

The Language of Hatchments

by J. Tindale

IN MANY WILTSHIRE CHURCHES ARE TO BE FOUND PAINTINGS OF COATS OF ARMS; MOST OF US HAVE SEEN THEM, BUT HOW MANY KNOW OF THEIR REAL MEANING?

In Wiltshire there are nearly fifty churches having one or more hatchments, in total well over a hundred. Guide books rarely mention them, yet, to those who can read them, they convey a great deal of information. What is a hatchment? The word is a corruption of "achievement," which is a representation of a coat of arms, and today a hatchment usually means a **funeral** hatchment.

Since the earliest days of heraldry a funeral has been the occasion for heraldic display, which took various forms according to the rank and wealth of the family concerned. In the middle of the seventeenth century a style or fashion was introduced which lasted almost to the present day. When a person entitled to use a coat of arms died, a hatchment was quickly prepared and placed over the door of the house to show that a death had recently taken place, and to show exactly who that person was. The hatchment was carried in the funeral procession and usually left in the church where burial took place. The procedure varied in places — sometimes the hatchment, or a duplicate, remained over the door as a sign of mourning for six months or more.

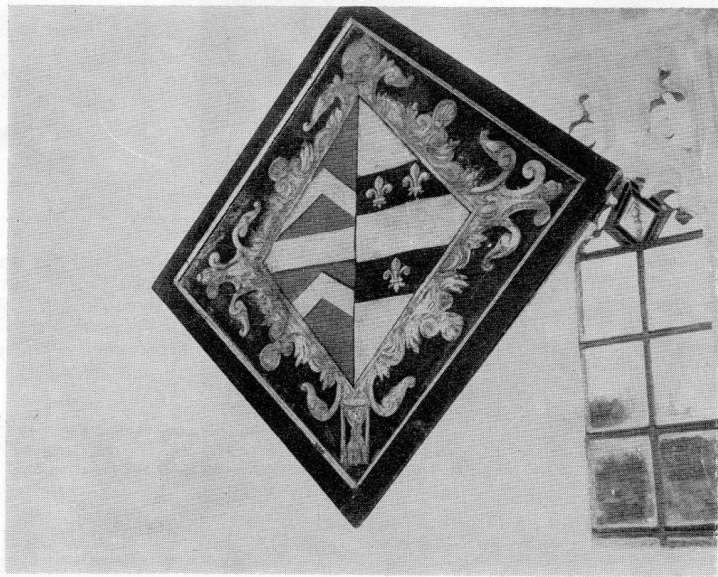
Hatchments are usually painted

on wood or canvas, and measure anything from three feet to six feet or more square. The shape is that of a diamond, or of a square balanced on one corner, so that the diagonal is vertical. The painting is

framed in wood, painted black, sometimes covered with black cloth, and sometimes painted with emblems of mortality, such as skulls, cross-bones, and hourglasses, for our ancestors had a morbid streak. The outstanding feature of the hatchment is that, without any words (except a motto, text, or pious hope such as Resurgam — I shall rise again) it proclaims the identity, sex, rank, and marital status of the departed, and often other details. Very little knowledge of heraldry is required to enable one to say "That is for a baronet whose wife survived him" or "That is for a spinster". How is it done?

The identity of the family or families concerned normally needs some knowledge of heraldry, but in many cases other, more permanent, memorials in the church, showing the same arms, will give the family name. Sex and marital status are easy to recognise. Are the arms on a shield, or on a lozenge? A lozenge is a diamond or square, similar to the complete hatchment. Occasionally one sees "arty-crafty" lozenges, somewhat like a cushion standing on one corner, but in most cases a lozenge is unlikely to be confused with a shield. Arms on a lozenge always mean a woman, either a spinster or a widow. Arms on a shield may mean a bachelor, married man or woman, or a widower. The arms of a married couple are shown side by side, the husband's arms being on the left-

• Fig. 1: A Widow's Hatchment at Mildenhall.



hand side as you look at the shield. This is called the dexter side, and the wife's arms are on the sinister side. Knowing that dexter means right and sinister is left, you may wonder why. The terms refer to the way they are seen by the person holding the shield. The dexter side is the husband's right side. To avoid confusion, the dexter side will be described as the left-hand side.

There is an exception to this rule that a shield is divided vertically, with the man's arms on the left and the wife's arms on the right, but this is the usual way of display. We can now sub-divide. Knowing that the arms of a married couple are side by side, it follows that a single coat of arms is for an unmarried person. If these arms are on a shield, it indicates a bachelor, if on a lozenge, a spinster. That takes care of two classes. To go further, all we need is to look at the background. If part of it is white, that means that one partner survived the other, the white part being behind the arms of the living. Figs. 2 and 4 show this, but there is an anomaly about Fig. 2, which will be dealt with later. Both these are for married men whose wives outlived them, as the background is white on the right hand (sinister) side. If the background is white on the left hand side, it means a wife whose husband survived her, and, in this case, there should be no helmet or crest above the shield.

