Blog: County flags and coats of arms

Posted on Tuesday 2nd August 2011

By: Chris Game (/schools/government-society/departments/local-government-studies/associates/profiles/game-chris.aspx)

Last week the Warwickshire county flag flew alongside the Union Flag outside the London offices of the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). OK, it wasn't the week's sexiest news story, but stay with me for at least a few paragraphs.

Communities Secretary, Eric Pickles, is flying England's county flags in weekly rotation, to celebrate the counties' importance in the nation's cultural heritage and government. Last week was Warwickshire's turn, and the flag hoisted was the one most county residents would probably recognise: bright red and yellow, three complicated crosses known as cross-crosslets, and the well-known 'bear and ragged staff'.

The bear is heavily muzzled, collared and chained to its tethering post, 'ragged staff' deriving from the French 'staff raguly', or tree trunk with its branches hacked off.

So here's my question. Why does Warwickshire, a county with a thousand years of rich and portrayable history – Warwick Castle, Battle of Edgehill, Shakespeare, canals, industrial revolution – have a flag with a bear and tree stump, of which hardly anyone knows the significance?

I certainly didn't. I always assumed the bear – featured also, I discovered, in Walsall's coat of arms – referred to the county's onetime enthusiasm for bear-baiting. It seemed odd and somewhat distasteful, but not dissimilar to Birmingham's commemoration of its bull-baiting past in the Bull Ring and now in the Bullring.

After all, it was more or less spelt out in Shakespeare's references in Henry VI, Part 2 to bear-baiting and Richard Neville, 16th Earl of Warwick, the so-called Kingmaker. 'Are these thy bears? We'll bait thy bears to death. And manacle the bear-ward [bear-keeper] in their chains, if thou darest bring them to the baiting place.'

And, later in the scene, Richard's retort: 'Now, by my father's badge, old Nevil's crest, the rampant bear chained to the ragged staff, this day I'll wear aloft my burgonet [helmet].'

It seemed obvious. Some previous Earl of Warwick, proud of his bear-baiting heroics, had incorporated one in his personal crest – shackled to its tree trunk, waiting to be tortured.

Not so, according to Eric Pickles. Warwickshire's County Record Office had seemingly briefed him that 'the origin of these emblems is lost in the distant past', but 'the bear was a common heraldic device and implied boldness and courage'.

Oh yeah? How many heraldic animals, mythical or otherwise – lions, stags, unicorns, dragons – can you recall seeing muzzled and chained? There are plenty of heraldic bears, posing and prancing, some with pretty weird features and inclinations – Berlin: bright red claws; Toronto: wearing a medallion; Madrid: pawing at an orange tree – but none requiring even one physical restraint, let alone three.

Even Coventrians, whose heraldic elephant has to carry a castle on its back, intended it apparently as a tribute to the beast's strength in slaying dragons, rather than a novel form of bondage.

So I reckon we're being conned. Warwickshire's bear is clearly a baited bear, and while MPs are banning wild animals from circuses, they should also ban images of cruelly restrained animals from flags and coats of arms.

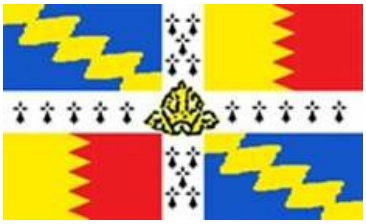
The University of Warwick has already acted unilaterally. Its current, rather crowded, coat of arms includes a couple of bits of lithium and a DNA helix to represent science, Coventry's elephant and castle, and an unchained, collarless bear gently embracing its ragged staff.

Full marks for political correctness, but why stop there? Why not a complete redesign – something with some real contemporary recognition? **Because the current flag is not actually an official county flag at all – simply a banner of the arms of Warwickshire County Council, a civic flag not even listed in the UK Flag Registry**.

There being no UK Flag Act, non-registration isn't itself a big deal, and Warwickshire is far from the only county unable to provide Pickles with more than a local authority flag. The fact is, though, that those of us in Coventry, Solihull, Sutton Coldfield and most of Birmingham were excluded from what was supposed to be a symbolic celebration of the whole historic county of Warwickshire, which seems unfortunate.

It's sad too that, apart from the hijacking of the St George's Cross by jingoistic political parties and football supporters, we generally pay such little attention to these things. I wonder, for instance, how many Birmingham citizens who don't do pub quizzes could describe the city's flag that flies prominently over the Council House in Victoria Square.

True, it's not outstandingly memorable, but it comprises bits of the city's history – red/yellow and blue/yellow quarters with lots of zig-zags, from the de Bermingham family arms, and a posh white ermine cross with tufty black markings and a bishop's mitre in the centre, representing the incorporation of Edgbaston and Sutton Coldfield.



Personally, I much prefer our coat of arms – or coats of arms, because you can see several versions around the city. There's the quartered shield, as in the flag; the disembodied, hammer-wielding arm emerging from an apparently brick crown; the inspirational 'Forward' motto; and of course the two supporting figures – the blacksmith with his anvil and another hammer, and 'the Lady of the Arts', clutching her book and a painter's palette.

But which figure is on the right? The answer, as quiz fiends will doubtless know, is that it depends – on whether you're looking at the arms of the pre-1974 Birmingham Corporation or the post-1974 City Council. The new body had to have a different design, so the figures were switched, the man now on the right, and both left- rather than right-handed. He's also had a haircut, lost his beard, and is holding what looks like either a toilet roll or a pint mug, but is apparently a cupel, a porous pot used in refining precious metals.

Back, though, to Warwickshire's flag. Nottinghamshire was recently in a comparable position, many residents feeling the county council flag – a golden oak tree with nine giant acorns – didn't capture the true essence of the county of Robin Hood. **So, following an online vote of BBC Radio Nottingham listeners, they acquired in May a new official county flag: a St George's Cross on green background, with Robin Hood emblem in the centre. How about it, 'Shakespeare's County'?**

Read more of INLOGOVs blog posts at http://inlogov.com (http://inlogov.com)

© University of Birmingham 2015