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Scrivelsby Court, the home of the Dymokes

The King's Champion

By the Rev. J. H. T. Perkins, M.A., Sacrist of Westminster Abbey

THE coronation of Richard II. stands out as one of the chief landmarks in the history of our great national solemnity. More than one of its own peculiar features appeared on that occasion for the first time, to remain, however, for generations to come, as an inseparable accompaniment of its splendour.

Worn out with the unwonted strain, the eleven-year-old monarch was carried at the conclusion of the Coronation Mass, down the Abbey Church, on the shoulders of his knights, in a state of utter collapse, being "oppressed with fatigue and long fasting." As the stately procession with Henry Percy, the Earl Marshal, at its head, swept out through the western doors, it was suddenly confronted by Sir John Dymoke, the Lord of the Manor of Scrivelsby. Mounted upon a magnificent steed, "the best but one" to

be found in the Royal stables, and attended by his esquires, with the words "Dimico pro rege" (in playful allusion to his own name) inscribed upon his shield, this gallant knight had presented himself in order that he might challenge to mortal combat all who would gainsay the paramount claims of his Sovereign Lord the King. To his utter discomfiture, Sir John Dymoke was greeted with but a chilly reception. In the curtest possible manner the Earl Marshal bade him begone, with the kindly advice that he had "better take his ease and rest awhile" and appear later on at the proper moment and in the proper place!

Such was the somewhat undignified entry of the Honourable the King's Champion upon the theatre of English History, that is to say, so far as the actual performance of the duties attached to his office are concerned.

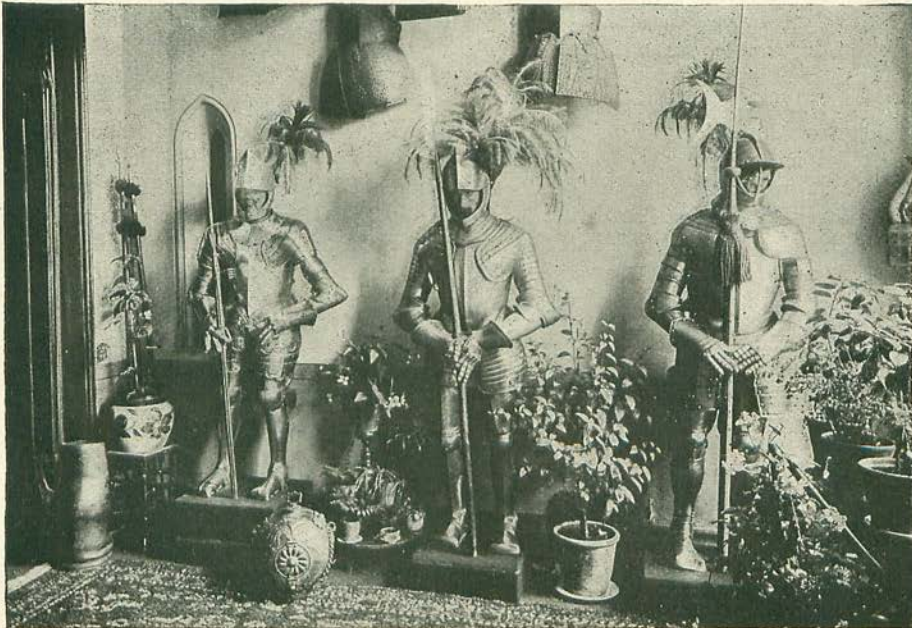
At the same time, the office of Champion, speaking in general terms, can be traced back to an exceedingly distant past. The word itself, derived from a Gothic root, signifies the act of contending. Hence it came to be synonymous with the custom immortalised in the pages of Sir Walter Scott by which persons were permitted to appear in the lists and to defend their rights by means of some duly accredited representative, while, in process of time, to play the part of Champion, implied the chivalrous duty of taking arms from a mere sense of honour, in aid of the defenceless and oppressed.

The King's Champion, however, stands upon a somewhat narrower footing. The Emperor Otto I. employed Champions in order to decide the succession to the Empire, while in ducal Normandy, according to tradition, a certain noble house once held the barony of Fonteney by the service of being hereditary champions to their liege lords on the day of their inauguration. No sooner had the Conqueror and his train of Norman barons passed over the sea, than

the head of this self-same family of Marmion (originally descended from Rolf the Ganger) became lords not only of Fonteney but also

Of Lutterward and Scrivelbaye
Of Tamworth tower and town.

