

:The Dragon Banner of the Kings of Britain

For many years the Dragon Banner was the fighting standard of the Kings of England, and it is still an important emblem of Britain. A red dragon on the green and white field of the Tudor's is the badge and flag of the Principality of Wales, a dragon is one of the supporters of the Arms of London, a herald of the College of Arms has the title Rouge Dragon, and Prince Charles, our present Prince of Wales has a red dragon as the emblem and flag of the helicopter squadron that he commands. So that mythical beast the dragon has lived in Britain for many many years.

The legend of the dragon exists in many countries, the earliest known reference to him is in the chronicles of the mysterious Yellow Emperor who is reputed to have ruled China in the year 2693 B.C. Perhaps the original ancestor of the dragons was the serpent in the Garden of Eden, for he is mentioned in the Psalms, psalm 91 "the young lion and the dragon thou shalt trample under thy feet". This is believed to have been one of the early psalms, dated about 800 B.C. and not one of those written by David.

It was the Romans who brought the first dragon banners to England, and the Romans got them from a tribe of wild horsemen who lived in south Russia. These were the Sarmatians, and they made such a nuisance of themselves that the Romans then as cavalry in their army; this was in the 2nd century A.D. The Sarmatian dragon was shaped something like the wind sock that we see flying at air fields, it had a head of a dragon and in the tail was a whistle that emitted a loud wailing sound as the wild horsemen galloped along. The Sarmatians may well have been, as so many of these nomadic tribes were, of Tartare origin, and to have got their dragons from the Chinese, for these dragon banners bear a striking resemblance to the dragon kites of China. I well remember these when as a small boy we lived in China. They were flown at the festival of China new year, and like the banners of the Sarmatians, had a whistle in their tails.

After the departure of the Romans England slipped into the so called dark ages, but recent work by archaeologists is revealing much more of these times. The legendary stories of Vortigen and Uther Pendragon, and his nephew, or perhaps his son, King Arthur and the magician Merlin are found to have a basis of truth, although that truth is very different from the famous romance "de Mortu d'Arthur" of Sir Thomas Malory which was written in the fourteenth century. The story starts with King Vortigen and his traitor son who tried to placate the Saxon invaders, and Uther who fought and defeated them and then as the old story has it "There came forth a comet of amazing size and brightness, shaped like a dragon, and after Uther had conquered his enemies and been made King he remembered this and ordered two dragons to be made in gold, like the dragon that he had seen in the comet. One of these he presented to Winchester Cathedral and one he kept as his banner, and after this he was called Uther Pendragon". This story can not be taken too literally, there are known inaccuracies, for instance at the time that Uther Pendragon was supposed to have presented his dragon banner to Winchester Cathedral, that is about the year 400 A.D. the cathedral at Winchester had not been built, so it was probably to the great church at Glastonbury that the golden dragon was given. Then there was King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table. A fairy story

but one with a basis of fact, there was no "King" Arthur, but Arthur existed, he was a prominent Anglo-Roman noble, Duke Arthur. He rallied the British and for some years held up the advance of the Saxons. He is reputed to have fought many battles against the invaders, the most famous of his victories being that of Bladen Hill, which is said to be in southern England, though the site is not certain. In this battle Arthur is said to have fought under the banners of the dragon and the Virgin Mary, for Arthur was a devout Christian.

There is further evidence that dragons were well known in these times. Just before the last war, in the year 1938 the remains of a wonderful ship were found in Eastern England, the Sutton Hoo ship. This was a Saxon ship of about the year 650 A.D. and buried with it was a collection of jewels and other beautiful objects, one of which was a shield decorated with dragons, rather bird-like dragons, modern heraldists might call them griffins. This shield is believed to have been of Scandinavian workmanship. All these treasures are now in the British Museum. And also we know that dragons were known to the Vikings who descended on England in the ninth and tenth centuries, for their fighting or long ships were known as dragon or snake ships, and carried dragon beaks on their bows and dragon tails on their sterns.

Then we come to William of Normandy's invasion of England in 1066 A.D. and the Battle of Hastings, and there we know that King Harold of England fought under a dragon banner, and what is more we have a very good picture of this in the Bayeux Tapestry, which is very helpful, for although much has been written about the dragon banners, there are very few pictures of these.

One of these banners of which we have a very good description is that of Henry III. Henry III was an odd character, but what concerns us was that he loved beautiful things and was given to good works. And one of the things by which he is remembered is that he rebuilt Westminster Abbey, surely one of the most beautiful of Gothic churches, and it stands to-day, much as it was after it had been rebuilt by Henry. Henry not only rebuilt the Abbey, but also endowed it with many beautiful objects, one of which was a dragon banner... "he commanded Edward Fitzwode to make a dragon in the manner of a standard or ensign of red samit, to be embroidered with gold, and his tongue to appear as though continually moving, and his eyes of sapphires or other stones agreeable to him".

