



## Factsheet G9 General Series

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House of Commons Information Office

# The Portcullis

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The crowned portcullis has come to be accepted during the twentieth century as the emblem of both Houses of Parliament. As with many aspects of parliamentary life, this has arisen through custom and usage rather than as a result of any conscious decision.

This **factsheet** describes the history and use of the Portcullis.

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## Introduction

Since 1967, the crowned portcullis has been used exclusively on House of Commons stationery. It replaced an oval device, which had been in use since the turn of the twentieth century, on the recommendation of the Select Committee on House of Commons (Services).

The portcullis probably came to be associated with the Palace of Westminster through its use, along with Tudor roses, fleurs-de-lys and pomegranates, as decoration in the rebuilding of the Palace after the fire of 1512.

The portcullis was the badge of John Beaufort, Marquess of Dorset and Somerset (c.1371-1410), bastard son of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster (1340-1399), and was subsequently adopted by his great-grandson, Henry Tudor (later Henry VII) whose mother was Lady Margaret Beaufort (1443-1509). Henry VII (1485-1509) and Henry VIII (1509-1547), the first and second sovereigns of the Tudor dynasty, employed the portcullis as a badge and probably used it in the Palace, as elsewhere. It was under the Tudors that the Palace of Westminster ceased to be the seat of the Court and became the regular meeting place of Parliament. The portcullis as now used in the Palace of Westminster is commonly surmounted by a crown, which makes it specifically a royal symbol, even though the original use by the Beauforts was of an uncrowned portcullis. There has been little consistency about inclusion of the crown over the years.

### Other uses for the Portcullis

Its use as decoration was not, of course, confined to the Palace of Westminster. It appears repeatedly in the Henry VII Chapel in Westminster Abbey and other buildings connected with the Tudors such as King's College Chapel, Cambridge. In the Palace, it was certainly used, for example in the cloisters dating from 1526, where portcullises can still be seen in the ceiling bosses (see Illustration III in the Appendix). It also appeared on the ceiling of the Star Chamber and, according to early nineteenth century authorities, in St Stephen's Chapel itself. A portrait of Sir Christopher Wray (Speaker in 1571) shows him wearing a chain of office in which the portcullis is prominently featured, no doubt as a token of loyalty to the Crown.

But it is not these uses which gave rise to the widespread use of the portcullis such that today it is accepted as the emblem of Parliament - it was used in the pre-1834 palace no more than several other devices. The wholesale use of the portcullis throughout the Palace of Westminster dates from the nineteenth century.

Approved  
*Elizabeth II*



*The Badge of  
 the House of Lords and the House of Commons  
 as heretofore borne and used  
 and authorized to be borne and used  
 by Her Majesty The Queen.*

Formal grant to  
 both Houses of  
 Parliament by HM  
 the Queen in 1996

College of Arms  
 London

*C. U. G. P. Fel.*  
 Garter King of Arms

## Charles Barry and the New Palace

Charles Barry, in his designs for the new Palace after the fire of 1834, which according to the rules of the competition had to be submitted pseudonymously, adopted the portcullis as his identifying mark. Because Barry and his collaborator, Pugin, were given a fairly free hand in the detail of design, they were able to indulge their liking for particular motifs and there is no doubt Barry was very fond indeed of the emblem under which he won the competition. Indeed, two uses of the portcullis appear on Barry's fine memorial brass in Westminster Abbey.

The use of the symbol in the new Palace was considerable. It is found literally thousands of times carved in stone and wood, stamped on leatherwork, on books in the Commons Library and on curtains and wallpaper. Likewise, it is cast in the metal of the Great Bell ("Big Ben"). It was quite likely this saturation of the Palace with the emblem which led to its adoption in a quasi-official form, though this has occurred mostly only in the late twentieth century.

## Modern uses

Among modern Commons uses are the notepaper mentioned above, the *Weekly Information Bulletin* (this was the official first use on parliamentary papers), *Hansard* bound volumes and the annual report of the House of Commons Commission. It has also been depicted on cutlery, silverware and china owned by the Catering & Retail Department. The portcullis was incorporated on pre-paid House of Commons envelopes which replaced the old "official paid" ones in 1983. It is very possible that the popularisation of the portcullis owes more to its early employment throughout the building on chairbacks than to any other factor. It should be added that though the portcullis is used equally by the House of Lords, the Tudor Rose is employed as or more often, as a decorative motif in their part of the Palace of Westminster. Since 1978 a design of the portcullis with the Mace below it has been used by the Speaker on notepaper etc.

