

## THE ARMS OF THE COLLEGE

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Fellows and Members of the College are familiar with its Arms but probably take them for granted and may never have wondered why or how they came about. In a review of Edinburgh's Academic Heraldry, Barden<sup>1</sup> felt that a whole article would be required to tell the full story of how the College's Arms developed. This article attempts to tell the story, not only of the present Arms, but also of other Arms that have been suggested for the College at different times.

The earliest evidence of some Scots Arms is to be found in seals<sup>2</sup> and this is so with the College's Arms. In the Charter of Erection of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, granted by King Charles II on the day before St Andrew's Day, 1681<sup>3</sup> power was given to the 'honest, faithful and approved physicians' to have a Common Seal, to be designated the 'Common Seal of the Royal College of Physicians at Edinburgh'. Craig<sup>4</sup> states that 'the College took advantage of their rights under the letters patent to design a seal for themselves in the following year'. Although the brass matrix of this seal was said in 1940 to be in the possession of the College<sup>2</sup> a recent search has failed to find it. There are two wax impressions of this original seal at the College but none at the Lyon Office, or in the Scottish Record Office. It is described by Stevenson and Wood<sup>2</sup> as 'A shield bearing Arms: On a mount, an oak tree fructed, on a canton the royal arms of Scotland. *Crest* – on a helmet with ornamental mantling and a ducal coronet, a demi-figure of Apollo playing on a lyre. *Supporters* – two wild men, garlanded about the loins with oak-leaves, the dexter supporter holding in his hand a covered cup, the sinister supporter a pheon (?). Above in the field the motto: NON SINIT ESSE FEROS (Ov. *Pont.* 2. 9. 48). Legend (caps): SIGILLVM COLLEGIJ REGIJ MEDICORVM EDINBVRGI 1682. At the end a thistle head slipped, leaved and inverted. Cabled border. Diam. 2 1/8 in'. A British Museum number is quoted, which turns out to be the Catalogue number; the Seal Number in the British Library Seal Collection is XLVII.787 (Fig 1). This seal impression is clearly that described by Stevenson and Wood and probably the one 'inscribed "1682"' mentioned by Craig, as extant in 1976<sup>5</sup>. The same seal, but probably a different impression, is illustrated in J. D. Comrie's *History of Scottish Medicine*<sup>6</sup>. Stevenson and Wood noted that the sinister supporter in the Arms on the seal held what they queried as a pheon, the heraldic term for an arrowhead. Their description of the thistle head at the end of the legend as 'inverted' refers only to the position of the thistle in relation to the legend. It is sad that the original seal matrix seems to have been lost from the College during the last fifty years.

Although under Acts of the Scots Parliament a record has been kept, in the Office of the Lord Lyon King of Arms, of all Arms used up to 1672 and all Grants of Arms made thereafter, and although the Honourable College of Chirurgeans (now the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh) recorded their Arms in the first volume of that *Public Register of all Arms and Bearings in Scotland*, the College of Physicians omitted to record the Arms they used on their seal.



Impression of the Common Seal of the College, 1682.

(British Library Seal Collection, Number XLVII.787, permission of the British Library).

Nevertheless, the College soon petitioned for a Royal Augmentation of their Arms. A Royal Warrant dated 25th February 1681/2 to Lyon and signed by 'Murray' (Secretary of State the Earl of Moray) authorised Lyon (Sir Alexander Erskine of Cambo) to allow and to confirm to the College 'our Coat of Scotland in the Dexter Canton of their Armes; and that as a Mark of our Royall favour ... and a proper nationall difference. For doing whereof these presents shall be to you and all other persons ... a sufficient Warrant' <sup>7</sup>. There were, of course, no officially registered Arms to which to add the canton. Nevertheless, the Arms with their canton appear on the early Seal.

These Arms, distinguished by this signal honour – the personal Arms of the King of Scots – are reproduced in Sir Robert Sibbald's *Scotia Illustrata* <sup>8</sup>. In this engraving (Fig 2) by George Main, who also engraved other illustrations in the work <sup>9</sup>, the supporters' outer arms are held out, flexed at the elbows at right angles. This illustration of the early, unregistered, Arms clears up the doubt of



FIGURE 2

The Arms of the College, from *Scotia Illustrata* (1684) by Sir Robert Sibbald, one of the College's Founders.

