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POSTCARD FROM THE SUPREME COURT, LONDON

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A short distance away from Westminster Abbey in the south-west corner of Parliament square in London stands the building that today houses the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom. There are usually tourists going to or from somewhere more well-known walking by. Few look at the signs that identify the building as a court. Perhaps considering the function of the building, few expect to find anything interesting to see inside. This is a mistake, as the building is well worth a visit. It is an oasis of quiet in an otherwise bustling part of town. After a short security procedure one may enjoy a small café in distinctive surroundings. For anyone interested in heraldry it contains many things of interest, as there are few buildings of this date (the late 19th century) that survive in London. Many Victorian



Fig 1

and often misunderstood, the Neo-Tudor buildings from this period - particularly public buildings - expressed interest in the past. Heraldry was a keen part of these interests. The arms of the Middlesex County Council are prominently displayed in and on the Supreme Court building.

Medieval heralds attributed arms to the Kingdom of the Middle and East Saxons (Middlesex and Essex). They depicted, in heraldic style, three seaxes. The weapons are not sabres, but single edged bladed weapons that usually do not have a pronounced curve. The name of the weapon gave the name to the ethnic group "Saxon." In 1910 the County Council of Middlesex petitioned the College of Arms for a formal grant. The crown is derived from a portrait of King Athelstan and it a distinctive difference from the arms used by other groups. The blazon is: *Gules, three seaxes fessewise points to the sinister proper, pomels and hilts and in the centre chief point a Saxon crown or.* The undifferenced arms were granted to

Essex County Council in 1931. In modern times many groups and organizations use the seaxes, and civic heraldry can incorporate the ancient form of the crown. However, ancient charges do not suggest that the arms themselves have great age.

The site of the modern court was the belfry for the Abbey, and it was used as a market from 1750-1800. The City and Liberty of Westminster built a guildhall on the site in 1805. Westminster became part of the City of London in 1889, barring the county of Middlesex. There was a division of property between the county councils, and the guildhall went to Middlesex. A Neo-Tudor guildhall was built here in 1893, and in 1912-1913 the current "art nouveau gothic" building was constructed. Middlesex county was abolished in 1965,



Fig 2

buildings have been laid waste by enthusiastic town planners, and not by German bombs. Maligned

and the structure continued to be used as court buildings. The Constitutional Reform Act of 2005 created the new Supreme Court on 1 October 2009. One of the reasons cited at the time was a clear separation of powers. Nothing could be more clear than a separate building. The old guildhall buildings were closed and refurbished to house the Supreme Court in 2007.

There was considerable controversy at this time. The structure was an important monument to an administrative structure (Middlesex). Many still felt an attachment to the name. Mr Wilshire, whose Spelthorne seat is one of 25 in what was once Middlesex, stated: "Middlesex, the kingdom of the Middle Saxons, has been around for 1,000 years and the Guildhall symbolises that civic pride. Its place in history should be recognised and they should not touch the coat of arms or the war memorials of the Middlesex Regiment which are inside."^a

It was also noted by English heritage that the courtroom furnishings were unsurpassed in terms of quality and completeness,



Fig 3

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Fig 4



Fig 5



Fig 6



Fig 7



Fig 8



Fig 9



Fig 10



Fig 11



Fig 12

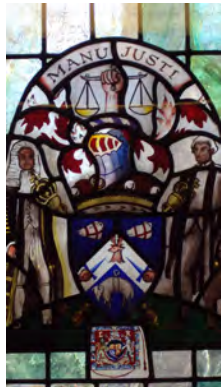


Fig 13



Fig 14

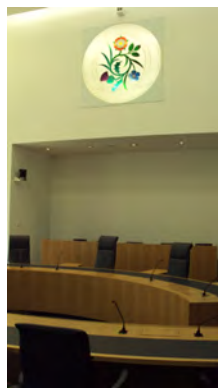


Fig 15



Fig 16

taking their period into account. However, one common feature of courts is lacking. Most court buildings, particularly over where the judges sit, display the royal coat of arms. This shows clearly, in a symbolic way, that the court represents the state and not individual interests. The new Supreme Court buildings do not have the royal coat of arms displayed above where any judge sits. This has drawn criticism from the press. Writing for the *Daily Telegraph* Tom Whitehead states: “Instead a less formal emblem, which only contains national flowers and vegetables representing each of the home nations, features throughout the building and in the three court rooms – in a bid to be more accessible to the public. Officials at the court, which began work on Monday, insisted the move “in no way” undermines the relationship with the Crown and the presence of the royal crown and coat of arms emphasised that the Monarch is the source of the court’s authority.”^c The royal coat of arms is on the front of the building. However, as one can see in Fig 3, the royal arms are not exactly prominently displayed. From ground level they are rather obscured. The self guided tour booklet states on page 3: “As you face the building and look above the entrance, you can see the Royal Coat of Arms. The Monarch is the source of the Court’s authority, as it is for all United Kingdom Courts.” However, as Mr Whitehead notes, the royal arms appear in the library. The court’s formal emblem (not the royal coat of arms) has a crown. This logo appears on all official documents.

