

ST GEORGE'S CHAPEL ARCHIVES & CHAPTER LIBRARY



Research guides

No. 2 Military Knights

Foundation and composition

The original Letters Patent of 1348 establishing the College of St George, Windsor Castle (see Research Guide no. 3), included provisions for maintaining veteran warriors to 'serve God continually in prayer'. In 1352 Statutes drawn up for the government of the College formalised the establishment of this community of twenty-six bedesmen (pensioners whose duty it was to pray for their benefactor), who were required to be present in St George's Chapel every day at High Mass, at the Mass of the Virgin, at Vespers and at Compline. These bedesmen, known as the Alms Knights or the Poor Knights, were to pray for the Sovereign and his successors, and for the Knights of the Order of the Garter. The original Poor Knights were paid twelve pence per day, in addition to accommodation and an annual sum of forty shillings. This was conditional upon their attendance at daily services in St George's Chapel. Their establishment took place within the context of the Chantry Movement, a popular religious movement by which groups of men were employed by religious establishments to pray for benefactors. Poverty was considered an important virtue of bedesmen in the Chantry Movement, and stipulations were included in the 1352 Statutes of St George's Chapel ruling that the Poor Knights should be drawn from impoverished military veterans:

If to any of the Poor Knights admitted to the said College by reason of their poverty (as alleged) there shall subsequently have accrued or come to them lands or revenues either acquired by inheritance or by any other means of the annual value of £20 or more, we decree that the Poor Knight to whomsoever such increases may come shall immediately thereupon be removed from the said College and from all the emoluments to be derived from it and that he shall wholly forfeit emoluments of this kind.

By the sixteenth century the Poor Knights had dwindled in number and were in urgent need of funds. Henry VIII, who was planning to be buried in Windsor, determined to place the establishment on a firmer footing. Under the terms of his will, he endowed the Poor Knights with properties to support them and drew up a scheme to reduce their number to thirteen and to place them under the supervision of a Governor chosen from amongst their ranks. Elizabeth I implemented her father's wishes by drawing up new Statutes to regulate the Poor Knights in 1559.

In the seventeenth century, the establishment was increased to eighteen under the terms of the wills of Sir Francis Crane and of his brother-in-law, Sir Peter le Maire. As a result of these bequests, five new almshouses were constructed against the lower east wall of the Castle, on the site now occupied by a nineteenth century guardroom. The five additional bedesmen who lived there and who were maintained by the bequests became known as the Poor Knights of 'the New Foundation' or 'Crane's Foundation' or 'the Lower Foundation'. However, Crane's buildings were demolished in 1863 and Crane's Foundation was absorbed into the main establishment in 1919, returning the number of Knights to thirteen.

In 1833, William IV altered their name to the 'Military Knights of Windsor', in order to emphasise their status in relation to the Naval Knights, a community founded in Windsor in 1728, and to remove the negative connotations of the term 'Poor'.

Appointment

The current appointment of new Military Knights is made by the Sovereign after applications have been received by the Military Secretary at the Ministry of Defence. Applicants must not be more than sixty-five years of age and must be medically fit. After attending an interview to determine suitability, the candidate joins a waiting list. When a vacancy arises, the Governor of the Military Knights selects a new Knight from the list. A further interview takes place with the Constable and Governor of the Castle, the Governor of the Military Knights, the Dean of Windsor, and others, and, if this interview is successful, details are sent to the Sovereign to approve the appointment.

Oath

The oath to be taken by Military Knights is recorded in the Chapter Acts of 1840:

You shall swear truly to observe the statutes and ordinances that concern the Government of the Military Knights or such others as shall hereafter be made by Her Majesty and her successors touching the good order of the said company so far as you are or shall be concerned in them and the contents of this book. So help you God.

Duties

The Poor Knights were established as a group of bedesmen whose sole duties were to worship God and to pray for the souls of the monarch and the Knights of the Garter. Attendance at four daily services in St George's Chapel was expected of the Poor Knights in order that they would successfully fulfil their praying obligations. This level of attendance at daily services was, however, never dutifully maintained and, in a Warrant issued on 14 December 1870, Queen Victoria granted the Military Knights liberty to attend services as they wished (SGC XI.O.3). On 24 December 1909, Edward VII ordered by Letters Patent that all of the Military Knights were expected to attend service in the Chapel every Sunday morning and also on certain specified occasions, including St George's Day and the Monarch's birthday. Currently the Military Knights are required to attend every Sunday morning service and remember the Monarch and the Knights of the Garter in their daily prayers.

Uniform

The uniform of the Poor or Military Knights has undergone several changes during their long history. According to the statutes of Edward III, the early Poor Knights were required to wear a red cloak with an image of the arms of St George when they attended services. The will of Henry VIII stated that the Poor Knights should wear a red mantle and a long white gown with an image of the arms of St George encircled with a garter. In 1559, however, a decision was made to change the uniform to a red gown and a blue mantle bearing the cross of St George. This uniform was maintained until 1833, save for a brief period during the Commonwealth when grey gowns with the badge of the Commonwealth were adopted. The uniform of the Military Knights was changed in 1833 to a military dress that befitted their name. They wore a scarlet tail coat with a blue collar and cuffs, gold epaulettes with the cross of St George in silver and the badge of rank above, blue trousers, a crimson sash, a black swordbelt complete with sword, and a cocked hat with red and

white feathers. In 1897 a red stripe was added to the outward seam of the trousers. This uniform has been maintained to the present day.