Stevenson and Wood about what the sinister supporter holds in his left hand. It is clearly a lancet, as is seen, for example, in the first and fourth quarters of the Arms of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow. Although in the seal impression the motto from Ovid is inscribed above the Arms in the Scottish fashion, the illustration in Sibbald's book shows it inscribed on an escrol upon which the supporters stand. This inferior position of the motto is in the English style.

We do not know who designed these arms, but it should be remembered that Sir Robert Sibbald's father was Keeper of the Great Seal of Scotland and that his colleague and kinsman, Dr Andrew Balfour was the younger brother of Sir James Balfour, Lord Lyon 1630—1654<sup>9</sup>. With Andrew Balfour's museum of antiquities and medals available, and such family backgrounds, it is quite possible that Sibbald and Balfour themselves conceived the bold and imaginative heraldic achievement. It could represent a grateful response by the College to the monarch who granted the charter. The sole charge on the shield is obviously the 'Royal Oak' at Boscobel, in which King Charles' life was preserved after the battle of Worcester thirty years earlier. The design is therefore strongly Caroline, and the King's decision to grant them the 'honourable augmentation' of his own

Arms of Scotland in a canton may represent his appreciation of the compliment paid to him by his new College in such a personal allusion to his safety. The College seems to have regarded as its Arms, registered or not, those on its Common Seal until into the nineteenth century.

While trying to trace the seal of 1682 in the College, Mr Iain Milne made xerox impressions of two seals in the strong room. On one of these, with the date 1681, the motto is correctly placed above the armorial achievement but the draftsmanship is like 19th century 'stationers' heraldry'. Unlike the early seal, in which the supporters hold the covered cup and the lancet with their forearms at right angles to their upper arms, in this and subsequent seals, both supporters' outer arms are held lower down (though in the present Coat of Arms the sinister supporter holds his sprig of rue aloft). There is a hint of the presence of acorns in the oak tree, but nothing resembling the four large acorns in the old seal impression in the British Library and the ten acorns in Sibbald's *Scotia Illustrata*. The sinister supporter holds an object more like a plant than a lancet. This seal is very similar to one embossed on a bound copy of the 'Charter Statutes, etc., of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh' (1852) but does not seem to be from exactly the same matrix. There are clear differences in the leaves of the thistle at the bottom of the border. These differences could, of course, be caused by the stamping of the leather and subsequent workmanship in gold by the binder.

The other seal is artistically far better, though the motto lies beneath the feet of the supporters in the English fashion. Underneath the border of the seal, in tiny letters, is the monogram NP and the date 1862. The seal itself carries the dates 1681 – 1861. This new version of the seal was produced for the College after Queen Victoria granted a new charter in August 1861<sup>10</sup>. Stevenson and Wood<sup>2</sup> refer to 'Laing MS no. 209 ... new Seal executed in 1865 by W. Park after drawing by Sir Noel Paton', for which the College paid five guineas<sup>11</sup>. Again in this seal there are no acorns, so the oak tree is not 'fructed' as in the early seal. The supporters' outer arms hang idly down and the sinister supporter holds the sprig of a plant.

Miss Joan P. S. Ferguson kindly undertook a further search and found seven other seal matrices. The only *brass* seal matrix extant was quite different from the others, and was only 7/8 inch in diameter. However, it is very like a small version of the 'stationers' heraldry' seal dated 1681 which Iain Milne had produced. The printed diplomas for the Membership and Fellowship of the College are still headed by a seal almost identical with Noel Paton's version (again with nearly bare branches and no acorns). Noel Paton's initials and the date below it have been removed, and instead there are the words 'A. Ritchie and Son, Edinburgh'. In the red wafer embossed at the bottom of the diplomas, the seal seems to be the same, but the fine details are naturally less distinct.

