

The Monarchs' Canopy

(Canopy for the Cinque Ports' Barons)

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Top ranking Dover men, defending ancient rights, have been at the centre of brawling at more than one royal coronation. And it's all been over a piece of cloth-with bells on.

By tradition, going back hundreds of years, those selected from the Cinque Port towns to be barons were entitled to carry a canopy over the monarch as he or she walked to and from their coronation.

Another tradition was that the Barons of the Cinque Ports should sit on the immediate right hand of the king or queen at the banquet that followed the ceremony. That was the cause of much of the brawling among those who wanted to be regarded as "first at the banquet."

I wonder what George III thought of the commotion in 1760 caused when the Dover and other barons demanded to sit at his right hand during the meal following his coronation.

When they received their invite to the banquet they noticed they had been placed down table so they pointed out this was against their ancient privilege. But the Lord Warden, the Duke of Dorset, responded that it was too late to change the place names!

Worse was to come. When the barons arrived at Westminster Hall following George III's coronation there was no table at all for them. They protested strongly to the Lord High Steward who explained that



The Coronation of James II by Francis Sandford, 1687

they were not listed to eat at all in the hall. Observers at the time related what happened next. The Cinque Ports Barons marched into the hall with their canopy and, finding all the tables on the king's right filled with peers and their wives, they crowded around the upper table. And they remained there, bunched together, well into the evening. Apparently with no food.

Still angry, the Kent and Sussex portsmen met next day at the King's Arms in Palace Yard and framed a strong protest to the king via the Lord Warden. "Our rights and privileges have been violated," they wrote to the king and his officials.

Selection of the Barons of the Cinque Ports continues but the ceremony of the canopy has been assigned to history.

It's an example of how the power and importance of the Cinque Ports has waned from the time its seafarers provided what is now the Royal Navy.

But still the Barons of the Cinque Ports, representing their various towns, are invited to coronation ceremonies. And, of course, there's plenty of rivalry in each

town to decide who should be appointed a Cinque Ports' Baron.

How the ceremony of the canopy began has been lost in the mists of time although records going back to the coronation of Richard I in 1189 tell of four Barons of the Ports pushing forward to spontaneously hoist on four spears a silk canopy over the king's head. Apparently Richard enjoyed the idea and the tradition was born.

As following kings and queens acceded to the throne the idea became more elaborate until the time came when it was an accepted custom.

The impromptu canopy on spears changed to a gorgeously made portable tabernacle-like structure held aloft on silver-lined poles that became so heavy by the 1861 coronation that sixteen Barons were needed (four on each pole) to bear it aloft.

At the marriage of Henry III and Eleanor of Provence in 1236 the tradition had expanded so that the Barons carried two canopies, one over Henry and the other over Eleanor. By the 14th century the canopy tradition was fully established in the style that continued for many years.

Diarist Samuel Pepys records the Barons carrying the canopy at the coronation of Charles II in April 1661. He was watching from a scaffold structure erected across the north end of Westminster Abbey, after he saw Charles enter Westminster Hall.

"The King came in with his crown on and his sceptre in his hand, under a canopy borne by six silver staves carried by Barons of the Cinque Ports, and little bells at every end."

It was after they all had a hearty meal that trouble started. When it was time to go

home the Barons, who by tradition shared the canopy and the bells, were angry when they discovered others trying to carry off their treasures. There was an argument and a tussle before the canopy and bells were restored to the Barons.

By tradition the Barons from the East Kent area, including Dover, normally gave their share of the canopy to Christ Church at Canterbury.

The last time the canopies were borne by the Cinque Port Barons, when a place was provided for them to dine on the right hand of the king, was at the coronation of George IV. They even had the cheek to ask the king for the state treasury to pay for the colourful robes they wore. That request was swiftly rejected.

Cinque Port Barons are still invited to coronations - but without their canopies. William IV, who reigned for only seven years, did not invite them nor did his successor Queen Victoria in 1837 who was not amused. But Edward VII renewed the tradition in 1902 and ensured they had an honourable place as spectators in the Abbey as have successive monarchs including Queen Elizabeth II.



The Monarchs Canopy Supported by Four Knights of the Garter Queen Elizabeth II.