

The Order of the Garter

In January 1344 Edward III held the 'The Round table Tournament' at Windsor, where the King and 19 Knights fought all comers for 3 days. Edward III announced the founding of a round table to number 300 Knights, with blue robes, St George as their Patron. The Scala Chronica and Froissart give the date of the founding of the order of the garter as 1344, but this is probably his intention to create an Arthurian order such as that of King Alfonso of Castile, Spain who founded an order of the band in 1330 based on the Arthurian legend.

At a feast on St Georges day 23rd April 1348 Edward III announced that the order would consist of a smaller and more select number of knights. The Order, consisting of the King and Prince Edward each leading a team of twelve knights, making twenty-six in total, was intended by Edward III to be reserved as the highest reward for loyalty and for military merit. The number of knights in the order fitted the number of the round table constructed at Winchester and was probably the number of Jousting teams of the time. New appointments to the Order of the Garter were made as knights died.

The founder-knights had all served in the French campaigns of the time, including the battle of Crécy, three were foreigners who had previously sworn allegiance to the English king, four of the knights were under the age of 20 and few were much over the age of 30. In the stalls at St Georges chapel Windsor, they would pray with each other in teams as at the jousts. Later in the year of 1348, the Black Death was to reach England's shores.



Image 1 Effigy of Reginald de Cobham showing garter, Lingfield - St Peter and St Paul



Image 2 Detail of Garter on effigy of Reginald de Cobham, Lingfield - St Peter and St Paul

The stalls of knights at St Georges Chapel, Windsor were numbered from 1 (Sovereign's stall) to 26, with the odd numbers on the south side and the even numbers on the north side (that is the system used in earlier reference works such as Ashmole and Joseph Pote, 1749).

In the 19th century, with the admission of foreign knights and Princes of the Blood Royal, the number of stalls in use increased. Fellowes decided to number the stalls on each side, S1 to S27 on the south side and N1 to N27 on the north side.

Originally a knight was assigned to a stall and remained there. Starting in the 16th century, knights changed stalls based on seniority as vacancies opened among better-positioned stalls. Also instituted were the poor knights who were bedesman and received food and lodging from the college.



Image 3 Altar with St George and the dragon presented to Margaret of Anjou, wife of King Henry VI by the Earl of Shrewsbury made in Rouen, France 1445

King Arthur's round table had 150 knights and the round table at the Great Hall of Winchester Castle had room for 26 knights, or shield blazons (Arthur had two) and was first recorded in 1463. Radio-carbon dating puts its age at 1255 (+/-16) and dendro-chronologically dates it to 1224 (+/-1), allowing for trimming and seasoning this gives a date of circa 1250-1280. The most likely date does appear to be early in the reign of Edward I when, the King took a great interest in all things Arthurian and Edward I was present at the opening of the supposed tomb of King Arthur in Glastonbury Abbey.

The Blazons of Knights for Arthur's round table were (clockwise from top) two for Arthur, S galahallt (Sir Galahad), S launcelot deulake (Sir Lancelot de Lake), S gauen (Sir Gawain), S pcyvale (Sir Percival), S lyonell (Sir Lionel), S trystram delyens (Sir Tristan de Lyonesse), S garethe (Sir Gareth), S bedwere (Sir Bedivere), S blubrys (Sir Bleoberis), S lacotemale tayle (Sir La Cote Male Taile), S lucane (Sir Lucan), S plomyd (Sir Palamedes), S lamorak (Sir Lamorak), S bors de ganys (Sir Bors de Ganis), S safer (Sir Safir), S pelleus (Sir Pelleas), S kay (Sir Kay), S Ectorde marys (Sir Ector de Maris), S dagonet (Sir Dagonet), S degore (Sir Degore), S brumear (Sir Brunor), S lybyus dyscovy (Sir Le Bel Inconnu), S alynore (Sir Alymore), and S mordrede (Sir Mordred). Arthur's heraldry on the table is three gold crowns on a red background and the other which is thirteen gold crowns on a blue or purple background.



Image 4 The Round Table in the Great Hall at Winchester Castle

The origin of the emblem of the Order, a blue garter, is obscure. One idea is that straps were used to fix armour to the body, and garters were known to have been used by knights to hold up leg armour. A legend exists that Richard I gave garters to knights for Chivalric deeds, but there is no firm evidence for this. Ashmole records that it was Edward III took his own garter to signal the start of a battle, which Ashmole assumed to be Crecy.

Another more romantic idea is said to have been inspired by an incident which took place whilst the King danced with Joan, Countess of Salisbury. The countess's garter fell to the floor and after the King retrieved it, he tied it to his own leg. Those watching this were apparently amused, but the King admonished them saying, 'Honi soit qui mal y pense' (shame on him who thinks this evil) which became the motto of the order. However, ladies were not known to wear garters at this time. The motto could well have also referred to critics of Edward's claim to the throne of France or simply a reminder of chivalric ideals.