If the background is all black, there are no survivors. We can now identify all six classes.

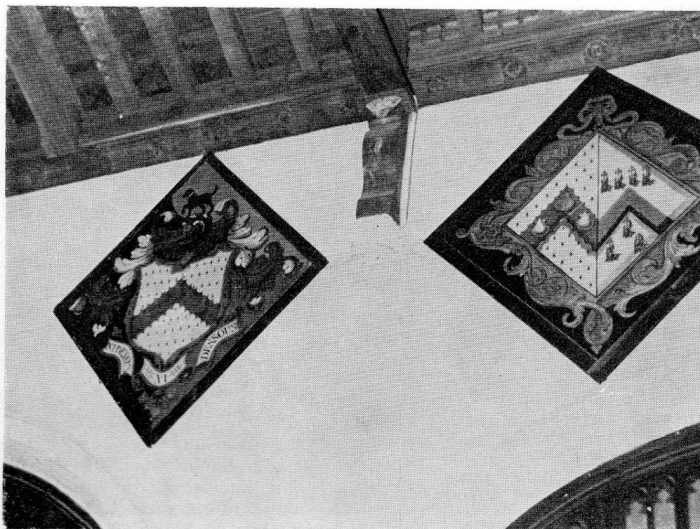
Single coat of arms on a shield means a bachelor; on a lozenge, a spinster.

All black background, two coats of arms, side by side, on a shield, indicates a widower; on a lozenge, a widow.

Two coats of arms side by side, on a shield, means a married couple; if the right half of the background is white, the hatchment is for a man whose wife was still living. If the left half of the background is white, the hatchment is for a wife whose husband survived her.

EXCEPTIONS

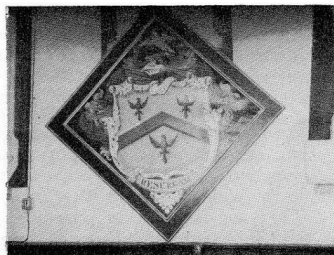
It has been said that there is an exception to the rule that the arms of man and wife are shown side by side, and, as examples may be seen at Westbury and elsewhere in Wiltshire, we may deal with it now. Usually a coat of arms is passed on through male issue only. If, however, there are no sons, the daughter may pass the arms to her



• Fig. 2: Hatchments of a widow (right) and of a married man whose wife was still living, at Mere.

son. She is an heiress, not necessarily to title, lands, or money, but to the family arms. In such a case, her arms are displayed, not side by side with those of her husband, but on a small shield in the centre of his arms. The background rules apply just the same as if the arms were side by side. Her son becomes the representative of both families, and may, if he wishes, divide his shield into four quarters, the first and last showing the arms of his father, the other two showing the arms of his mother's family. If a number of heiresses marry into a family, in the course of time, any or all the arms may be shown, for a quartering is a division, not necessarily a fourth part.

There is a mistaken idea that only peers and knights could use hatchments. You can see that this is not true by looking at the helmet, which indicates the rank. The illustrations, except the two widows' hatchments, all show esquires' helmets, which are facing to the left, with vizors closed.

