

# 5.10 Knight life

Have you ever shaken hands with your opponent before and after a football match? Or have you given up your seat on a bus for an elderly person or pregnant woman? Have you ever held a door open for someone, or allowed them to go through the door before you? If the answer to any of these questions is 'yes', you have probably been told what good manners you have. The person you've helped knows you didn't have to do any of these things, but they (and you) feel much better for it. So why do we do this? Where does this sort of behaviour come from?

## Mission Objectives

- Consider the role of the knight in medieval society.
- Judge whether aspects of medieval history still have relevance today.

### From the Middle Ages?

Lots of sports today include these ideas about behaving properly and being courteous. For example, when playing golf or snooker, there are no rules to stop you making a noise when your opponent is taking a shot, but players are quiet when their opponent is playing. This is because they don't want to distract them and be seen as unsporting. But this idea of behaving in the correct manner comes from the Middle Ages. And it all started with the best warriors in Europe – the knights.

### The knight's code

The first knights were just soldiers on horseback. William the Conqueror brought them to England in 1066 to fight King Harold. As a reward for beating Harold, King William gave them land. In return, they promised to spend 40 days a year fighting for their king. This was called **paying homage**. From the twelfth century onwards, though, knights were expected to follow a strict code of honour, called **chivalry**. Inspired by Christian teachings, chivalry demanded that knights were kind, truthful, loyal, polite, and brave in battle. They had to spend money and choose friends wisely, never break a promise and defend people who couldn't defend themselves.

The 'Code of Chivalry' also stated that the knights had to treat women especially well. They should fight for a woman, do brave things for her, and even write her poems! Even today, when a man helps out a woman in an extra special or kind way, it is often said that 'he was like a knight in shining armour!' Over the years, this

idea of behaving correctly and considerately was passed down and still survives today. So next time someone thanks you for giving up your seat for them or holding open a door, just say, 'It's OK, I'm just being chivalrous!'

### So how did you become a knight?

If you wanted to be a knight, having a rich father helped. Being a knight was expensive because you had to pay for all your horses and weapons – and you were expected to give expensive gifts to your friends.

A knight's training would start at seven years of age when he would be sent to a knight's home to serve him. The **page**, as the boy would be known, would clean dishes, serve meals and wash clothes, and might learn to read and write. At about 14 years old, the page would become a **squire**. He would learn about chivalry, weapons, fighting, armour, and horses. And if the squire worked hard enough for another seven years, he might be ready to become a full knight. The cartoons on the next page show the ceremony a young man would eventually go through to become a knight.

**SOURCE A:** Re-enactments of medieval tournaments are popular tourist attractions, and regularly take place at castles in Britain during the summer holidays.



## FACT!

If a knight was captured in battle he would rarely get killed because he was valuable and his family would pay a ransom to free him.

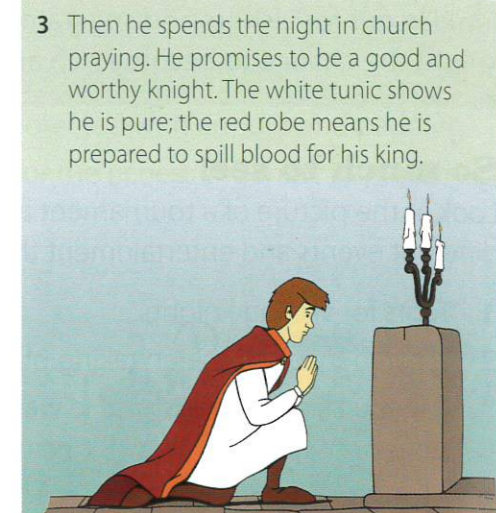
### A knight at last!



1 The young squire has waited years for this. He has learned all there is to know about being a knight, and now his time has arrived!

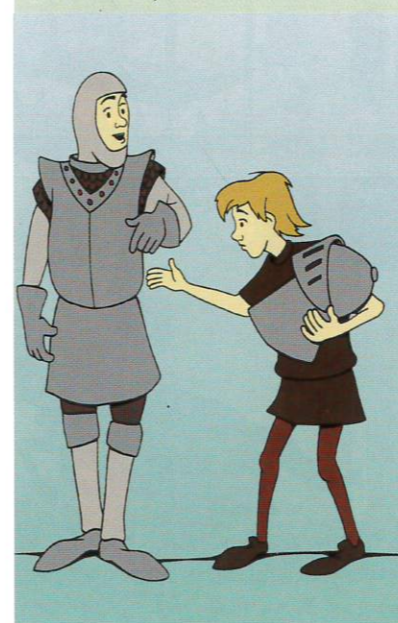


2 The night before, he has a bath to wash away his sins.



3 Then he spends the night in church praying. He promises to be a good and worthy knight. The white tunic shows he is pure; the red robe means he is prepared to spill blood for his king.

4 Helped by the page and another squire, he puts on all his armour ready for the knighting ceremony.



5 The squire kneels before his lord, or even the king, and promises to be loyal and brave and to protect the poor and weak. He is then **'dubbed'** (touched) on each shoulder with the flat of his own sword.



6 A knight is born! He is often presented with a set of spurs (used to control a horse), a sword and a new suit of armour. The priest will bless him so he should always triumph in battle. He is also usually given land and reminded that he must spend 40 days a year fighting for his lord.

## Wise Up Words

chivalry dubbed page paying homage squire

## Work

- 1 Explain the following words and phrases: chivalry; paying homage; dubbed.
- 2 What is the difference between a page and a squire?
- 3 Make a list of five things that people do today that could belong to a modern code of chivalry.
- 4 In pairs or small groups, write a code of chivalry for your classroom or school. Think it through carefully. You could put it on display and try to follow it.

