

**THE GREAT MACE, AND  
OTHER CORPORATION  
INSIGNIA OF THE  
BOROUGH OF LEICESTER**

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The great mace, and other corporation insignia of the borough of Leicester by William Kelly

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**WILLIAM KELLY**

**THE GREAT MACE, AND  
OTHER CORPORATION  
INSIGNIA OF THE  
BOROUGH OF LEICESTER**



J. R. Planché Esq. A. S. A.  
with the kind regards of <sup>the</sup> Father  
William Kelly

THE  
GREAT MACE OF LEICESTER.

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# THE GREAT MACE,

AND OTHER

CORPORATION INSIGNIA

OF THE

BOROUGH OF LEICESTER.

A PAPER READ BEFORE THE ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF  
LONDON, FEBRUARY, 16TH, 1874.

BY

WILLIAM KELLY, F.R.H.S.

*Author of Notices illustrative of the Drama, &c. in the 16th and 17th  
Centuries; Ancient Records of Leicester; Royal Progresses in  
Leicester; A History of Freemasonry in Leicestershire, &c.*

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"Pomps, without guilt, of bloodless swords and maces;  
Gold chains, warm furs, broad banners and broad faces."

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*Gough Add: Leicester  
p 24.*



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## THE GREAT MACE, AND OTHER CORPORATION INSIGNIA OF THE BOROUGH OF LEICESTER.

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THE custom of distinguishing men occupying positions of power as chiefs or rulers of the people by some outward symbol of authority, such as the mace or the sceptre (terms indeed often used as synonymous\*), denoting the dignity of their office, is one undoubtedly of very great antiquity, both amongst savages in all ages, like the aborigines of Australia and New Zealand, and from the times of the polished ancient Greeks and Romans down to our own day.

The club or mace, formed originally of hard wood, and the latter, subsequently either wholly or in part of metal, would naturally be adopted as one of the earliest weapons of primitive man, but it soon came to be regarded as a symbol of authority.

We learn that maces were in common use in warfare amongst the ancient Greeks, the name (*κορυνή*) being derived from the little horns or spikes by which the head was surrounded, it being thus the prototype of the "morning star" of Scandinavia; and it may be mentioned incidentally that on the font at Wandsford Church, Northamptonshire, of about the reign of William Rufus, are sculptured two warriors fighting, bearing shields, one of whom is armed with the mace and the other with that singular weapon consisting of a staff to which is attached by a chain an iron ball covered with spikes; and it may be remembered that one of the giants in the Guildhall, London, is thus armed.

\* The most ancient mace of the Lord Mayor of London is termed the "sceptre."



Many ancient Græco-Roman mace-heads have been frequently dug up in Italy, several of which are in the British Museum.

As Plutarch informs us, Periphetes, slain by Theseus, was named "Corynetes," or the "Mace-bearer," and that weapon was adopted by Theseus, which, we are told became in his hands irresistible; and Homer gives the same appellation to Areithous. Indeed, Dr. Clarke has derived the origin of the Corporation mace from the ancient Greeks. He says that "the sceptre of Agamemnon was preserved by the Chæro-neans, and seems to have been used among them after the manner of a mace in corporate towns, for Pausanias relates that it was not kept in any temple appropriated for its reception, but was annually brought forth with proper ceremonies, and honoured by daily sacrifices, and a sort of mayor's feast seems to have been provided on the occasion."<sup>3</sup>

Although during a prolonged but unknown period down to the present day it has been customary on all occasions of state processions at Rome for mace-bearers with silver maces to be in close attendance upon the Pope, the origin of the mace-bearers of our corporate towns is, however, rather to be sought in a warlike than a religious source.

In the Middle Ages the mace was a common weapon with ecclesiastics, who, in consequence of their tenures, frequently took the field, but were, by a canon of the Church, forbidden to wield the sword.† It strikes me as not improbable that in this custom we have the origin of the use of the mace as a symbol of authority by our cathedral and other ancient religious bodies. Odo, Bishop of Bayeaux, at the battle of Hastings, was a noted instance of the use of the mace as a weapon by an ecclesiastic, as described in the "Roman de Rou," by Master Wace.