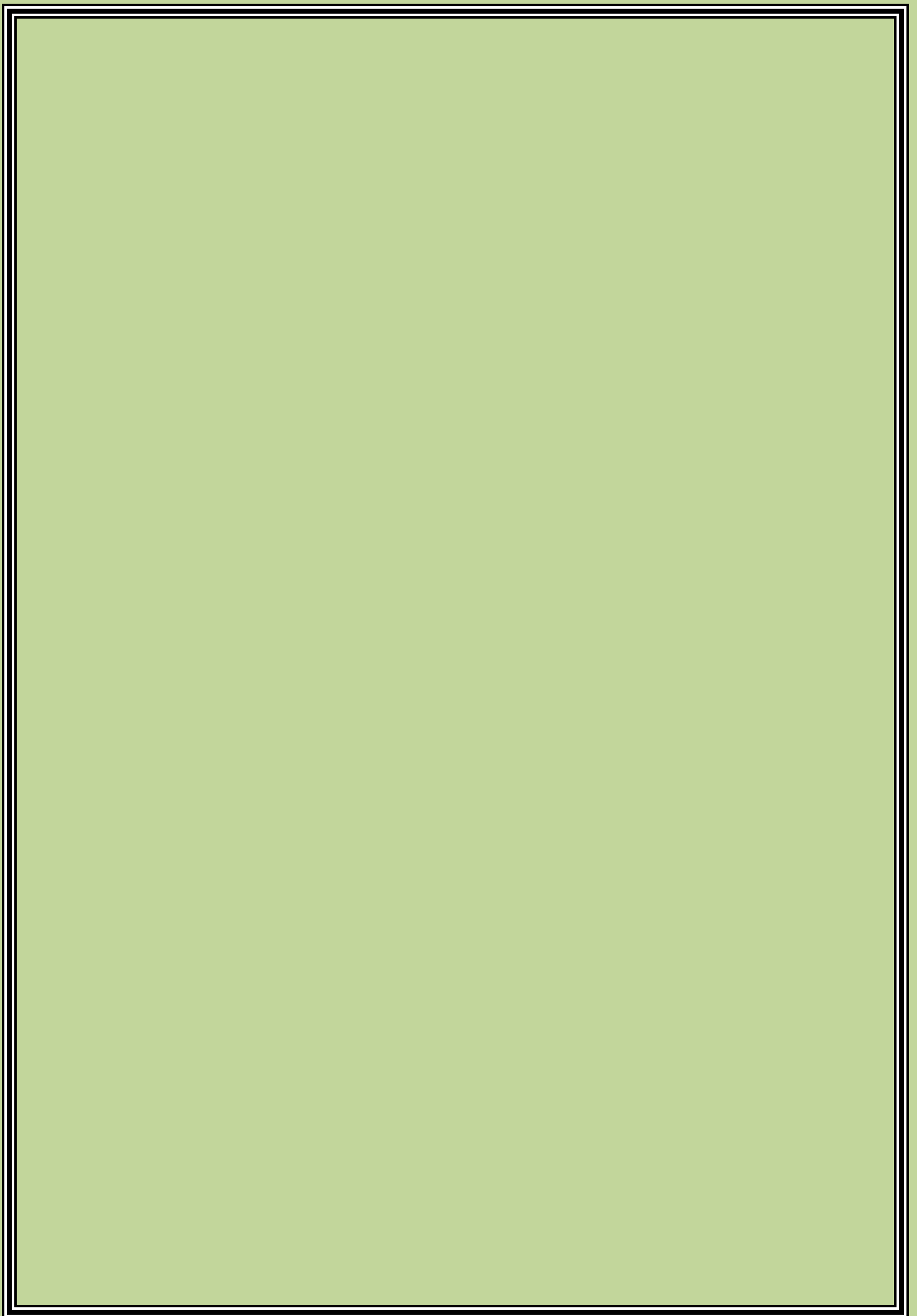


• Fig. 3: A Bachelor's Hatchment at Mildenhall.

A knight and a baronet each have a helmet facing to the front, with vizor open. Peers' helmets face left, with bars instead of a vizor, and there is usually a coronet of the appropriate type. The crest above the helmet is that of the family concerned, and may show us the exact branch of that family. The mantling, the feathery adornment flowing from the helmet, and framing the shield, is usually red and white, and is supposed to represent the cloth worn to shield the helmet from the sun. It helps the design, and may help in dating the hatchment, as early ones had mantling almost filling the background.

'JOKER'

The motto may be that of the family, as in Fig. 2, a text or a pious hope, as in Figs. 3 & 4, but there is no truth in the suggestion that *In Coelo Quies* (Peace in Heaven) was always used for a married man. The illustrations are of hatchments in Mildenhall and Mere churches. Fig. 3 is for a bachelor, the Rev. Charles Francis, M.A., rector of Mildenhall, who died in 1821. Incidentally, if you come across a number of hatchments in a church, and all but one are for the same family, the "joker" is likely to be a former vicar or rector. Fig. 1 is obviously for a widow, as it has two coats of arms side by side, on a lozenge. Fig. 4, for a Calcraft, is puzzling. It is for a man whose wife was still alive. But the "arms" on the right do not exactly correspond



THE LANGUAGE OF HATCHMENTS—continued

with any listed. It is possibly for a man who married twice, neither wife possessing a coat of arms, but in that case the background should have been three-quarters black, for the first wife would be dead also. The “marshalling” of a hatchment was always a problem for men who married wives whose families did not possess a coat of arms, and the problem was tackled in several different ways. Perhaps the best is shown in Fig. 4. The right hand hatchment is obviously for a widow (Eleanor, daughter of Thomas Michell, and widow of William Chafin Grove, of Zeals. She died in 1862), but the left hand one shows only one coat of arms (Grove), yet the background is white on the wife’s side. It would appear that the wife was non-armigerous (which means that her family had no coat of arms) and that this is the delicate way of showing it.

IMPERMANENT

Although the rules given above do not cover every variety of hatchment—there are ways of identifying bishops and other officials, of showing a man who married several times, and of showing man and wife who had both had previous marriages—they do enable one to identify the majority of hatchments. Wiltshire has fewer hatchments than some larger counties, but few counties have more of interest. Salisbury has the greatest number (twenty-three, in three churches) in the county, but many will prefer those in the smaller churches, such as Chirton, where lands can be seen to have passed through several families by the marriages of heiresses. Unfortunately, owing to the impermanence of the materials, each year sees fewer hatchments. Let us study and enjoy them while we can.

• Fig 4: The Hatchment of a married man at Mildenhall.

