

ST GEORGE'S CHAPEL ARCHIVES & CHAPTER LIBRARY



Research guides

No.1 The Order of the Garter

Foundation and composition

The Most Noble Order of the Garter, the oldest surviving Order of Chivalry in the world, was founded by Edward III in or just before 1348. St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle, became and remains the spiritual home of the Order and holds the annual Service of Thanksgiving on Garter Day which is attended by the Sovereign and Companions of the Order. The origins of the Order's blue garter and motto, 'Honi Soit Qui Mal Y Pense' (Shame on Him Who Thinks Evil of It), are uncertain.

The date of the foundation of the Order of the Garter is a subject of historiographical controversy, largely due to the absence of early records of the Order. The French chronicler Froissart, writing between 1370 and 1400 and drawing upon the account of the English ecclesiastic Adam of Murimuth, claimed that the foundation of the Order coincided with the feast held by Edward III at Windsor Castle in January or February of 1344. At this feast, according to Murimuth, Edward had declared an intention to establish a Round Table of three hundred knights 'in the same manner and estate as the Lord Arthur, formerly King of England'. It is now widely believed that Froissart wrongly conflated the events of the feast held in 1344 with the actual foundation of the Order of the Garter, which occurred later in the 1340s and possibly coincided with the establishment of the College of St George, Windsor, in 1348. The College, which comprised a Dean or Warden and Canons, Priest Vicars, Lay Clerks and choristers, was entrusted with the maintenance of the Chapel of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St George and St Edward the Confessor, generally known simply as St George's Chapel, on behalf of the Order of the Garter.

The Order of the Garter as originally conceived by Edward III was to be composed of twenty-four Knights including the Sovereign. This figure was increased to twenty-six at some point between April 1349 and November 1352. The majority of these were to be English Knights, but the Founder's Statutes envisaged the appointment of persons of foreign nationality. Three of the Founder Knights were not subjects of Edward III as King of England, and 'Foreign Knights' or 'Stranger Knights' continued to occupy positions in the Order throughout its history. In 1786, King George III ordained that the sons of each Sovereign, if elected, should not be counted as part of the twenty-six Knights but rather added as 'supernumerary' or extra members. The composition of the Order was again reviewed in 1954 and now consists of the Sovereign, twenty-five other Knights, the children of the Sovereign as Royal Knights, and such additional Stranger Knights as are appointed by the Crown.

From 1358 to 1488 the Order of the Garter recruited a number of women as Ladies of the Garter although they did not form part of the Companionship of the twenty-six Knights. However, the custom of appointing Ladies of the Garter lapsed and it was not revived until 1901, when Edward VII awarded the honour to his consort, Queen Alexandra. She was the first of a number of post-medieval Ladies of the Order, whose status was that of 'supernumerary' members. In 1987 a statute issued by Elizabeth II permitted women to be appointed full Companions of the Order and counted amongst the twenty-six Knights. Lavinia, Duchess of Norfolk, was the first to enjoy this distinction.

Oath

To be invested with the Garter, the new Knight either sits his left foot upon a stool or kneels upon his right knee. The Garter, a small blue strap embroidered in gold with the famous motto, is then buckled on his left leg just below the knee or, in the case of Lady Companions of the Order, just above the left elbow. Upon the fastening of the Garter by the Sovereign, or in her absence by one of the Knights of the Garter, the following admonition is read by the Chancellor of the Order:

To the Honour of God Omnipotent, and in Memorial of the blessed Martyr St. George, tie about thy leg, for thy renown, this Most Noble Garter; wear it as the symbol of the Most Illustrious Order never to be forgotten or laid aside, that hereby thou mayest be admonished to be courageous, and having undertaken a just war, into which thou shalt be engaged, thou mayest stand firm, valiantly fight, courageously and successfully conquer.

The riband is then put on whilst the following admonition is pronounced:

Wear this Riband, adorned with the Image of the blessed Martyr and Soldier of Christ, St. George; by whose imitation provoked, thou mayest so overpass both prosperous and adverse encounters, that having stoutly vanquished thy enemies, both of body and soul, thou mayest not only receive the praise of this transient combat, but be crowned with the Palm of eternal Victory.

Each new Knight is obliged to take one oath: 'loyally to keep and observe the statutes of the said Order as far as within his loyal ability he is able'. The new Knight then gives thanks to the Sovereign and receives the congratulations of the existing Knights of the Garter.

Uniform

The present Garter Knights wear a mantle made from dark blue velvet fastened with blue and gold rope strings. Upon their shoulders the Knights wear the badge of the cross of St. George upon a shield encircled with the Garter. The mantle of the Sovereign has a train and the Garter star as opposed to the badge. A hat with a low crown, broad rim, a plume of ostrich feathers, and a brooch of the badge of the Order of the Garter is worn by current Garter Knights. This has replaced the cowl-like hood worn previously by Knights.