Lodgings

There does not appear to have been official accommodation for the Poor Knights before 1557. In February 1557 work began on providing lodgings within the Castle walls. Six houses that had been built in 1359 along the south wall of the Lower Ward were renovated and a further six were added westwards along the wall opposite the Chapel. A common hall and a kitchen were also constructed. The central tower which separated the two blocks was allocated to the Governor of the Poor Knights. This is referred to as Mary Tudor Tower. The Military Knights continue to occupy these houses along the south wall to the present day.

What information do we hold?

1. Individual Knights

The first source to consult for information about individual Poor and Military Knights is volume 4 in the St George's Chapel Historical Monograph series: Edmund H. Fellowes, *The Military Knights of Windsor, 1352-1944* (Windsor, 1944). This work contains concise biographies of the majority of the Poor or Military Knights. A recently printed booklet, *The Military Knights of Windsor: Brief History and Personal Profiles, 1946 to 2006* (Windsor, 2006), by Major and Mrs. Richard Moore, supplements the original monograph.

There are a large number of extant documents relating to the appointment of new Poor or Military Knights, such as warrants of appointment and applications for these positions. The collection includes copies of royal warrants for the period 1730-1830 (SGC V.B.20).

2. Government and administration

The Statutes of the College of St George contain information about the organisation and government of the Military Knights. The 1352 College Statutes are no longer extant, but transcriptions can be found in a roll of c. 1400 (SGC XI.D.20), in two seventeenth century registers, and in the Arundel White Book (SGC IV.B.1). We also hold Letters Patent and warrants issued by several monarchs to alter the Statutes regulating the Poor or Military Knights, including a warrant issued by Queen Victoria in 1870 (SGC XI.O.3) and Letters Patent issued by Edward VII in 1905 (SGC XI.O.13).

From the early twentieth century onwards, proceedings of meetings of the Military Knights have been recorded in minute books, which contain details of new appointments and of decisions made by the Military Knights as a collective body. Minute books dating from 1942 to 1997 are now held in the St George's Chapel Archives (SGC M.870.343-344).

The Chapter Act Books of the Dean and Canons of Windsor, the formal record of the business concluded and decisions taken at meetings of Chapter also contain occasional information about the Poor and Military Knights. The earliest extant Act Book dates from 1596 (SGC VI.B.2), although transcripts of Chapter Acts for 1430 and 1523-1548 can be found in an early seventeenth century register (SGC IV.B.4) and also in a book compiled in 1701 by Canon George Evans (SGC IV.B.16-17). The earliest registers have been published as volume 13 in the St George's Chapel Historical Monograph series: Shelagh Bond, *The Chapter Acts of the Dean and Canons of Windsor, 1430, 1523-1672* (Windsor, 1966)

3. Attendance

Attendance books now kept in the St George's Chapel Archives record the presence of individual Military Knights at services, the earliest two registers dating from 1384 to 1385 and 1468 to 1479 (SGC V.B.1-2); whilst a series of 'Check Books' record the attendance for the period 1772 to 1890 (SCG V.A.1-17).

4. Financial records

Financial records relating to the Poor and Military Knights include lists of fees payable to the Knights at various installations, receipts of payments to and from the Poor or Military Knights, and details of their salaries and perquisites at several points in their history. Further information relating to their finances can be found in the College treasury rolls.

5. Correspondence

The St George's Chapel Archives holds correspondence involving or concerning the Military Knights, including letters between the Governor of the Military Knights and the Dean of Windsor from the sixteenth century onwards. In addition, there are a number of petitions, issued by the Poor or Military Knights collectively or individually throughout their history. A particularly rich collection of petitions survives from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, including one addressed to Parliament regarding the withdrawal of support by the Dean and Canons (SGC XI.B.8).

6. Records of services and ceremonies

The Military Knights' records include a collection of Orders of Service for the installation and funerals of Military Knights held in St George's Chapel in the 1980s and 1990s. In addition, the Chapel Archives retains correspondence, memoranda and press clippings relating to the involvement of Military Knights in Chapel services.

7. Photographs

A series of photographs of the Military Knights taken in the twentieth century has been deposited in the Chapel Archives and Chapter Library. These are mainly group photographs showing the Knights in uniform, supplemented by a small number of individual photographs. Unfortunately, there is not a comprehensive photographic record of past Military Knights.

Further Reading

Peter J. Begent & Hubert Chesshyre, *The Most Noble Order of the Garter, 650 Years* (1999)

Shelagh Bond, *The Chapter Acts of the Dean and Canons of Windsor, 1430, 1523-1672* (1966)

J.N. Dalton (ed.), *The Manuscripts of St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle* (1957)

Edmund H. Fellowes, *The Military Knights of Windsor, 1352-1944* (1944)

Major & Mrs. Richard Moore, *Personal Profiles of the Military Knights of Windsor, 1946-2006* (Privately printed, 2006)

<http://www.stgeorges-windsor.org/about-st-georges/whos-who/military-knights.html>

For further information contact St George's Chapel Archives and Chapter Library, The Vicars' Hall Undercroft, The Cloisters, Windsor Castle, Windsor SL4 1NJ (email: archives@stgeorges-windsor.org) or consult our website (<http://www.stgeorges-windsor.org/archives.html>).