In all probability its use by lay corporations may be traced to the corps of sergeants-at-mace, instituted as a body-guard

\* Fosbroke's "Encyclopædia of Antiquities."

† See M. Le Grand's "Fabliaux of the xii. and xiii. Centuries," by Way and Ellis, i., p. 190.

both by Philip Augustus of France and our own Richard I., whilst with the Crusaders in Palestine.

We learn that when the former monarch was in the Holy Land he found it necessary to secure his person from the emissaries of a sheik, called "the Old Man of the Mountain," who bound themselves to assassinate whomsoever he assigned. "When the king," says an ancient chronicler, "heard of this he began to reflect seriously, and took counsel how he might best guard his person. He therefore instituted a guard of *serjeants-à-maces* who night and day were to be about his person in order to protect him." These *sergens-à-maces* were "afterwards called sercants-at-arms, for Jean Bouteiller (*Somme Rurale*, lib. ii.), who lived in the time of Charles VI., that is, at the conclusion of the fourteenth century, tells us, 'The *sergens d'armes* are the mace-bearers that the king has to perform his duty, and who carry maces before the king; these are called sercants-at-arms, because they are sercants for the king's body.'"<sup>\*</sup>

We learn further that Richard I. of England soon imitated the conduct of the French king, but he seems to have given his corps of sercants-at-arms a more extensive power. Not only were they to watch round the king's tent in complete armour, with a mace, a sword, a bow and arrows, but were occasionally to arrest traitors and other offenders about the court, for which the mace was deemed a sufficient authority; hence they came to be denominated "the valorous force of the king's errand in the execution of justice."<sup>†</sup>

As regards the costume of these important officials, we find that according to the orders given by Thomas of Lancaster, constable at the siege of Caen, September 3rd, 1417, a serciant-at-arms was to appear in the king's presence with his head bare, his body armed to the feet, with the arms of a knight riding (*i.e.*, with armour such as used by knights when they fought on horseback), wearing a gold chain, with a medal bearing all the king's coats (*i.e.*, armorial bearings quartered),

<sup>\*</sup> Meyrick's "Antient Armour," i., p. 88.

<sup>†</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

with a peon royal, *or mace of silver*, in his right hand, and in his left a truncheon.

Hence, in all probability, was derived the custom of the chief magistrate of a municipality, who, as such, is the representative of the sovereign, being attended by his mace-bearer, as a symbol of the royal authority thus delegated to him.

We hear of the mace of the Lord Mayor of London being in use in the early part of the fourteenth century, but at what period the custom was first introduced into Leicester—also one of the most ancient of our boroughs—is unknown, as, unfortunately, none of our local records now remaining (although some of them are as early as the reign of Richard I.) throw any light on this subject; however, as will be seen hereafter, entries of payments to the mace-bearer, or mayor's serjeant, occur early in the fourteenth century. We find, that as early as the beginning of the reign of Henry the Eighth two maces at least were then in use here, as they had been doubtless long before. We learn this on the authority of the parchment roll of the town accounts for the year 1517, being the first of the series of the chamberlains' accounts now in the muniment-room at the Guildhall,\* which contains the following entries:—

“Item, for mendyng of the Maase ..... xxij<sup>d</sup>  
Item, for mendyng of the brason Mase iij<sup>d</sup>.”

Up to the passing of the Municipal Corporations Reform Act in 1835, in addition to the “Great Mace,” or the “Mayor’s Mace,” as it was indifferently termed, and which was of silver-gilt, four other maces, known as the “Silver Maces,” or the “Lesser Maces,” were also part of the corporation insignia; and which, if not coeval in their introduction with the

\* The earliest part of this ancient building belonged to the religious guild of Corpus Christi. It contains the minstrels’ gallery, and there is strong circumstantial evidence of Shakspeare and Burbage having performed in it with the company of players of which they were members. The hooks and pulley to which the curtain was attached still remain.