Probably the original idea of using a portcullis in arms was to betoken strength and redoubtability. In many old representations of the emblem, for instance, in the possession of the Customs and Excise, the portcullis itself is flanked by towers as if representative of a strong castle. Among modern users with this theme of strength in mind is Security Express Ltd. Perhaps the association of the rose, a symbol of beauty, and the portcullis, one of strength, may suggest a play or rebus (*Beau - fort*) on the Tudor family name.

## City of Westminster

The portcullis (without the crown) has also been associated with the City of Westminster since Tudor times. The arms granted to Westminster in 1601 were composed of the emblems of those two monarchs particularly associated with Westminster: Edward the Confessor (1042-1066), who began rebuilding the Abbey, and Henry VII. (1485-1509). The emblems of the Confessor (allocated posthumously by medieval heralds) are the cross and five martlets, the Tudor emblems are the rose and the portcullis. As regranted in 1902 with crest and supporters the City arms contained four separate uses of the portcullis. The arms of the City of Westminster were regranted when it was merged with St Marylebone and Paddington in 1965 and now include a portcullis only in the badge. The appendix gives some details of the appropriateness of the portcullis to Westminster.

## Westminster fire office

At the time of the rebuilding of the Palace after the destruction of the medieval building in 1834, the most common use of the portcullis in London streets would certainly have been the Westminster Fire Office's firemark. Many thousands of these wall-plaques (which, incidentally, told the then-private fire brigades which firm had insured a particular building) would have been found all over the capital and would undoubtedly have been familiar to Barry and Pugin with their architects' eye for detail.

The Westminster fire-mark (see page 6) was adopted in 1717 from the design of Roger Askew, a coach-painter of Long Acre, and a director of the Fire Office. It was of a particularly bold and effective design: the crowned portcullis issued in gilded lead, without chains, with the three feathers of the Prince of Wales (who had taken an interest in fire insurance matters) and bears a marked resemblance in several features to the portcullis presently used in Parliament. The Fire Office used their badge on seals, medallions, notepaper, policies, furniture, and staff uniforms. It must have been a very common emblem in early 19th century London. Incidentally, like those of Pugin, portcullises were employed on chairbacks used by the Fire Office. The Westminster Fire Office was absorbed by another insurance company (now the Sun Alliance) in 1906, though its emblem still hangs over the offices at the Quadrant at Piccadilly Circus.

### Other users

Other users of the portcullis (which is a fairly common heraldic device) include the Dukes of Westminster of Beaufort, in their family arms, HM Customs and Excise, the erstwhile Westminster Bank Ltd., the Westminster Chamber of Commerce, the Royal College of Surgeons, Westminster College Oxford, the Boroughs (as they existed pre-1974) of Harwich (Essex), Romsey (Hampshire), Abergavenny (Monmouthshire), Wallingford (Berkshire), the burgh of Arbroath (Angus), the (pre-1965) Metropolitan Borough of Stoke Newington and the Metropolitan Police. The Arms of Wallingford (Illustration IV) included no fewer than eight portcullises. The present National Westminster Bank continues to use the portcullis in its seal. In general, these uses are of the uncrowned portcullis.

The crowned portcullis as now used by the House is, as mentioned above, a Royal emblem. It has, nevertheless, been used by organisations unconnected with the Crown - for instance the Victoria Station and Pimlico Railway Company, which built Victoria Station in London. HM Customs and Excise have used the badge for some centuries. Apparently, the portcullis came to be regarded as a symbol representing the gates of the kingdom, that is, the seaports; which were, of course, the seats of operation of the Customs. It is not certain whether their use of the emblem pre-dates that of the Beauforts; certainly nowadays the crowned portcullis is used. The portcullis has also featured intermittently over the centuries on the coinage, including the old 3d and present 1p.