Matters rested there for about 100 years. There are no records that successive Lyons sought to bring pressure to bear on the College to register its Arms until John Hooke Campbell of Bangeston was Lord Lyon (1754 to 1795). Although a Campbell of Cawdor, his estate was in Pembrokeshire in Wales and he spent comparatively little time in Edinburgh, particularly towards the end of his tenure of office; he seems to have preferred to style himself Campbell Hooke, and his own Arms are registered with that style<sup>12</sup>. From 1770, Robert Boswell, W.S., was Lyon Clerk and Lyon Depute and even became Lyon *ad interim* between

Hooke Campbell's death and the appointment of Lord Kinnoull as Lyon <sup>12</sup>. As Lyon Depute he actually signed the Letters Patent of the Arms granted to the University of Edinburgh in 1789 by Lord Lyon Hooke Campbell <sup>1</sup>. He was the son of Dr John Boswell, President of the College (1770 – 72) and therefore a cousin of James Boswell, Samuel Johnson's biographer. In addition, Robert Boswell was Clerk to the Royal College of Physicians from 1771 to 1800. In this double capacity he would naturally have been concerned about the fact that the College had not registered Arms.

In the College muniments <sup>13</sup>, there exist two draft Grants of Arms in the name of Lord Lyon John Campbell Hooke of Bangeston. They are unsigned, dated only 'One thousand and seven hundred ... years' and are in a scholarly, eighteenth century hand which Lyon Clerk considers to be that of Robert Boswell <sup>14</sup>. These drafts describe the proposed Arms, though the terms used are not strictly those of modern heraldic blazon. On the first document, in another hand, presumably that of a College official, there are several notes and comments and an indication that, when he receives the amended figure showing the Arms, the College man 'will show it Dr Gregory for his Concurrence'. The second draft document from Lyon (or Robert Boswell) incorporated some of the College man's suggestions, but not all and the text is reproduced by Craig <sup>5</sup>. The proposed heraldic achievement is reproduced in Fig 3. These documents will be fully described elsewhere <sup>15</sup>.

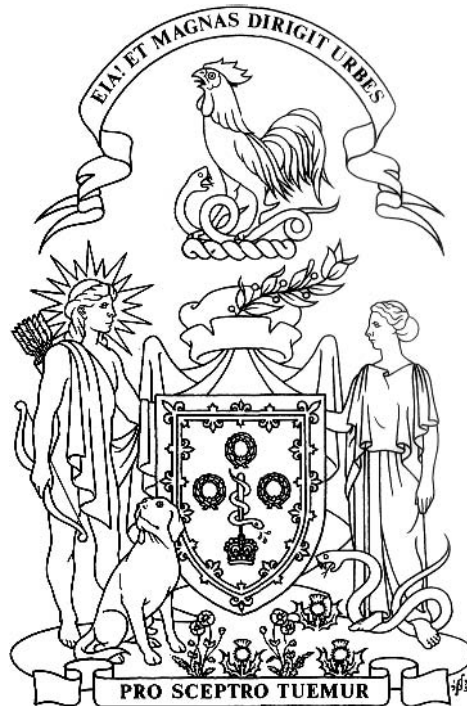


FIGURE 3

Suggested arms for the College, from the late 18th Century blazon in the College muniments.

The proposed Arms are extremely unusual in Scottish heraldry for a number of reasons. Although showing a good grasp of the mythology of Apollo, the substitution of a laurel-plumed ‘physician’s cap’ instead of a helmet, and a ‘physician’s robe’ instead of mantling suggests a continental style of heraldry, such as was later adopted by Napoleon in the heraldry of the French Empire. Barden stated that ‘the Royal Warrant was obviously not produced, for the document makes no mention of the Royal Augmentation’<sup>15</sup>; however, the charges on the shield are within the Royal Tressure and the first draft document suggests that the shield should be suspended from an oak tree with gold acorns. The Lord Lyon or his Depute may have considered that the honourable augmentation of the Arms of Scotland in a canton could not fully apply because the Arms on the seal had never been registered and were therefore, heraldically speaking, illegal. Whatever the reason, nothing further seems to have come of this interesting negotiation. My suggestion that Robert Boswell played a pivotal role in these negotiations between the Lord Lyon and Dr Gregory (probably Dr James Gregory, Secretary 1790, President 1798) is perhaps supported by the fact that all the documents are in the College muniments and there is no record of them at the Lyon Office. Boswell might even have drafted them within the College. James Gregory became a Fellow in 1777 and was a member of various small College subcommittees in 1785 and 1787<sup>16</sup> so he was active in College affairs before he became Secretary. Unfortunately these facts do not help to date the documents, although these are folded in a cover inscribed ‘A Diploma for arms, 1783’.