The emblem was designed by Yvonne Holton, Herald Painter at the Court of the Lord Lyon in Scotland. According to media reports cost £26,200 to create.^d After approval by Her Majesty it was put on record at the College of Arms (Standards 5/118).^e There has been considerable debate about the individual elements of the emblem. Critics have pointed out that the leek, the symbol of Wales used in to log, is only represented by the leaves of the plant. The daffodil is the flower of Wales, why was it not chosen? The badge was granted by the College of Arms in London in October 2008. The Greek letter omega is prominently displayed, clearly showing that the court is the ultimate. The symbol of Libra is a more traditional one representing justice. Aside from the leek – which as noted is somewhat problematical – there is a Tudor rose for England, flax for Northern Ireland, and a thistle for Scotland. There are several simplified versions of the official badge. Prominently displayed throughout the building is a more abstract set of the four floral emblems. A simplified emblem is used on the carpets. This was designed by Sir Peter Blake (b 1932) who is known for designing the cover of ‘The Beatles’ album Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band.

The reviewer would like to note that the Supreme Court has a variety of gifts available for purchase. They range from cufflinks through ties. The official teddy bear has a logo on its sweater. No crown is portrayed. However, the mug proudly displays a crown surmounting the omega symbol. The large paper gift bag used to carry purchases away bears a crown as well. In a statement issued by the Ministry of Justice on 28 October 2008, it was noted that: “At its most formal level, the Royal Crown surmounts the emblem, as the Monarch is the source of the Court’s authority. Other versions of the emblem will be created to enable both consistency and flexibility in the Court’s communications.”

To this reviewer the media attention directed towards the lack of the royal coat of arms, much less a crown on some versions of the emblem, is not warranted. It was clearly envisaged that there would be different styles of emblem, from very abstract through more formal. It is clear that the Supreme Court is an organ of the

state, and the crown does appear prominently on some versions of the emblem. The average “person in the street” may, given a quick look, not even notice the lack of a crown on some versions. There are also instances where clearly no crown should be depicted. Even a purist would note that the crown is not appropriate on a logo used on the carpet, for example. However, one cannot but notice that not one courtroom has a display of the royal arms with a crown. In this case one can draw no other conclusion that the designers did not feel comfortable with the heraldry. As in so many other areas of public life, there seems to be opposition to the symbols of monarchy.

FIGURES

1. The building of the Supreme Court is decorated with an ideal view of the past. Despite welcoming signs few tourists will brave a visit.
2. Knights play a prominent role in representing the power and prestige of the state. These sculptures are by Henry Fehr (1867-1940).
3. The arms of Middlesex County Council. The royal coat of arms are behind.
4. The arms of Middlesex County Council on a document in the museum in the basement.
5. During WWII, Belgium, Holland, Poland, Greece, and Norway were authorised to hold courts martial in the building.
6. The carpeting in the court building is elaborately patterned with national symbols.
7. The second floor, entrance to courtroom 1.
8. The wood panelling bears many heraldic decorations, like this ancient ship.
9. This coat of arms is more in keeping with the medieval revival style.
10. The interior of Court 1 has benches decorated with heraldic beasts. The wood has been restored so as to appear as it did in 1913.
11. The ceiling of Court 1 is particularly ornate.
12. The stone carving on the way down from the second floor also portrays heraldry.
13. The stained glass is from the period when the structure was the guildhall. This example has distinctive legal figures.
14. The heraldic glass adds a considerable amount of color to an otherwise stark building.
15. The stark interior of Court 2 has drawn most criticism from critics.
16. The lack of the royal coat of arms in the court rankles some (detail from court 2). The emblem of the court used here does not even have a crown.

(Endnotes)

- a Chris Summers, Grand Designs, 7 March 2007, BBC News, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/6143744.htm>.
- b Tom Whitehead, Crown Sidelined from Supreme Court. Daily Telegraph 7 October 2009.
- c Tom Whitehead, Supreme Court Emblem in Fresh Row. Daily Telegraph 8 October 2009. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/law-and-order/6270260/Supreme-Court-emblem-in-fresh-row.html>.
- d College of Arms Newsletter No 19, 2008. <http://www.college-of-arms.gov.uk/Newsletter/019.htm#News>.
- e Official Emblem of the UK Supreme Court Announced, Ministry of Justice 28 October 2008. <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.justice.gov.uk/about/supreme-court-official-emblem.htm>.