On the historical associations of Westminster with the Portcullis, the following is taken from the minutes of Westminster City Council, 20 March 1902, as quoted in Richard Crosley, *London's Coats of Arms* (1928) pp 229-232

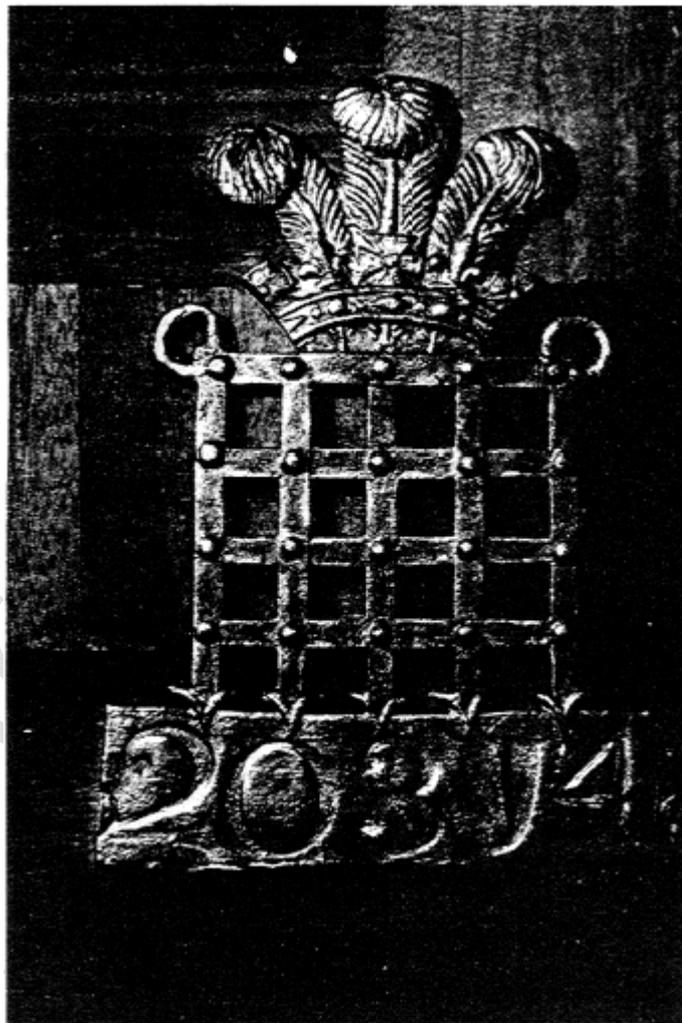
*"...The Portcullis, as a design, has always been closely identified in the mind with Westminster; but insomuch as it appears in the Arms of Romsey and Arbroath, and perhaps in one or two other places, it should be differenced in some way. The Decoration of the Portcullis and Tudor Rose occurs in profusion in the Houses of Parliament, in the roof of the Savoy Chapel, in the lovely Henry the Seventh's Chapel, and other public buildings in Westminster. They are, both of them, badges of the Tudor Dynasty, under whom Westminster received its greatest favours, being made a Parliamentary borough, an Honour, a Bishop's See, the seat of the Royal Court at Whitehall, etc. The Portcullis was assumed by the children of John Gaunt, and was the favourite device of Henry VII., as it imported descent from the House of Lancaster; whilst the plucking of the damask rose of Lancaster and the pale rose of York, as the rival cognizances at the quarrel in the Temple Gardens, has been immortalised by Shakespeare in Henry VII., Act 4, Scene 1. One of the Pursuivants of Herald's College bears the title of Portcullis, with whom Westminster would thus be identified. The Portcullis may also be regarded as the emblem of Security, and the significance of the united Rose of England resting on the emblem of Security possesses an additional picturesque appropriateness to the City of Westminster."*

### Styles

Various forms of the portcullis have been used for House of Commons purposes during the twentieth century, the variations being largely due to the practices of individual artists and blockmakers. In some designs, the crown was omitted or depicted in different designs. Another

