

MARITIME ARCHIVES & LIBRARY

INFORMATION SHEET 21

THE LIVER BIRD

The Liver Bird is part of Liverpool's modern, rather than ancient, folklore. William Enfield, Liverpool's first historian, writing in 1774, speaks of the Liver Bird as existing only in 'fabulous tradition'. People think of the Liver Bird as they think of the Griffin or the Phoenix. When, in 1911 the Royal Liver Friendly Society crowned its waterfront offices with two huge effigies which bear no resemblance to any real bird, it helped to fix in the popular mind the myth that the Liver was a fabulous bird that once haunted the Pool inlet. For the record the above mentioned Society takes its name simply from the inn where it first met.

Early seal impressions and the association with King John

The facts are these: A bird of some kind is found on the earliest surviving impressions of Liverpool's corporate seal, now in the British Museum, dated 1352. The Archives Department of National Museums Liverpool holds at least four later impressions of the seal, the earliest being 1458. The design of the bird is nondescript. The maker of the seal was neither artist nor ornithologist. So scholars have examined the wording of the seal, and the other symbols on it, for clues. One clue is in the crude letters under the breast of the bird. These letters appear to be an unskilled person's effort to carve a mirror-image of the JOHIS on the matrix of the seal. This is an abbreviation for the Latin JOHANNIS, which means 'of John'. But of which John? King or Apostle? The answer is both. The eagle is the ancient symbol of St. John. King John acknowledged St. John as his patron saint. Therefore it seems proved that the bird was meant to be an eagle.

This might tempt us to conclude that the symbol goes back to the time of the first charter, that of King John to Liverpool in 1207, particularly since near the bird's beak, the sun and crescent moon are depicted. Now this was the symbol put on John's Irish coinage, specimens of which are held in the Liverpool Museum, and it was from Liverpool that John had troops transported to Ireland. However, not till the second charter, that of Henry III, granted in 1229, was the right to form a guild with its attendant privileges, including the use of a common seal, granted. But the people of Liverpool, it seems, still honoured King John as the grantor of their first charter, by using the eagle of St. John and the sun and crescent moon on the seal. In the bird's beak, too, is a spring of foliage, probably of broom, the 'planta genista', symbol of the Plantagenets. Some suppose it is the fleur-de-lys although nowhere else in heraldic art is this symbol associated with the eagle. The former interpretation is almost certainly right.

The Eagle becomes a Cormorant or 'Leaver' or 'Liver Bird' (or 'Spoonbill!')

Years passed and people forgot about the eagle of St. John. In the Town Books for 1611, we read of 'plate bestowed on the Mayor marked with the Cormorant, the townes arms on it'. So it is clear that by this time, many people thought the bird on the old seal, the emblem of Liverpool, was a cormorant, which is still quite a common bird in the Mersey Estuary. In 1668 the then Earl of Derby gave a silver gilt mace to the town 'engraved with ... the arms of the town, viz, a leaver'. This is the first recorded reference to the Liver Bird as so named.

How did the cormorant become the Liver Bird? One Randle Holme the third, an authority on heraldry, refers to the 'Leaver' as the 'coat' of the town of Liverpool in his book, *The Academy of Armoury*, published in 1688. He also explains what Leaver is: 'The head of a Leaver ... of some termed a Shoveller's head: this fowl is by Conradus Gefner, fol. 641, called in Latin platea, which he taketh to be the WATER PELLECAN OR SHOVELLER in England, but in Low Dutch LEPLER ... or LEFLER ... which we more finely pronounce LEVER: yet Mr Ray terms this bird SPOONBILL'. Then follows a drawing of a spoonbill as Liverpool's arms. So we have here a clear case of false associations - a confusion of the cormorant with the shoveller and spoonbill, so as to make the emblematic bird's name a play on the name Liverpool!

The Grant of Arms, 1797

Enfield, realising that here was indeed an area of great confusion, dismissed the Liver Bird, as we have already seen, as 'fabulous tradition', existing only in the Herald's office. However, in the official records of the College of Arms, namely the grant and confirmation of arms to the Borough in 1797, the bird is called a 'cormorant', the spring in its beak being called 'a branch of seaweed called Laver' - a rather weak play on the name Liverpool. Incidentally the cormorant does not eat seaweed, but fish only. However, when Clayton Tarleton, a Liverpool Alderman, wrote to the College in 1796 applying for the grant, he called the bird 'a lever or sea cormorant', but the name 'Leaver' was not written into the official document. The Liverpool Museum, incidentally, has a stuffed cormorant which was probably used for the heraldic design. One may wonder why the first official grant of arms was not given till 1797. It may have been that an earlier grant was lost; alternatively, that a petition was made but did not proceed as far as an official grant from the College of Arms, or that Liverpool assumed it had been granted arms from time immemorial and proceeded to act accordingly.

Conclusion

What then is the Liver Bird? It is an eagle, which was mistaken for a cormorant. Whether one examines the ancient medieval seal, or the seal that was made after the loss of the earlier seal at the time of the Civil War, the bird is quite nondescript, as we have already said and was even thought by one authority to be a dove. Thus it is not surprising that by 1611, the mistake was almost official. Later the cormorant was confused with a bird called, in Dutch, something like LEVER so as to make a play on the name Liverpool. However, since 1797, the emblem of Liverpool has officially been cormorant.

It is of interest, however, that when the bishopric of Liverpool took out arms in 1882, the eagle was incorporated, not the cormorant.