The next recorded move was on 29th July, 1830<sup>5</sup>, when a letter was sent by Mr Alexander Macdonald, Lyon Clerk Depute, to Dr G. A. Borthwick apparently in response to an enquiry by him about the status and privileges of the College in processions—its precedence, in fact. Dr Borthwick is not listed as an Office Bearer of the College, although his appointment in 1829 as Convener of a Committee of the College to enquire into the Constitution of the Library of the University of Edinburgh testifies to his activity in the College<sup>17</sup>. There is no indication why he, rather than an Office Bearer, approached the Lyon Office, but the answer was clear. Mr Macdonald pointed out that ‘there seems to have been no Patent of Arms asked for or obtained from this Office at any period for the College’ and he contrasted that state of affairs with the matriculation of the Arms of the College of Surgeons ‘in the common form’ in 1673<sup>5</sup>. Despite that, it was not until almost a further 70 years later that, at an extraordinary meeting of the College, Council seriously took up the matter of registering their Arms. They did this, however, in a very circumspect manner.

Dr Peter A. Young as Treasurer of the College (1887-1908) was, under the Laws, master of ceremonies. He was also, according to his obituary, interested in Scots history and a Member of the Royal Company of Archers, It seems that he had a discussion with the Lord Lyon, Sir James Balfour Paul, following which, in March 1898, Lyon wrote to Dr Young enclosing a petition for a grant of Arms with Supporters, to be signed by the President of the College and returned to him. It is clear from Lyon’s letter that he had been shown the version of the College Arms in Sibbald’s *Scotia Illustrata* and also Noel Paton’s version on the title page of the *Historical Sketch and Laws of the College of Physicians*. He noted that in the Sibbald illustration, the sinister supporter was holding what appeared to be a lancet, but that in the ‘History’ this had been altered to the sprig of some plant. He asked what it was, and suggested rue ‘as that was a kind of typical

medicinal plant in olden times' <sup>18</sup>. This opinion agrees with the glowing testimony to the many uses of rue given by Culpeper in his *Complete Herbal* (1653). However, my 1941 edition of Martindale's *Extra Pharmacopoeia* lists *Oleum Rutae* (B.P.C.) only as 'an emmenagogue and antispasmodic'. The Lord Lyon was also concerned about the relationship of Apollo in the crest to the direction of the helmet. In the old seal Apollo is full-faced, but the peer's helmet faces to the right. In Sibbald's illustration, which seems to have struck Sir James even more forcibly, Apollo is looking towards the left while the peer's helmet is facing the right. Lyon described this as 'an impossibility. If the helmet used is ... in profile poor Apollo is looking off to the back of the wearer's head: & if it is a knight's helmet full faced he would be looking sideways to the sinister which is heraldically wrong. I should give the College a knight's helmet and we shall fit the figure to suit'. Sir James also suggested that the savage supporters should be wreathed about the middle with laurel.

