

## The Wesley Coat of Arms

By Frank Baker

When Samuel Wesley, rector of Epworth, entered his sons at Oxford University, he described himself simply as "clericus," and not in the proud fashion of so many parents, as "armiger." For the Epworth branch of the ancient Wesley family had had no arms granted by the College of Arms. Nor does there seem to be any evidence that the Wesley sons themselves attempted to use armorial bearings.

As is usually true of an ancient family, there are many gaps in the Wesley genealogy, as well as many changes in the family name. The three chief variants which have survived the days of kaleidoscopic spelling are Wellesley, Westley and Wesley. There have been changes even in recent centuries. The rector of Epworth called himself "Westley" at first, as did his son John. Arthur Wellesley, first and most famous Duke of Wellington, until 1798 spelt his name "Wesley."

Although John Wesley was never granted a coat of arms, one of the many engravings of him issued during his lifetime contains his supposed bearings. In 1788 William Hamilton, R.A., painted Wesley—the portrait hangs in the National Portrait Gallery, London. An engraving of this portrait, by James Fittler, was published in November of this year. Fittler added beneath the portrait his own conception of the arms of the Wesley family—a shield with an outlined cross, containing three scallop shells in each quarter, a wyvern as the crest, and "God is love" as the motto underneath. Whether he prepared this drawing with Wesley's permission we cannot say, but the motto certainly adds an authentic touch, for Wesley did use the words "God is love" on one of his seals.

Hardly any Methodist attention has been given to Wesley heraldry until the beginning of the present century. Interest was aroused by an article in Part 4 of the first volume *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, issued in 1898. It was entitled "The Wesley Coat of Arms," and was by a member of the Wells branch of the family, the Rev. L. H. Wellesley Wesley. Mr. Wellesley Wesley gave as illustrations for his article facsimiles of fifteen different coats of arms used by various branches of the family, including Fittler's representation of John Wesley's supposed bearings. In some, the scallop shells are replaced by Saracen money (simple circles termed in heraldry "plates"). The number and disposition of the scallops or plates varies considerably, and there is also variation in the "tincture" or colouring. Yet there is a basic similarity. A cross is present in all but one example, and

either scallops or plates in all but four—and in two of these the plates have merely been altered to annulets, and in another added to the arms of the cross to make a cross pommée. Both scallops and plates, as well as cross, signified a Crusading family, and with this in mind the symbol of a scallop shell has been taken up in modern British Methodism, notably by the Methodist Youth Department.

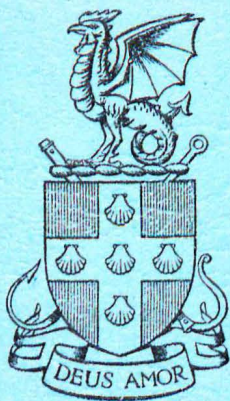
Mr. Wellesley Wesley has pointed out that Fittler's version of the Wesley coat of arms was somewhat garbled in several details, notably in the crest, which should be a cockatrice, not a wyvern. For those uninitiated in mythical animals, it should be pointed out that a cockatrice is a cock with a dragon's tail and wings, but only two legs; a wyvern is similar, but has a dragon's head instead of a cock's.

The most ancient arms used by the Wesley family were those granted in 1321 to John de Wellysley, over a century and a half before the incorporation of the College of Arms by King Richard III. The heraldic description is: "Gules: on a cross, argent, five escallop shells, azure." The earliest known example of these bearings is contained on a seal in Wells Cathedral dated 1324: the shield is surmounted by a crowned cockatrice, and the margin is inscribed: "S' IOHIS DE WELLYSLEYE 1324." This ancient coat of arms with its five blue cockle-shells on a white cross, against the background of a red shield, has been drawn in recent years for the Methodist Publishing House. With its cockatrice crest and its subjoined motto, "God is love," it has become a fairly well-known Methodist *motif*, even though it cannot strictly live up to its title of being "John Wesley's Coat of Arms."

Neither John nor Charles Wesley had any false pride in their "blue blood." Indeed Charles Wesley refused the opportunity of inheriting the fortune (and the coat of arms) of Garrett Wesley of Dangan, which eventually passed to the Duke of Wellington. On recounting the incident in later years, John Wesley said that Charles had "Had a fair escape." Nevertheless, there is at least some attraction in considering how the Wesley family link us all with the very birth of Christianity in the British Isles, for the first recorded bearer of the name, Guy, was made a "thane of Welswe" near Wells in Somerset about A.D. 938. It is even more important that through the Wesley coat of arms, we are linked with the spirit of what our American Methodist brethren have called the "Crusade for Christ."

*Note*—Dr. Frank Baker informs us that investigations are proceeding in an endeavour to get the matter of the early reproductions of the Wesley coat of arms more fully documented.





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