A considerable portion, if not the whole, of these broad spreading acres was held upon the same identical tenure as their Norman lands. For upwards of two centuries the house of Marmion continued to occupy the post of hereditary King's Champion, though for some obscure reason the actual duties attached to this office seemed to have remained an absolute dead letter. It has been conjectured, and with some show of probability, that the early Norman and Angevin kings felt some compunction in displaying before the eyes of their new Saxon subjects a ceremony which might conceivably remind them, and moreover, in a very forcible manner, of their lost independence. Be this as it may, the fact however remains that neither the Conqueror's friend, the great Robert Dispensator, the



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The Entrance Hall, Scrivelsby Court

founder of the English branch of the Marmions and first "Lord of Scrivelbaye," nor yet any of his seven immediate descendants, were permitted to fulfil this obligation, attached to their landed property, upon one single occasion. These estates passed on from father to son with varying fortunes. One Marmion, Sir Robert by name, found himself despoiled of all his possessions by King Henry I. Another, while engaged in the sacrilegious plunder of the monastery hard by his castle walls, fell into "the pit which he had made for others" in literal truth, and was there ignominiously done to death. Others there were, however, who more nobly fulfilled the grand traditions of their line, notably, a fourth Sir Robert, who, after spending many years in the holding of high legal office, proceeded to sign Magna Charta and boldly flung down his defiance to King John. Best of all, there was the gallant Sir Philip, in whom we behold, as it were, the last and loveliest rays of a setting sun. He stood right loyally by Henry III., even in the worst days of that long and troublous reign, and, ere Sir Philip was gathered to his fathers, the house of Marmion was still further enriched by a substantial token of royal gratitude, in the shape of the proud domain of Kenilworth.

Sir Philip passed away towards the close of the reign of Edward I. Four daughters survived him as co-heiresses, to bequeath traditions they had inherited from their sire. Two only, however, of these ladies demand our attention; since, by means of their matrimonial alliances, the fate of the great Marmion estates came to be settled. Through Margaret or Mazera, the elder, Tamworth and all its wealthy appanages passed into the hands of the De Frevile family; while Jane or Joan, the younger, with Scrivelsby as her portion, became the wife of one Sir Thomas De Ludlow. A son and a daughter were born to the new owners of Scrivelsby. The former, however, predeceased both his parents; so that a comparatively brief interval of time found a lady once more bearing rule as sole heiress over the ancestral estates.

It was not long, however, before Lady Margery bestowed her hand in turn to a

Lincolnshire knight, Sir John Dymoke by name. In the marriage of this couple the foundation was laid of that noble house, who, one and all, have delighted century after century to uphold their close and romantic connection with the English Crown, as Lords of the Manor of Scrivelsby and Champion to the King's Majesty. Notice first of all the remarkable origin of their famous surname. It is believed to be the offspring of Totemism, *i.e.*, the belief that each family is descended from some particular plant or animal: in this case, of course, the oak. Indeed, there may be detected to this day upon the Lion gate of Scrivelsby Court, a sixteenth-century carving of the outline of an oak-tree, with the latter "y" quaintly formed by the shape of the stem.

We reach at length the coronation of Richard II. in 1377. Here were two parallel lines descended both of them from a common ancestor—Earl Philip de Marmion. Tamworth and Scrivelsby, the de Freviles and the Dymokes, forthwith proceeded to give vent to a jealousy which had been smouldering for many years, and to pit themselves one against the other. A tough struggle now ensued for the privilege of bearing arms, if need be, on behalf of the new Sovereign. The Royal Championship at once sprang into a position of importance previously unknown in England. The case was argued at length before the Court of Claims. Judgment was given, strange to say, for the younger and apparently weaker line, the house of Dymoke. Tamworth, so ruled the Court, was held by the tenure of ordinary knight-service; Scrivelsby, however, by that of Grand Sergeanty and the office of the Honourable the King's Champion was definitely proclaimed to be the inalienable possession of the last-named fief, *e.g.*, the Lincolnshire estate of the House of Marmion. The Court delivered judgment in such terms as implied a willingness to listen to further evidence, if such should be forthcoming, and Sir Baldwin de Frevile was not slow in availing himself of this loophole. Two-and-twenty years later, at the coronation of Henry IV., he returned to the fray with renewed zest. Once more, however,

did the militant Dame Margery, though now well stricken with years, succeeded in routing her opponent off the field. The Championship was secured for ever to the Lord of the Manor of Scrivelsby, and from that day to this the Dymokes have remained in undisputed and indisputable possession of this ancient and most remarkable privilege.