The College was obviously not entirely pleased with Lyon's suggested blazon. Dr Young had a conversation 'in the street' with Mr J. H. Stevenson, an Advocate very learned in heraldry. At that time Stevenson was not actually an Officer of Arms, but he became Unicorn Pursuivant in 1902, wrote a well known book on Scottish Heraldry, and later became Marchmont Herald. Young must then have unofficially lent him the letter and petition sent by Lyon, because next day Stevenson replied in a long and scholarly letter to Young, offering advice about why and how the College could ask Lyon to make some changes <sup>19</sup>. He commented that the College had hitherto considered the field of the shield to be silver which, with the oak tree, made up the white and green of the badges College Officials assumed 'on great occasions' and he advised that the College 'should not lightly abandon' its silver shield. He felt that a red field (one of Lyon's options) on the arms of a Medical College 'might be open to wilful misconstruction'. He explained that Lyon's decision was based on the ordinary heraldic rule that forbids colour on colour or metal on metal, but he pointed out that this rule does not apply to a canton awarded as an honour, citing the cantons used by Baronets of both Ulster and Nova Scotia whose fields are silver, yet are frequently found on silver or golden shields. He also criticised Lyon's statement that 'savages in heraldry invariably wear laurel', citing many examples in Scottish heraldry where the savages are wreathed with oak, and he made the further point that when laurel is used in the crest 'it detracts from the respect of Apollo's crown when you find savages in his presence tying the same round their waist'. In their conversation, which must have been a long one, it seems that Young and Stevenson also discussed the question of rue. Young seems to have referred to Hamlet (4.5.183) '*Ophelia* ... "There's rue for you; and here's some for me, we may call it herb of grace o' Sundays – O you must wear your rue with a difference"'. Stevenson pointed out that the phrase 'with a difference' refers to a heraldic 'difference'—the change in a coat of arms which distinguishes, for example, a younger son's arms from those of his father. In view of his heraldic erudition, it is surprising that in this letter Stevenson admits that he does not recognise the special allusion or origin of the oak tree.

These representations must have been tactfully forwarded to Lyon, for in January 1900 Sir James wrote to Young agreeing that the canton could quite well be gold, although the shield was silver, and enclosing a rough sketch of the proposed arms. The College must have been worried about the position of the

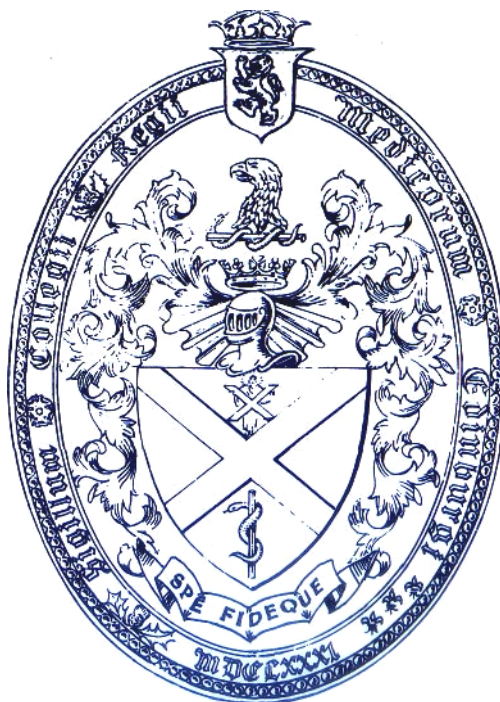


FIGURE 4

Seal, including Arms, suggested for the College by Dr Sydney Watson Smith in 1947.

arm of the sinister supporter holding the sprig of rue and also about Lyon's suggestion of awarding them a knight's helmet instead of a peer's, for in a final letter (23rd January 1900) Stevenson wrote to Young that he agreed about the raised arm of the left supporter and commented 'it is not the part of a supporter to play the herald'. On the other hand, he advised the College to accept Lyon's award of a knight's helmet.

The College's Arms had now reached their present form. There is no mention in the blazon of the position of the supporters' arms, such small details being left to herald painters. The Arms in the Public Register at the Lyon Office (dated 5th April, 1900), and reproduced as the frontispiece of Craig's history and a well known College Christmas card, show the sinister supporter brandishing his rue aloft, but, as we have seen, in other versions, including that which embellishes the College's writing paper at present, there is no such flourish.

Of course, nothing pleases everyone, and in late January 1947 Sydney Watson Smith, the Dundee-born physician who endowed his well known eponymous lectures, wrote to the President of the College, Dr D. Murray Lyon, submitting for consideration new designs for a College Seal, including new Arms (Fig 4). With it he enclosed a 'Criticism of the present Crest Seal and Coat of Arms'. Although this criticism is marked 'Confidential', nearly 50 years have passed since it was made and it may interest readers to learn how the College Arms were viewed by so distinguished a Fellow and see what he suggested should take their place<sup>20</sup>.



