

## MEDIEVAL ARMS AND ARMOUR

20 January 2025

Adrian Waite

Appearing as an arresting visual aid, Adrian told his audience that he was dressed in the style of a fifteenth-century person. Wearing pointed shoes, which were very fashionable at the time, he explained that the higher the man's status the more pointed the shoes were, because that indicated the wearer did not get involved in any practical activity. Women's shoes tended to be more rounded. Trousers were tight fitting and called hose. On his upper body he wore a shirt and doublet. All was topped off by his rounded hat; everyone in the fifteenth century always wore 'head gear' when they went out.

Adrian then appealed to the audience for a young athletic volunteer whom Adrian could dress up in the various pieces of armour at his disposal. Without hesitation, Peter Lewis sprang out of his chair to fulfil this role. The first pieces applied to Peter's body were called 'greaves', metallic lower leg guards which were buckled around the shins. Above them were added the 'cuisses' which protected the thighs and 'poleyns' protected the front of the knees. All pieces of armour have French names, probably as a consequence of the Norman Conquest, French names were used to describe items of armour all over Europe. At a later period, a Danish nobleman famously said, "I speak French to my friends and family, German to my servants and Danish to my dogs".



If knights were expecting to go in to battle they would don their armour the night before and sleep in it, because battles often started at first light. The only protection a common soldier would wear was a 'padded jack' which was buckled down the front. This garment was also worn by our knight under his upper armour to provide extra defence from spears and arrows, and glancing blows from swords. A 'rerebrace' protected the upper arms, connected to a 'vambrace' over the lower arms. Elbow protection was the 'couter'. All were held in place by a shoulder strap which was part of the 'padded jack'.

The next protective item was a chain-mail shirt which had a hole through which the head went. This shirt was

then strapped under the arms and covered the top half of the body. Originally all the individual links of the shirt were riveted together by hand which meant that it took a very long time to make. A livery jacket was then placed on top of the chain mail which allowed soldiers to identify which side the wearer was fighting for. The one on display had a red wyvern (a dragon-like creature) embroidered on the front and back to signify that the wearer was one of Clifford's men.

Soft gloves were worn under the 'gauntlets' to protect the hands before the 'gorget' was added to cover the neck and upper chest. On top of the head was then placed the 'sallet' or helmet which was equipped with a 'visor' which could be either worn up for better vision or down for better protection. If the person was from the aristocracy and very wealthy, he would spend a large amount of money on the best quality armour, sometimes made in Germany or Italy. This increased his status but one of the disadvantages was that he would be more noticeable to the leaders of the opposing army and become a target to be captured. If this happened then he would be held to ransom, his family then paying large sums to get him back. King Richard I was captured by the Emperor of Austria and about three years of taxpayers' revenue for the whole of England had to be paid to release him.

The laws of chivalry allowed the losing army to collect any dead bodies after the battle, usually those from higher status families, so they could be buried in the family graveyard. More common soldiers were usually buried in a common grave near the battle field.

The weapons taken into battle included a sword, which was strapped around the waist, and a long handled 'poleaxe'. Some people think that this weapon derived its name because it is an axe on a pole but the name comes from 'poll' meaning head – a weapon to strike the head – this could be done with great force. Another weapon on a long pole was called a 'swiss'. This had a spike at the end with a billhook about one foot further down and a sharp bulge just below that. This weapon was invented by the labourers of Switzerland who were gathered to fight but they did not own any equipment so they made their own. It proved to be a very effective weapon, the point being used to stab whilst the hook was used to de-arm the enemy. Use of this weapon gave the Swiss army a fearful reputation; a similar weapon was still in use by the Scots in the seventeenth century.

The job of those wearing armour was to protect the flanks of the main fighting force and attempt to get behind the opposition. One disadvantage, especially in places like the Middle East, was that the armoured men became rather overheated. Peter sympathised at this point and was very relieved to have his armour removed so he could return to his seat. The audience gave them both a well-deserved round of applause. An interesting and well-presented demonstration which entertained and informed us all.

Tricia Jagger