The patron saint of the Order is St George (patron saint of soldiers and also of England) and the spiritual home of the Order is St George's Chapel, Windsor. Every knight is required to display a banner of his arms in the Chapel, together with a helmet, crest and sword and an enamelled stall plate. These 'achievements' are taken down on the knight's death (and the insignia are returned to the Sovereign), but the stall plates remain as a memorial, and these now constitute one of the finest collections of heraldry in the world.



Image 5 Sir Nele Loring founder Knight of the Garter wearing a robe 'powdered with garters'

Originally the garter knights wore hooded woollen blue robes, the wool from the profitable English wool trade of the time, and the garter robes were embroidered or 'powdered with garters', the more garters, the higher the status of the person and the king had his robe lined with ermine. Garter robes were provided by the king and accounts of issuing of the robes exist. Beneath the robes a tunic was worn and the colour of this varied from year to year.

Later the powdering of garters changed to a single garter worn on the left breast and the badge of St George was added. A cap was also worn, but the garter robes retained the hood on the robe. A collar was added in the sixteenth century, and the star and broad riband in the seventeenth century.

Although the collar could not be decorated with precious stones (the statutes forbid it), the other insignia could be decorated according to taste and affordability. George IV, well-known for his vanity, left 55 different Garter badges of varying styles.



Image 6 Edward Prince of Wales wearing Garter Robes from William Bruges's Garter Book 1440-1450

Over the years, a number of knights have been 'degraded' (for the crimes of heresy, treason or cowardice), the most recent example being the Duke of Ormond in 1715, or even executed - such as Lord Scrope of Masham (a childhood friend of Henry V), and the Duke of Buckingham in 1622. Charles I wore his Order (ornamented with over 400 diamonds) to his execution in 1649.

From the eighteenth century to 1946, appointments to the Order (and to the Order of the Thistle) were made on advice from government. Today, the Order has returned to its original function as a mark of royal favour; Knights of the Garter are chosen personally by the Sovereign 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. The number of knights is limited to 24 plus royal knights. For much of its history, the Garter was limited to the aristocracy, but today the knights are from varied backgrounds. If there are vacancies in the Order, appointments are announced on St George's Day (23 April).



Image 7 Detail of effigy of William Fitzwarin showing garter, Wantage - St Peter and St Paul

Every June, the Knights of the Garter gather at Windsor Castle, where new knights take the oath and are invested with the insignia. A lunch is given in the Waterloo Chamber, after which the knights process to a service in St George's Chapel, wearing their blue velvet robes (with the badge of the Order - St George's Cross within the Garter surrounded by radiating silver beams - on the left shoulder) and black velvet hats with white plumes. The Queen (whose father George VI appointed her and her husband to the Order in 1947), as Sovereign of the Order, attends the service along with other members of the Royal family in the Order, including The Duke of Edinburgh, The Prince of Wales and The Princess Royal.

Some knights are depicted with garters on their effigies, the earliest being Reginald de Cobham and William Fitzwarin La Frere. It is possible that other early knights may have had their garters painted on and have disappeared over time. Edward le Despencer is depicted on an al fresco dated 1368.



Image 8 Edward le Despencer shown wearing the garter from the Cappella Spagniki Santa Maria fresco, Florence, 1368

During the Middle Ages ladies were associated with the Order, although unlike today they did not enjoy full membership. One of the last medieval ladies to be honoured was Lady Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII and grandmother of Henry VIII. After her death in 1509 the Order remained exclusively male, except for reigning queens as Sovereign of the Order, until 1901 when Edward VII made Queen Alexandra a lady of the Order. In 1987, The Queen decided that women should be eligible for the Garter in the same way as men. Women are therefore included in this number Lady Thatcher (formerly Margaret Thatcher, first female Prime Minister of Great Britain) held this honour.



Image 9 Henry Talbot in a robe of powdered garters presenting a manuscript to the wife of Henry VI, Queen Margaret of Anjou from the Shrewsbury Book of 1445

Since the early fourteenth century, foreign monarchs have been appointed to the Order, as a means of marking and securing alliances, one of the earliest such appointments was that of the Duke of Urbino by Edward IV in 1474. Such appointments were and are occasionally made to non-Christian rulers (for example, the Shah of Persia in 1902), which prompted some debate over removing Christian imagery (the cross of St George) from the Order when it is given to non-Christian recipients; in the end, the design remained unchanged. Foreign monarchs in the Order are

known as 'Stranger Knights'. These knights are in addition to the number allowed by statute, and they include the kings of Spain and Sweden and the former emperor of Japan.



Image 10 Badge of the Order of the Garter