Henry III's extravagancies and love of beautiful things got him into monetary difficulties, and also his love of foreign favourites was not looked upon with any pleasure. Things came to a head in the year 1264 when the barons, led by Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester, rebelled. Simon de Montfort defeated the King at the Battle of Lewes, a town in southern England. It is recorded that the King fought under the same dragon banner which he had presented to Westminster Abbey. Incidentally there is an amusing story of how Simon de Montfort used flags as a stratagem to help to defeat his enemy, for although owing to his superior military skill he won the battle he was heavily outnumbered by the army of the King. Simon had a large baggage wagon, and this he caused to be protected by heavy iron plates. All that were in it were a few old camp followers who were sheltering from the battle, but de Montfort raised a number of his standards, a white lion rampant with a forked tail on a red field, around the wagon to make it look like his headquarters. In consequence Prince Edward, afterwards King Edward I, one of England's greatest monarchs spent a considerable time subduing this

fake fort, whilst de Montfort was busy down the road attacking and defeating the main body of the Royal troops.

As I have said there are many records of dragon banners being used in battles, but there are very few actual pictures of these, one I have mentioned, the Dragon of King Harold at the Battle of Hastings, the other comes from a most unusual place. One is inclined to think that labour troubles are a modern phenomenon, but this is not so. In about the year 1348 England was visited by a terrible scourge, the Black Death, which is estimated to have killed about half the population of England. This caused a grave shortage of labour and those who were left struck for more money. The wages which were fixed by statute for a ploughman was ten shillings a year, and they asked for £ 2. In passing we can also note that the fixing of wages by law also does seem to be a modern innovation ! And when these men, mostly from the counties around London, and to the east, struck they did it in no uncertain manner, for some 60,000 men marched on London. This is known as the rebellion of Wat Tyler, for he was one of their leaders, although the real leader and instigator was a priest, John Bull (now a national hero), and also one Jack Straw. Strange that Jack Straw is the only one to have a memorial, if it can be called that, a public house on Hampstead Heath, a suburb of London, called Jack Straw's Castle.

The Government was unprepared for this rising, and the young King Richard II, who was little more than a boy, parleyed with the rebels and agreed that their demands should be met. He told them to return to their villages, but each village to leave behind two men to whom, when it had been written, he would give a letter telling their employers that their wages should be increased. And as a sign he gave each delegation one of his Royal Standards, so that all would know what he was doing. The majority returned to their villages, but a number, led by Wat Tyler remained in London where they ran amok, rioting, pillaging and burning important buildings, among which was the famous Savoy, the residence of the Duke of Lancaster. They also got into the Tower of London, where they found and murdered the Arch Bishop of Canterbury. By this time the government forces had become organised and the rebels were directed to meet the King again. This they did at Spitalfields, on the outskirts of the city. At first the rebels, and particularly Wat Tyler were very truculent, so much that the Lord Mayor of London drew his sword and killed him. With this the rebels lost heart, and seeing the forces arrayed against them gave in. This whole story is given in great detail in the famous contemporary history, the Chronicles of Froissart, and the story is illustrated by two very beautiful little paintings. In one we see the first meeting of the King and the rebels, and in the other we see the second meeting. On one side of the picture we see the killing of Wat Tyler by the Mayor of London, and on the other side the King is confronting the rebels. We see that the Royal Forces, on the "dexter" side are carrying the Royal Standard of the three lions and the three fleurs de lys. And we see the rebels on the other side are carrying a pennon with the Red Cross of St. George and also a red pennon on which is a golden dragon. From this it is fair to assume that the Royal Flags that the King gave to the rebels were not the Royal Standard proper, but his Dragon Standard, for this pennon is very similar to the one of Henry III of which we only have a description, but no picture. It is strange that we find an actual picture of a dragon banner in this unusual setting.

All this happened in the year 1381. In about the year 1401 Owen Glendower, a noble of Wales, adopted the red dragon as his badge, and it has remained the badge and banner of Wales to this day. Some say the Welsh dragon was chosen by Owen Glendower because it was the emblem of Uther Pendragon, who has been mentioned and who was a Celt and not English, and lived much of his life on the borders of England and Wales. This may be so, but it seems equally likely that he took it as it was recognised as the emblem and banner of a fighting man.

In 1485 the war of the Roses had been raging for eighty five years. This was the civil war between the House of Lancaster, the red rose, and the House of York, the white. The fight was between these two great houses both of whom claimed the throne of England, it was a war, which though fiercely fought did not greatly affect the ordinary people of England. However in 1485 a Welsh gentleman, Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond and of the House of Lancaster, landed in Wales, and raising the dragon banner of Owen Glendower met and defeated King Richard III on Bosworth Field. He became Henry VII and the founder of the Tudor Dynasty one of the most famous in our history whose best known monarchs were Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth I. The Tudors kept the dragon as their emblem, it became one of the supporters of their Royal Arms. Henry VII presented a dragon banner to St. Pauls Cathedral, and this was probably different to that we saw used by Richard II in the Wat Tyler rebellion. It was probably rectangular, green and white, the Tudor colours with the red dragon upon it. Bosworth Field is said to have been the last battle at which the dragon banner was carried by a King of England. But as I said at the beginning of this article, the dragon is still one of our British banners and emblems.

And finally I will say again what I have already said that it is exasperating that we have so many mentions of dragon banners, and so few pictures of them. There are many pictures of ships of Tudor times flying many flags, the Tudor rose, the feather of the Tudors and so on, but never the dragon, and so what he must really have looked like can only be a guess.

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Being extracts from "A History of Britain and her Flags", now in preparation by Jean Wilson M.A. (Oxon)

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