

BUCKINGHAM'S SWAN

The gilded swan perched high on Buckingham's Old Town Hall glitters like a veritable golden eagle when illumined with sunshine. The passing motorist cannot miss it and it can be said to put Buckingham on the map. Why is it there?

Thomas Hervey, a Herald, during an official visit in 1566, said 'the arms antiently (!) belonging to the town and borough of Buckingham' were 'partly per pale, sable and gules, a swan with expanded wings, argent, ducally gorged'. It's worth noting that the original borough arms had a crown around the swan's neck but, unlike Bucks County Council arms, there was no trailing chain.

How ancient was "antient"? We're unsure, there seem to be three possibilities: Firstly, that the Swan came over with one of the marauding Danes who wreaked so much damage across our area, south of Bedford, in the years leading to 1000 AD. Our Swan is not a mute gliding without a ripple across quiet waters, our angry swan has wings spread to scare nest raiders whilst his jaws are open to seize & to shake. He'd have looked full of prowess on the prow of a Viking Chief's boat!



Copyright © Kevin Quick

Then, there are Norman suspects (1066, and all that followed: a Castle & Market for Buckingham). Did Earl Giffard or his French successors lend their Arms to the town? Maybe!

Finally, the Swan has been definitely associated with Buckingham, the county of Buckinghamshire and other boroughs towns in the county e.g. High Wycombe since Humphrey, 6th Earl of Stafford. Humphrey became the first Duke of Buckingham in 1444. His family used the white swan as their personal crest and their servants wore it on their livery of black and red a.k.a. sable & gules in heraldic terms. The association of a swan with Bucks had probably become accepted fact by the time of Humphrey's death in 1460.

The poet Michael Drayton confirmed the Swan's part in Buckingham's identity when he wrote "the muster'd men for Buckingham are gone under the Swan, the Arms of that old Towne". They had gone to the Battle of Agincourt in 1413 and our lads, probably fine archers, were part of what Shakespeare called King Henry V's "band of brothers", a brave English army that routed a larger French force.

Records suggest that the present town hall that dates from the 1780s wasn't the first to have a swan on its roof. The building it replaced was small and sited in front of the White Hart Hotel. It sported a swan weathervane that looked like an Aylesbury duck! Rumour suggests that this retired town swan has found a happy resting home with a young lady of Buckingham.

Ed Grimsdale