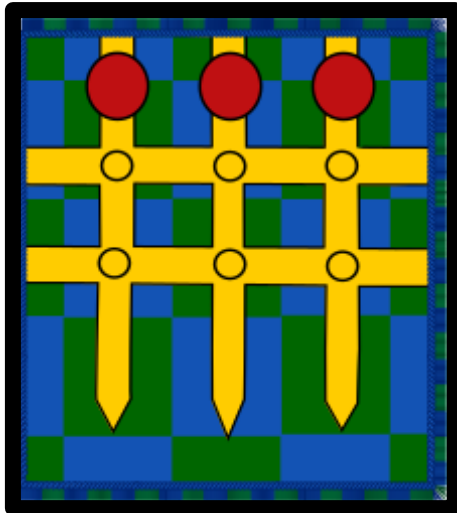
An amusing tale of how the Order's motto came about is that of the Countess of Salisbury losing a garter and her stocking falling while she was dancing at Court in the company of Edward III. As the king retrieved the embarrassed Countess's garter, he admonished those that were sniggering at her plight by declaring: ***Honi soit qui mal y pense!*** ('Shame on him who thinks evil of it') – French was the language used at Court at that time. Closer to the truth is that the motto refers to the king's claim to the French throne and the garter emblem may have been derived from the straps used to fasten plates of armour.

Each Knight of the Garter has a shield, or 'colour'. Their colours were important during battles to discern which side they were fighting for as well as to denote their high rank. Opponents would maim their knighted English enemies rather than kill them so that they could then demand a huge ransom for their important prisoners. Indeed, when King Richard I was held to ransom, enough silver to fill Westminster Hall was demanded for his release!



Coat of arms of the Duke of Vizeu

The coat of arms of the Portuguese Duke of Vizeu (known as Prince Henry the Navigator) depict five smaller shields, each representing the five wounds of Christ and the five pieces of silver paid to Judas, bordered by eight castles on a red background, signifying royalty.

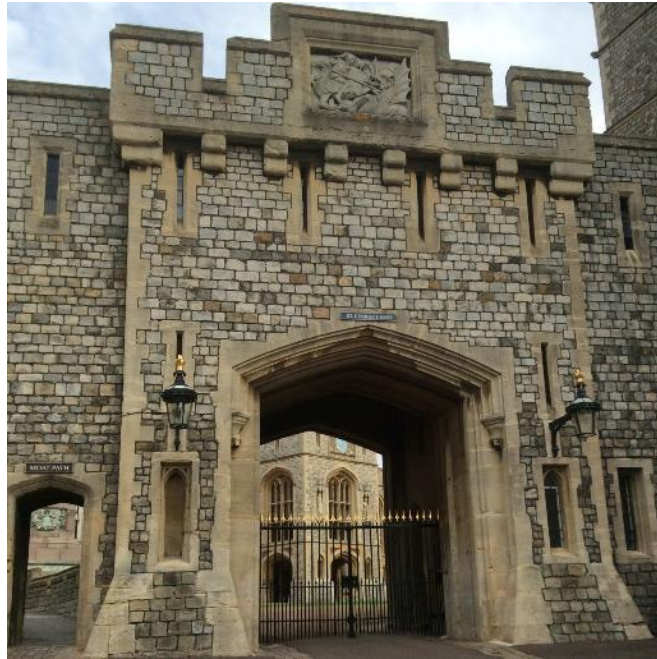


John Major's Coat of Arms

A more recent example, seen in the image above, is on the shield of former British Prime Minister John Major. The yellow bars represent the portcullis of Parliament, whilst the red balls reflect his love of cricket!

Women were associated with the Order in the Middle Ages, but this ceased in the reign of Henry VII in the 15th century. It was revived in 1901 when Queen Alexandra was appointed Lady of the Order of the Garter. The first woman to be appointed a full Companion of the Order was the Duchess of Norfolk in 1990.

There are signs of the legendary St George and Knights of the Garter all over the castle. St George's Gate was added by George IV and an image of St George slaying the dragon is set above the gate.



St George's Gate

St George's Hall is used for State Banquets and royal wedding receptions.



St George's Hall

It is through this hall that the Knights of the Garter process to St George's Chapel. The cross of St George is even visible in the clock face above the doorway.



The shields that decorate the ceiling in St George's Hall represent all the Knights of the Garter. However, some shields are blank since their former owners fell into disgrace – something which occurred particularly during the Tudor and Stuart periods. The shields are numbered, and the disgraced former knights can be identified by their number! The fourth Duke of Norfolk was one such knight, who colluded with Mary, Queen of Scots in a plot to overthrow Elizabeth I. The Duke was degraded, his accoutrements of office taken down and kicked out of the Chapel whereupon he was executed at the Tower of London. His stall plate was later found washed up on the banks of the River Thames.

Brass stall plates remain in the chapel as a memorial, and they form one of the finest collections of heraldry in the world. The numbered wooden wall plaques include forty disgraced knights who have endured a degradation ceremony.



Brass stall plates in St George's Chapel

The Knights of the Garter's banners of their Arms, along with a helmet, sword and enamelled stall plate are displayed in the Quire of the Chapel. A drawn sword and coronet hang above the male knights and this symbolises the ever readiness of the knight to fight.



The Quire of St George's Chapel

Further evidence of St George is displayed in the Lantern Lobby's grand marble floor which was part of the restoration project following the devastating fire in 1992. The beautiful design, cut from English stone (including St George's Cross made from red marble from Chatsworth in Derbyshire), represents a complex numerological scheme depicting the aims of the Knights of the Garter. The concentric circles and the first band represents the material world. Twenty-six interlinked octagons depict the 26 original Knights of the Garter (including the Black Prince and the Sovereign) and 13 represent Christ and the twelve Apostles. Eight represent the spiritual renewal. The six-way pattern represents the movement from the material to the spiritual worlds. The orange colour depicts the heavens, the sixty black and white stones represent time, and the silver disc in the centre symbolises wisdom as well as a memorial to the fire.



Garter symbolism in the Lantern Lobby

Appointments to the Order of the Garter are announced on St George's Day, 23 April, and there are currently three vacancies in the Order. Garter Day takes place in June. The Queen chooses Knights of the Garter to honour those who have held public office, who have contributed in a particular way to national life, or who have served the Sovereign personally.

Following the Investiture ceremony, lunch is served in the Waterloo Chamber. Afterwards, the procession makes their way to St George's Chapel for a service, accompanied by the Heralds and the Yeomen of the Guard. The public can request tickets to see this historic spectacle, which is also broadcast from the Chapel to the Precinct outside. The procession returns to the castle by carriage.



The Yeomen of the Guard

Upon their death, Knights of the Garter cease to be knights of the realm. Their banners are given to their surviving family and their coronets returned to the Sovereign.