The garter which is currently worn by male Garter Knights is made of blue velvet with gold embroidery around the edges and is around 50cm long. The motto of the Order of the Garter is displayed in gold lettering with gold roses acting as stops between the words. The garter is buckled around the left leg below the knee. Lady Companions of the Garter wear a garter made of corded silk with embroidery of gold bullion and a gold buckle and pendant. This is worn upon the left arm rather than the left leg.

What information do we hold?

1. Individual Knights

The most accessible source of information about individual Knights of the Garter is volume 16 in the St George's Chapel Historical Monograph series: Grace Holmes, *The Order of the Garter: Its Knights and Stall Plates 1348 to 1984* (Oxley and Son Ltd., Windsor, 1984). This publication includes alphabetical and chronological lists of all Garter Knights installed from 1348 to 1984.

2. Government and administration

The original statutes of the Order of the Garter, composed at its foundation in the 1340s, are no longer extant. We do, however, possess transcripts of these statutes made in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Original and transcribed copies of subsequent statutes, dating from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, provide evidence of the changes made to the government and organisation of the Order since its inception.

3. Proceedings and activities of the Order

The registers of the Order of the Garter document its major activities and proceedings and record the election of new Knights. The earliest surviving register, known as the Black Book or *Liber Niger*, was compiled in 1534 by Canon Robert Aldridge and contains retrospective information including annals dating from 1415 (SGC G.1). Successive registers, including the Blue Book or *Liber Ceruleus*, (1553-1621) and the Red Book or *Liber Rubeus* (1621-1638), continue the series into the twentieth century. In addition, the Chapel Archives hold minutes and proceedings of the Chapter of the Order, 1481-1529 (SGC M.866), and 1661 (SGC X.G.8a)

Histories written about the Order over the years, both published and unpublished, provide another source of information regarding its proceedings and activities. Several of these are held in the Archives, including a manuscript history which provides a list of the Knights of the Garter to the end of the reign of Queen Elizabeth (SGC X.8) and another written by Sir Isaac Heard which gives an account of the proceedings of the Order from 1779 to 1788 (SGC X.17). Elias Ashmole's published history, *The Institution, Laws and Ceremonies of the most Noble Order of the Garter* (London 1672), forms part of our collection of rare books. The most recent history, by Peter J. Begent & Hubert Chesshyre, *The Most Noble Order of the Garter, 650 Years* (London, 1999), is an invaluable resource for any study of the Order, its archives and its members.

4. Financial Records

Various past financial documents relating to the Order of the Garter are available for viewing by researchers. These include accounts of fees paid by Garter Knights, 1789-1902 (SGC XIII.A.4-6), a Knights' burial fee book, 1789-1825 (SGC XIII.A.4), and warrants for items purchased on behalf of the Order, including Garter robes.

5. Garter Day services

The Chapel Archives and Chapter Library holds documents which relate to several of the Garter Day services held in St George's Chapel from the early twentieth century to the present day. These include photographs, programmes and orders of service, correspondence, and related notes. A particularly large collection of documents relating to Royal Ceremonies held at St George's Chapel in the first half of the twentieth century was donated to the Archives by a former Minor Canon and Organist, Edmund H. Fellowes, and includes admissions tickets for various Garter Day services in the first half of the twentieth century (SGC M.69).

6. Elections, installations and memorials

The choice of appointment of new Knights of the Garter has always rested with the Sovereign. However, prior to the reign of Queen Victoria, new Garter Knights were elected after a process of consultation in which existing Garter Knights were able to nominate the persons they wished to see installed. Suffrage papers survive from a small number of these occasions (SGC X.L, SGC X.J.4). However, the best source of information regarding nomination processes for new members of the Order can be found in the registers of the Order of the Garter mentioned above.

Records relating to installation ceremonies include photographs, orders of service, correspondence and memoranda. Although the majority of these documents date from the twentieth century, earlier material includes a notebook describing Garter processions from 1762 (SGC IV.B.32) and manuscript and printed sources from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which contain details of installation ceremonies and illustrations of Garter processions.

Orders of service and related documents survive for some of the memorial services held in St George's Chapel for deceased members of the Order of the Garter.

7. Stall plates and achievements

Above the stall of each Knight in the Chapel are his achievements, the banner and crest. Fixed to the stall itself is stall plate, a permanent reminder of his election to the Order. A number of photographs of individuals' stall plates and achievements can be found within the Archives photographic collections.

Further reading

Peter J. Begent & Hubert Chesshyre, *The Most Noble Order of the Garter, 650 Years* (London, 1999)

J.N. Dalton (ed.), *The Manuscripts of St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle* (Oxley and Son Ltd., Windsor, 1957)

Grace Holmes, *The Order of the Garter: Its Knights and Stall Plates 1348 to 1984* (Windsor, 1984)

Nigel Saul (ed.), *St George's Chapel, Windsor in the Fourteenth Century* (The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2005)

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

For further information contact St George's Chapel Archives and Chapter Library, The Vicars' Hall Undercroft, The Cloisters, Windsor Castle, Windsor SL4 1NJ (email: archives@stgeorges-windsor.org) or consult our website (<http://www.stgeorges-windsor.org/archives.html>)