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Do coats of arms reveal the true soul of England? DT128, 22/9/01

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Country

Do coats of arms reveal the true soul of England?

countrynotebook

I knew that if I gave the name cutlasses to the three billhook lookalikes on the Essex coat of arms, *Telegraph* readers would swiftly fill me in – and so they did. My cutlasses are “seaxes”, but what a seaxe might be good for, no one saw fit to tell me.

I would have been pleased to discover that they were indeed billhooks, or ancient sickles, or thatcher's knives or fish-gutters, but that would hardly fit in with the notion of a coat of arms, which has to have something to do with fighting, or jousting at the very least. Chances were overwhelmingly that, like the sabres, spears, swords, falchions, scimitars and other hardware to be found



Germaine Greer

charged on shields, seaxes were things for killing people with.

A seaxe is simply a big knife, shown in heraldry with

a squared-off end and a deep semicircular notch in the back. Saxons get their name because they were a seaxe-wielding people, though the first unsavoury story about seaxes involves a Jute, namely Hengest, commander-in-chief of the international expeditionary force that came from continental Europe in the mid-fifth century to assist Vortigern in his battles against the Picts and Scots.

When Hengest realised that his picked force of Jutes, Saxons, Frisians and Angles could annihilate his British allies, he is supposed to have said: “Let us grab our seaxes.” The rest is not quite history because nobody is really certain that Hengest

was real. But the seaxes were; Englishmen possessed them and toolled up with them well into the second millennium.

The Essex coat of arms is a field gules (that is, a red ground) charged per fesse with three seaxes argent, hilts and pommels or, and not as you will see it on some signs, red seaxes on a white ground. These are supposed to be the arms of the ancient kingdom of the East Saxons, and Essex to be a short way of saying East-Saxony or Ost-Sachsen, reminding the inhabitants of their German forebears.

Irritatingly enough, the same device is used by Mittel-Sachsen or Middlesex, which claims that three seaxes are the arms of the Kingdom of the Middle and

East Saxons, and have been used since time immemorial.

This is tosh, because heraldry itself did not exist until 700 years or so after Hengest. Even then, the right to bear arms was to be enjoyed by feudal lords rather than county councils and lesser bureaucracies. Middlesex was granted its arms no longer ago than 1910 and Essex could manage no better than to copy its device in 1932. Middlesex responded by charging its shield with a Saxon Crown. Other coats of arms have crests, surmounted by prancing beasts or knightly helmets or boats or battlements. The arms of Suffolk are surmounted with a whole stack of things, a Viking dragon ship on the sea

within a crown on top of a helm.

Essex is crestless, which is probably a mercy. And there are no supporters, no creatures holding the shield as the lion and the unicorn do the royal arms. All you get is a red shield with three knives lying cutting edge upwards, handles oddly to the left. Were the Saxons left-handed?

Suffolk arms show a blazing sun rising over the sea (argent azure barry wavy), which seems a lot nicer than three choppers. Other counties have mottoes, but not Essex. Suffolk says: “Guide our Endeavour.” Essex remains silent. Not a lot of creativity was exerted in

1932 when it was decided that Essex had to have a county coat of arms. We just stole the best part of the Middlesex arms and left it at that.

The attributed arms of East Anglia are three gold crowns on a blue ground, which could have been charged with our seaxes to signify that we lie east of Middlesex. Instead, we are just uncrowned Middlesex.

What message are we sending with our wordless seaxes? This is how it strikes a Canadian: seaxes “were implements of war carried at the belt of every Englishman. Even though the English were busy as farmers and fishermen, they were at heart fighters. Tribe warred against tribe and village against

village. Feuds parted households and passions of hatred and vengeance were handed from father to son. A grim joy of fighting was characteristic of the race.”

So with three seaxes charged on a field of blood, we are boasting of our grim joy of fighting. We could print the device on the breast of every T-shirt worn by every hooligan from Essex or Middlesex. This at last may be the answer to that perennial question about what it means to be English.

● Germaine Greer will give a lecture in aid of a new library in Addis Ababa tomorrow at 5pm at the Ethiopian Embassy, 17 Princes Gate, London SW7.

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FAX

From Carol Horne
Assistant to Professor Germaine Greer
Fax No. 01799 530623
To Kylie O'Brien
The Telegraph
Fax No. 0207 538 7244
Date 17 September 2001
No. of Pages, including this one 3

Kylie,

Herewith Professor Greer's copy, also sent by fax. Please confirm safe receipt.

Carol.

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Subject: DT128

Date: Tue, 18 Sep 2001 09:38:01 +0200

From: Carol Home <kaj41@dial.pipex.com>

To: Kylie O'Brien <wkdatx@telegraph.co.uk>

Kylie,

Herewith Professor Greer's copy, also sent by fax. Please confirm safe receipt.

Carol.

COPY:

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