

An Alphabet of Queries (6)

How does the heraldic Dolphin blend the features of a marine mammal with those of a fish? The answer is: Not very consistently, as these samples show:-



Nearly all have the mammal's beak and fish's scales, but the brow is sometimes more like the one and then again more like the other. The same is true of the dorsal fin, which occasionally has its own unique character with a row of dragon-like spines along its back. In a flat drawing, it is hard to tell if the tail flukes are meant to be vertical or horizontal, but they often display the rays typical of fishes' fins and absent from mammal's. More recent models tend to veer towards the mammal, but older examples are very definitely fishy, with scales and rayed fins, though they still have a bit of a beak.



HMS DOLPHIN, the former submarine base at Gosport, had a distinctly fishy heraldic Dolphin as its badge, as drawn by Charles ffoulkes in 1923, but the more recent insignia of the RN Submarine Service authorised in 1971 (*shown here*) has two natural Common Dolphins, slightly stylized, inspired by the 1966 Australian Navy example.

Of the forty-four submarine services in the world, eleven use heraldic Dolphins, seven use Common Dolphins, one has a shark and the other twenty-five have little model submarines, as described and illustrated in **Submarine Insignia** by W. M. Thornton (Lee Cooper, London 1997).

Promoted in 2001 by Ralph Brocklebank

Issued St George's Day 2002 from Orland, Clent, Stourbridge, Worcs DY9 9QS

Dragonlore

The Journal of The College of Dracology

Number 22 St George's Day 2001



St George and the Dragon on the Gold Sovereign Coin

The College of Dracology for the Study of Fabulous Beasts

The re-awakening of pride in England, probably as a response to the promotion of Scottish and Welsh nationalism, has seen a revival of interest in St George, and therefore of the Dragon. One of the best known representations of the George and Dragon theme is the one (*shown on our cover*) modelled on a relief by Benedetto Pistrucci in the early 19th century, and used on our gold sovereign coins. Note the Dragon is quite small, his threat coming not from his fearsome size but from his extreme venomousness, a characteristic that is not easy to show in a picture but was well known to those who knew the story.

A wonderful variety of Dragons as depicted through the ages is seen in the illustrations to a splendid new book, **ST GEORGE: HERO, MARTYR AND MYTH** by Samantha Riches (Sutton, Stroud 2000). They come large and small, winged and wingless, two-legged and four-legged, scaly and leathery, and the author describes their developing symbolism in some detail. She is at pains to point out the contrast between the Princess and the Dragon in the story, representing as they perhaps do the two extremes of the female character, the Ideal Woman of Chaste Virtue against the Tempting Lust of Carnal Indulgence, and to stress this effect she selects a lot of images where the dragon is shown revealing female genitalia. To a zoologist, this seems odd, as reptiles do not have external genitalia and determining the sex of a snake or lizard by simple observation is not easy. Most dragons are distinctly reptilian, so perhaps it is correct that these artists were making a specific point by depicting them as obviously female. Having dwelt on this aspect of Dragon symbolism at some length, the book says little about the presence or absence of wings or of the number of legs, but the wealth of illustrations provides plenty of material for speculation and this book must stand as a major source for dragon studies (besides giving copious details of St George's life and martyrdom).

The Most Noble Order of the Garter: 650 Years by Peter J. Begent and Hubert Chesshyre (Spink, London 1999) is a magnificent book which has illustrations of a number of examples of the George and Dragon motif which forms one of the main emblems of this Order, after the Garter itself. The Chapel of St George at Windsor, the spiritual home of the Order, contains hundreds of heraldic stall plates, one for each of the Garter Knights that have ever been, but only a few of these are illustrated in this book, among which are seen a Wyvern and a Demi-Griffin. A book showing these stall plates in profusion is being prepared, which will for sure include a large number of fabulous beasts.

The Anatomy of the Dragon

All dragons, in East as in West, seem to have started out as serpents which are limbless and wingless. Many are venomous and others are constrictors and in either form have aroused feelings of horror, fear and loathing in the human heart. Old legends relate how the serpent was originally as other beasts but was condemned to crawl on his belly as a punishment for wickedness. Oddly enough, evolutionists now believe that serpents were descended from lizard-like ancestors with a full set of four legs. The basic vertebrate body plan with two pairs of limbs was evolved by the fishes, with pectoral and pelvic fins, and remains constant throughout the amphibia, reptiles, birds and mammals. Some species such as the serpents, have lost limbs—in whales the pelvic limbs have virtually disappeared—and in others they have been adapted to specialised uses as flippers or wings, but in no case has an extra pair of limbs appeared. In birds and bats the fore limbs have evolved into wings and are used for powered flight, while in a few species of reptile and mammal flaps of skin stretching between the front and back legs enable jumps to be extended into longer glides. In one species of lizard, cheekily named *Draco* by zoologists, extended ribs covered by skin make long gliding jumps possible but they look more like fins than wings.

Early drawings of dragons usually show only one pair of rather stumpy legs, and their heads are more like that of a dog than a snake, indeed, early bestiaries show nearly all snakes with such heads and often with little legs and wings as well. The form that we know as the Wyvern with the fore limbs evolved into bat-like wings and the rear limbs still reptilian or even bird-like, still conforms to the general vertebrate body plan, but around the 14th century artists began to show dragons with four legs as well as a fully developed pair of wings like a Wyvern's. The question is, did the Wyvern grow an extra pair of legs or did a four legged reptile suddenly develop wings ?

Four-legged wingless dragons are often shown in pictures of St George, and they are generally pretty reptilian, like a large lizard or crocodile. It is worth noting that the addition of wings to a normally wingless creature was a practice that was widespread in the ancient Middle East where winged lions, bulls and horses, winged men (not then regarded as angels) and winged serpents appear, as well as a host of other hybrids such as the Sphinx, Minotaur and Centaur, many of which have three pairs of limbs. It is probable that these combinations were symbolic rather than supposedly real creatures, the wings standing for celestial power. So an artist could have added wings to a fearsome reptile to express its imagined unearthly powers. Perhaps the true evolution of our Welsh Dragon will never be known, being the result of work by imaginative but anatomically ignorant artists.