For nearly two centuries onwards then, the Dymokes occupied this commanding position in English national life, almost analogous to

summoned Sir Thomas Dymoke and Lord Welles, the respective heads of the two houses, to London. These rebel leaders hesitated, and finally sought the refuge of sanctuary, receiving, however, a prompt pardon. A very short interval then elapsed, ere tidings arrived of the militant proceedings of young Sir Robert Welles. The Yorkist armies were at once set in motion, and marched for Lincolnshire. The loose array of forty thousand peasants, who gallantly



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Tomb of Sir Philip de Marmion and his wife in Scrivelsby Church

that of the Marmions before them. Passing over the three first Champions of the new line, we arrive at Sir Robert Dymoke, who played a very leading part in the Wars of the Roses, and indeed to his own ultimate cost. By reason of his matrimonial connections, Sir Robert happened to be closely connected with the great Welles family, who were Lancastrians to the very core. Hence, when Sir Robert Welles, his brother-in-law, proceeded to rally the Fenmen of Lincolnshire to the standard of Henry VI., the aid of the Dymokes was not sought in vain. Edward IV., transported with fury, forthwith

confronted them, could make little effectual resistance, and at the battle of Lose Coat Field were utterly routed. Just before the encounter commenced Sir Thomas Dymoke and Lord Welles were beheaded under circumstances of revolting treachery, and as soon as the battle was over and done, the unfortunate son of the latter met with the same untimely and cruel fate. Thus, the ten-year-old heir, Sir Richard Dymoke, would have been left in a pitiful plight, had it not been for the curious piece of irony by which the murderer of the father became the warm benefactor of the son. Basking as he did in

the full sunshine of Royal favour, Sir Richard attended no less than three Sovereigns as their Champion, and finally rose to the high position of Treasurer to King Henry VIII.

Sir Edward that, after an experience such as this, he should have succeeded in escaping the dire wrath of King Harry, to die peacefully in his bed upwards of twenty years later.



The procession of the Champion at James II.'s Coronation Banquet. Sir Charles Dymoke, who is here represented, fell down as he reached the King's Table

His son, Sir Edward Dymoke, was in the same manner, Champion to three monarchs in succession, Edward VI., Mary I., and Elizabeth, while, in the general politics of the nation he came to play a still more commanding part. When the Lincolnshire poor, smarting with rage for the loss of the monasteries, proceeded to raise the banner of resistance to Henry VIII.'s blood-thirsty tyranny, Sir Edward Dymoke and the remainder of the county magnates found themselves situated between the upper and the nether millstones in very deed and truth. Personal wishes counted for nothing, or less than nothing, in circumstances such as these, and whether he liked it or not, Sir Edward was compelled to take sides with the Abbot of Barlings, and the body of rebels who heralded the great northern movement usually known as the Pilgrimage of Grace. It speaks volumes for the astuteness and statecraft of

With the next Champion, Sir Robert Dymoke, the fortunes of this noble family attained perhaps to their zenith. He was one of the faithful few who remained stubbornly loyal to his ancestral beliefs, through good and evil report alike. The prelate who at that time was ruling over the see of Lincoln was one Dr. Thomas Cowper, a man representing the very worst type of arrogant and vindictive Protestantism. Neither the distinguished rank nor the personal qualities—not even in fact the failing health—of the King's Champion succeeded in stemming the current of Cowper's unrighteous zeal. Sir Robert was removed from the home of his fathers and flung into Lincoln Gaol, where he speedily succumbed to his sufferings—a martyr, in the estimation of the whole country-side, to his fervid and undying loyalty to the faith of his fathers.

From that date onward the fortunes of

this great family commenced to wane. One and all, as we should naturally assume, were Cavaliers to the backbone, and the very strength of their convictions cost them dear. While Sir Charles Dymoke bequeathed by his last will and testament the sum of £2000 to the support of the throne, his nephew, who followed him in the office of Champion, was haled before the minions of the Parliament at Westminster, for holding "a lewd and malicious title!" For this offence (?) he was condemned to a fine of £7000! Thanks to these misfortunes, both the Scrivelsby estates and their owners came in process of time to be terribly reduced; and it was long before symptoms of recovery appeared.