Although comparisons are odious, and the present design because recognized as officially adopted in the distant past by the Royal College should for this reason not be criticised, yet an opinion expressed in confidence by a Fellow may be permissible. The CREST consists of a chlorotic, undersized girl, seeming old for her years (or a boy; but the sex is in doubt), bearing a quiverful on her right shoulder, in the act of playing upon a heavy (man's size) harp. Whether the harp is Irish, Welsh or Celestial is uncertain; it is not to be recognized as a Scottish symbol. The SHIELD is insignificant, as if 'cut-away'; the emblematic Scottish Royal Standard is of minute size, pushed up inconspicuously into the corner of the first quarter. The Tree of Knowledge, inappropriate for the purpose, looms too large, occupying the centre and greater part of the Shield, and as if planted on 'hangman's hill'. The HELM has, surmounting it, an unfinished Crown; the Mantling on each side is, in effect, cheap, ragged and shabby; Helm and Mantling together produce a top-heavy appearance. The Supporters cannot but excite some feeling of shame: they have the semblance of being twin brothers (both male?), equally hirsute and naked except for a wreathed loin-cloth round each; and they look rather coy and shy in a self-conscious way. The right Supporter, perhaps ashamedly, is holding in out-turned hand, well away from himself, a sandglass; or is it an egg in egg-cup, and has the egg gone bad? He has, too, a light bangle round each arm above the elbow which, of course, may possess some meaning? The left Supporter holds effeminately in his left hand a little flower, perhaps culled leisurely by the wayside, maybe plucked from the Tree of Knowledge? The Surround: The honourable words inscribed are abbreviated instead of being given in full in the correct manner usual at Edinburgh; the broken words are interspaced by ordinary unadorned stops. At the most dependent part is the sole attractive detail of the whole composition—a Crowned Thistle; but, why crown a Thistle when the Lion Rampant is more fitting; and placed above, not below? The dates given on both sides of this Crowned Thistle, obviously meant to represent the single Date of Foundation of the Royal College, are not the same; the figures make only a confusing mystery; they are even upside down, which is absurd. As a final indignity, the artist or printer has had the effrontery to stamp his sign-manual or trade-mark under the indifferently printed design. May I submit that the whole picture is unheraldic, medically meaningless, as well as being unpleasing, even repellent: that the design is unbecoming the honour and dignity of the Royal College; and that it should be discarded forthwith, and consigned to the limbo of unremembered things. S.W.S.

The manner in which the criticism is written is probably meant to be amusing, if not facetious, but the substance of the criticisms, which seem to refer to Noel Paton's version of the seal, is obviously deeply felt. Although Watson Smith considered the whole arrangement to be 'unheraldic', his own comments demonstrate an impressive ignorance of heraldry. Any armorist would immediately identify the crest with Apollo and his attributes The proudest part of the College's armorial achievement—the augmentation of honour in the form of a canton of the Royal Coat of Arms – is completely misunderstood. The Boscobel Oak is thought to be the 'tree of knowledge', though, of course, the Tree of Knowledge was an apple tree. This misunderstanding might have been corrected if Watson Smith had looked at the actual Arms rather than the Paton seal in which no acorns are visible. The 'unfinished crown' is not a crown at all, but a 'crest coronet'. Perhaps he has a valid point about the supporters. It is not clear why the supporters of the shield of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh should be savages. However, so called 'savages' or 'wild men' are supporters for no particular reason in other Scottish Arms; the late Don Pottinger, Islay Herald and Lyon Clerk, suggested that they might represent Hercules, especially when they carry clubs, as they often do<sup>21</sup>. Nothing came of Watson Smith's proposals. In November 1947 the drawings were displayed at a quarterly meeting and the Librarian has found no further comment in Council minutes or elsewhere.

Apart from these detailed examples of heraldic misunderstanding in Watson Smith's criticism the fact is that he simply missed the central point, as, indeed, had the learned J. H. Stevenson. The College's Arms are Royal, Caroline and, heraldically, beautifully simple. They are outstandingly different from the Arms of any other medical corporation in the United Kingdom. Except for the substitution of rue for a lancet, they are the Arms assumed by the College in the year after its Charter of Foundation. Arms of such great distinction should be the pride of all Fellows and Members.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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