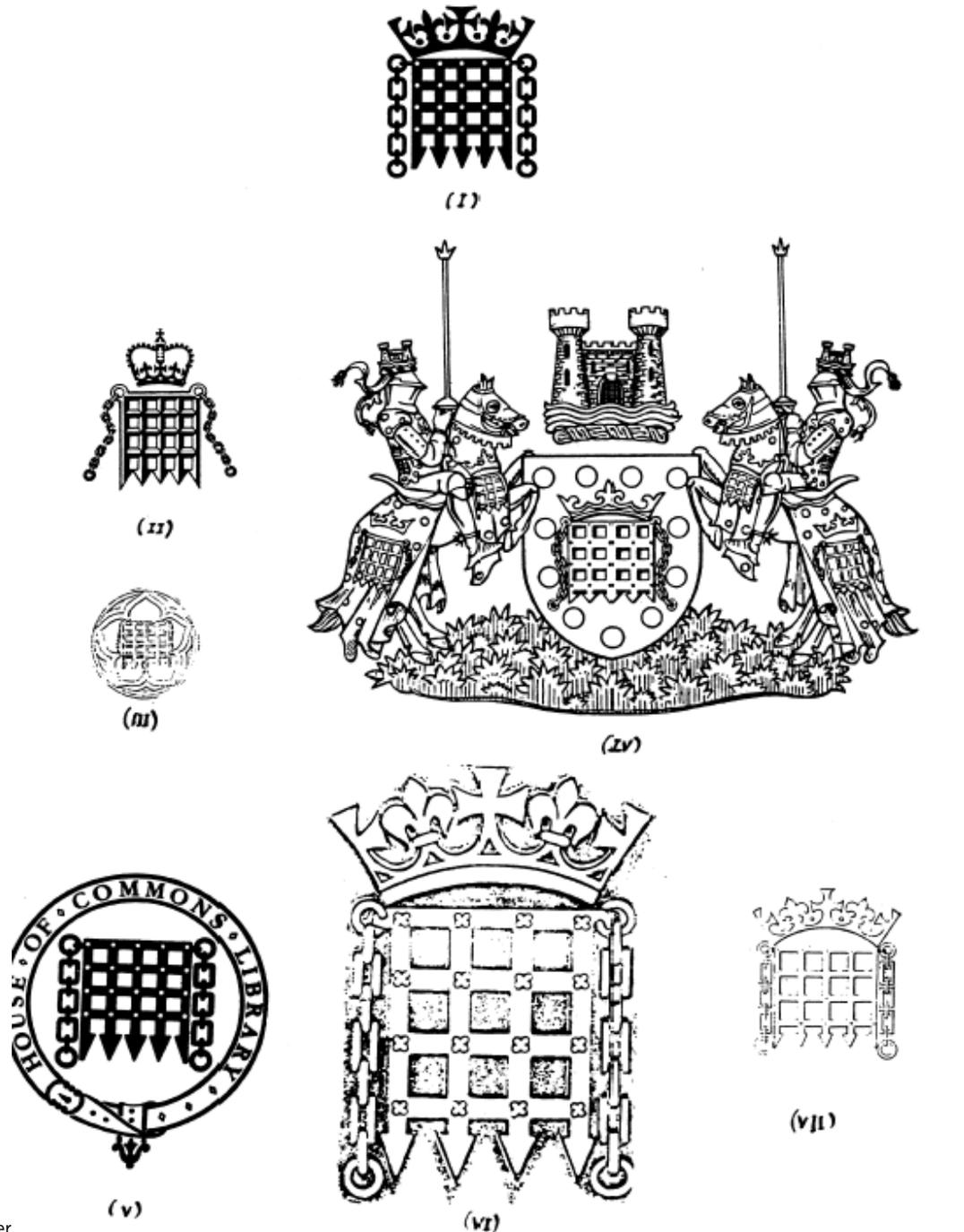
form shows the chains in the "flying" position, as in the Customs and Excise device, and in some of the 19th century seals until the 1980s in use in the Commons Library, the chains were omitted altogether. Some 19th century portcullises had only four instead of the more usual five bars. Curiously, the portcullises on Barry's memorial brass include one five-barred and one six-barred.

In 1996, the usage of the crowned portcullis was formally authorised by licence granted by Her Majesty the Queen for the two Houses unambiguously to use the device and thus to regulate its use by others (copy of formal grant in appendix). The emblem should not be used for purposes to which such authentication is inappropriate, or where there is a risk that its use might wrongly be regarded, or represented as having the authority of the House. A leaflet on the subject is available from the Serjeant at Arms on 020 7219 3080.



## Appendix A

### Examples of uses of the Portcullis



A Westminster Fire Office firemark, cast in lead and gilded, issued to the holder of policy no 20314 in 1735. These marks (which incidentally cost the policy-holder 1/8d each) would have been found all over London in the early 19th century

- (i) The "standard portcullis" now printed on Commons stationery, etc.
- (ii) The Customs and Excise portcullis with "flying" chains.
- (iii) Eighteenth century engraving of a portcullis boss, probably in the Cloisters, Palace of Westminster
- (iv) The Arms of the Borough of Wallingford.
- (v) An uncrowned portcullis depicted on a mid-20th century House of Commons Library bookplate.
- (vi) Pugin portcullis from a wallpaper design.
- (vii) Early 20th century portcullis.

## Further reading

Malcolm Hay and Jacqueline Riding  
Art in Parliament  
Jarrold Publishing 1996

Christine Riding and Jacqueline Riding  
The House of Parliament: History, Art,  
Architecture.  
Merrell 2000

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