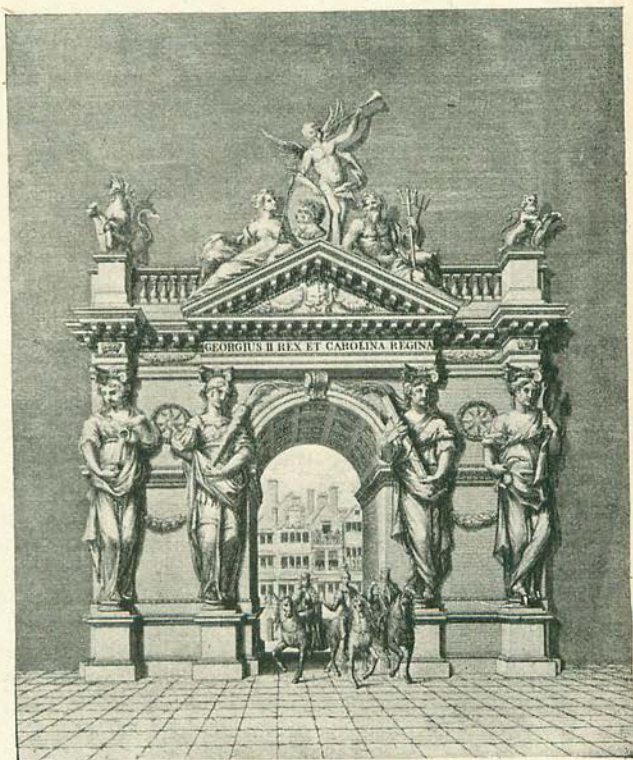
The Champion who officiated at the coronation of James II., in 1685, was another Sir Charles Dymoke. He was unfortunate enough to meet with a somewhat ill-omened accident upon that great occasion. Immediately after the proclamation of the Challenge, Sir Charles, in moving towards the King for the purpose of kissing his hand stumbled heavily, so that he measured his length upon the floor of the hall. "See you, love," cried the Queen, "what a weak Champion you have!" Sir Charles made the best apologies he could under the circumstances, pleading ill-health and weight of his armour, none of which excuses were true. The King, however, merely laughed.

What would have been the King's reply could he but have foreseen the disastrous events of 1689! This ill-starred Champion passed away very shortly after the coronation, but there were not a few whose minds recurred to the story of his collapse in years to come.

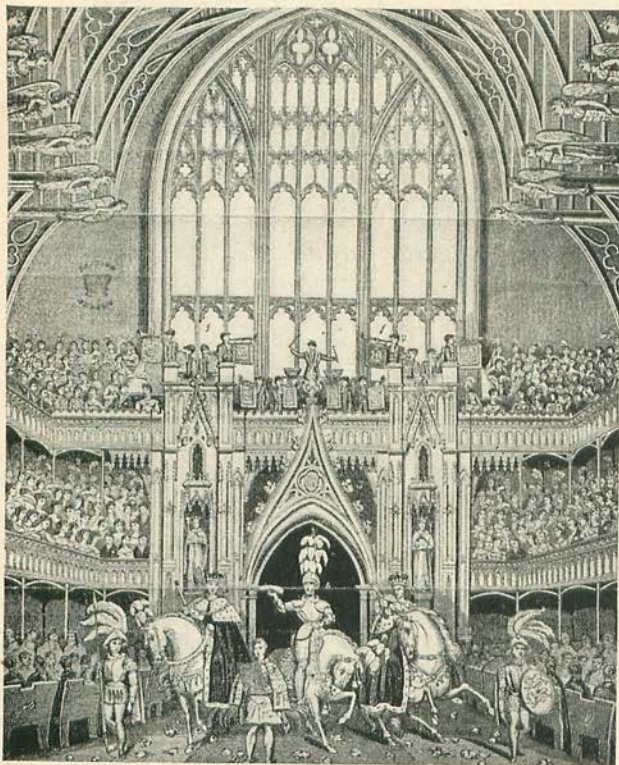
The next Champion but one was Sir Lewis Dymoke, who attained to the great age of ninety-one years. He performed the duties of his office at the corona-

tions of George I. and George II., and succeeded in outliving every one of his near relations. On his death in 1760, Scrivelsby was bequeathed to a distant cousin, who died, however, almost immediately. To Sir John Dymoke, son of the latter, there fell the duty of acting as Champion for George III., at the famous ceremony when, according to time-honoured tradition, the gage, as soon as flung down, was accepted by no less a personage than "bonnie Prince Charlie" himself.

The ceremonial observed at the performance of the Challenge must at one time have been considerably more elaborate than it subsequently became. Originally, the Champion seems to have figured not only at the Coronation Banquet with which his name has been indissolubly associated for many a generation, but also in the course of the



Triumphal arch erected and painted on the west end of Westminster Hall for the Coronation of George II. and Queen Caroline in 1727, showing the entrance of the King's Champion



Mr. Henry Dymoke, Deputy Champion, entering Westminster Hall at the Coronation of George IV.

grand procession which took place earlier in the day. At the coronation of Henry IV., according to Sir William Segar, the Challenge was repeated, both in Westminster Hall, and also at six different stations in the city prior to the ceremony. It would obviously seem more natural for the delivery of the Challenge to precede rather than to follow the actual crowning of the Sovereign. Consequently, its relegation during later years to almost the concluding scene in the entire solemnity of the coronation, and long after the great central act has been performed, appears to have reduced the ceremony to the position of a mere historical relic.