# 12 What was heraldry?

Once a knight put on his armour, he looked the same as any other knight. So, in order to stand out when jousting in tournaments, or to avoid being killed by his own men during battle, the knight decorated his shield. The designs were made up of special pictures, patterns or colours. This special design was known as a **coat of arms**. Sometimes the knight would also wear a tunic or carry a flag with the same design as his shield. A coat of arms was a knight's personal badge and had to be easy to recognize. After all, during battle it was vital to know instantly who was coming towards you so you knew which side he was on. As the years went by, the patterns became very complicated and complex rules for their creation, called **heraldry**, were developed.

## Mission Objectives

- Analyse the rules of heraldry.
- Explain why heraldry was important in medieval society.

## Rules of heraldry

When designing his coat of arms, a knight had to follow several strict rules. To begin with, a knight was only allowed to use five basic colours – purple, blue, red, black, and green. He was also allowed to use two metal colours – gold and silver. A knight then had to choose a simple design (see **Source A**).

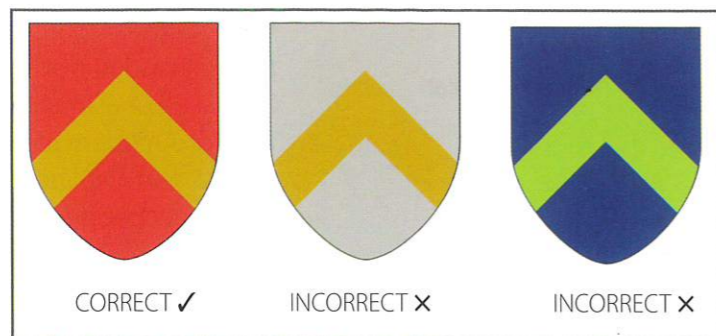
There were even strict rules when selecting the colours for a pattern. For example, you couldn't put a metal next to a metal or a colour next to a colour (see **Source B**).

**SOURCE A:** Each basic pattern had its own name.



## Armour

A suit of armour could cost up to £75,000 in today's money. Most suits looked the same, so a distinctive coat of arms was very important in order to tell the knights apart.



**SOURCE B:** Colour rules for a knight's coat of arms.

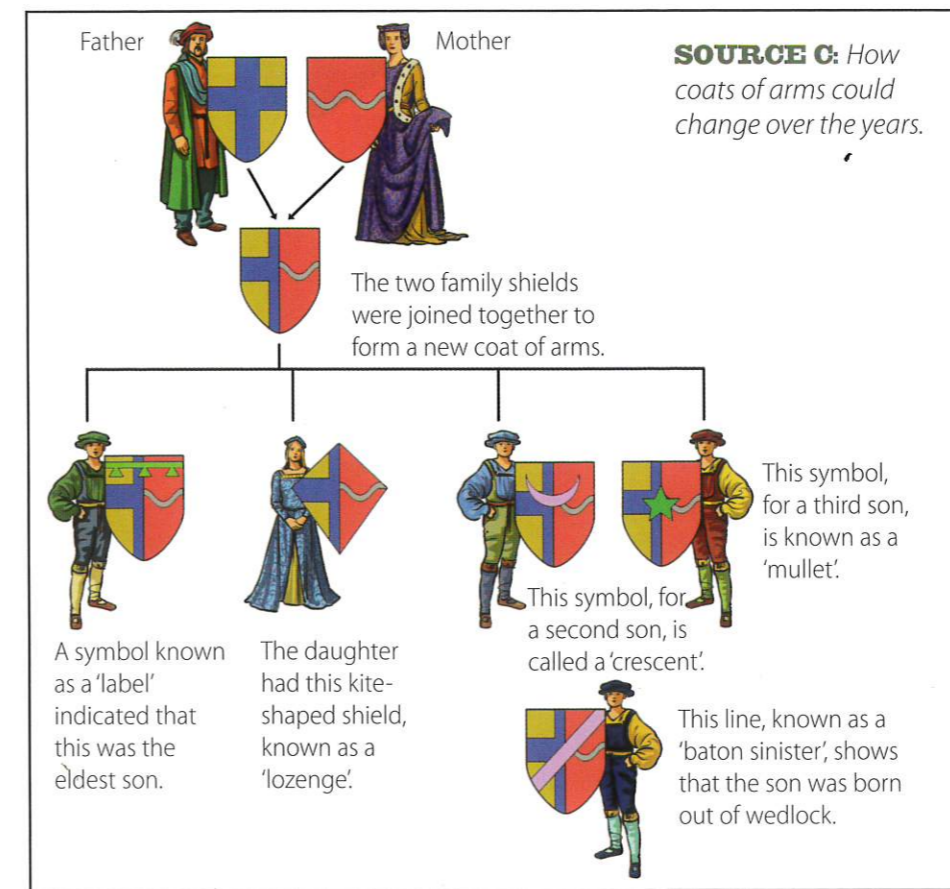
## Choosing your charge

A coat of arms often had a 'charge' – an image that represented something about the knight or his family (see below).



## Family matters

Coats of arms were passed down through the generations and became family badges. They were used on everything – walls, gates, flags, clothes, windows, even plates and cutlery. When the members of two important families married, their coats of arms were joined, and if they had children, special symbols were used that indicated their rank within the family (see **Source C**).



**SOURCE D:** This illustration from the 1400s shows a knight in coat of arms.



## Work

- In heraldry, what was:
  - a pattern?
  - a charge?
- In your own words, explain the rules about colours and metals that knights had to follow when designing their coat of arms.
- Why was a coat of arms important for a knight?
- Design your own coat of arms. Choose the basic pattern, charges and colour – and remember to stick to the colours and metals rule! Then write a paragraph explaining the choices you made when designing it.