Whether this be a true criticism or no, the ceremony of the Challenge was repeated with automatic regularity upon the arrival of each coronation; indeed, it appeared to stand upon as secure and durable a foundation as any other of the main features in the

“hallowing” of our English kings. The ceremonial which was thus employed century after century must have been intensely impressive. Immediately before the bringing in of the second course at the Coronation Banquet, a short procession advanced from the bottom of the hall. First of all came two trumpeters, with the magnificent falls attached to their instruments embroidered with the arms of the Dymoke family. These were followed by the sergent-trumpeter, together with two sergeants-at-arms; all three bearing their respective maces of office. Then came the two Esquires of the Champion, armed with lance and shield respectively, while behind them marched a member of the Heralds’ College, carrying in his hands a paper, on which were written the actual words of the Challenge. Last of all, there rode the Champion himself, clad in full armour, and with four gorgeously attired pages in attendance. The armour worn by Sir Lewis Dymoke at the coronation

of George I. is thus described: “One suit of armour cap-a-pie, white and parcel gilt of King Charles II.; one white manifair; one short gauntlet white engraven and parcel gilt; one target painted with his arms and set round with silk fringe: one sword with scabbard of crimson velvet; one belt of crimson velvet.”

The Champion was flanked on either side by the Earl Marshal and the Lord High Constable, arrayed in their state robes and coronets, each of them bearing his staff of office. Then from the lower end of the hall the Herald proclaimed in ringing tones the formula of the Challenge.

“If any person, of what degree soever, high or low, shall deny or gainsay our sovereign lord —, king of Great Britain and Ireland, defender of the faith, &c., son and next heir to our sovereign lord —, the last king deceased, to be right heir to the

imperial crown of this realm of Great Britain, or that he ought not to enjoy the same; here is his Champion, who saith that he lieth and is a false traitor, being ready in person to combat with him; and in this quarrel will adventure his life against him, on what day soever shall be appointed."

The glove was then flung down and in a few moments restored to the Champion by the Herald, after which the procession advanced to the centre of the hall, where the same quaint ceremonial was repeated. The third and final halt for the same purpose was made at the foot of the steps beneath the Royal table. The Champion having made a profound reverence to his sovereign, a gilt cup full of wine was brought by the Royal Cup-bearer. King and Champion drank to one another in turn, and after making his obeisance once more, the Champion took his departure from the hall, carrying with him the cup and its gilt cover by way of fee. It is curious to note that the gold cups, which are still preserved at Scivelby Court, are almost invariably found to be lacking their covers. The inference to be drawn is this, that in the excitement and confusion occasioned by the quaffing of his Majesty's health, the Champion forgot to replace the cover upon the cup and consequently retired from the hall leaving this portion of his property behind him!

Of the coronation of George IV. two contemporary accounts among others have descended to us. The first is attributed to Sir Walter Scott. He tells us: "The Champion was performed as of right by young Dymoke, a fine looking youth, but bearing too much perhaps the appearance of a maiden knight to be the Challenger of the world in a King's behalf. He threw down his gauntlet, however, with becoming

manhood and showed as much horsemanship as the crowd of squires and knights around him would permit. On the whole, this striking part of the exhibition somewhat disappointed me, for I would have had the Champion less embarrassed by the assistants and at liberty to put his horse on the *grand pas*, and yet the young lord of Scivelby looked and behaved extremely well." The other account by Haydon, the painter, is of a far more complimentary character: "The Hall doors opened and outside in twilight a man in dark shadowed armour appeared against the shining sky. He then moved, and passed into darkness under the arch, and suddenly Wellington, Howard, and the Champion stood in full view with the doors closed behind them. This was certainly the finest sight of the day. The Herald read the challenge; the glove was thrown down. They all then proceeded to the Throne."

It is curious to note that the duties attached to the King's Champion on the first and last occasions on which they were performed were placed in the hands of a deputy. As, at the coronation of Richard II., Dame Margery was represented by Sir John Dymoke, her lord, so, at the coronation of George IV., young Henry Dymoke fulfilled the duties which his father, Sir John, was unable to carry out, in consequence of his clerical character.

From this last named date onwards, the glory has departed from Scivelby, never, it is to be feared, to return; for, with the coronation of William IV. this delightful old world ceremony was flung to the winds. Although the Dymokes are still to be found in their old ancestral home, the mail-clad figure has ceased to darken the venerable portals of Westminster Hall, and the last chapter has closed on the history of the Honourable the King's Champion.

