

Making the invisible visible

An Atlas of Coats of Arms in Winchester



Introduction



Walking through Winchester, coats of arms appear everywhere. They are carved into stone walls, painted above gates, printed on institutional signs, and embedded into everyday objects. At first glance, they seem decorative or historical. Most people pass by without noticing them, and even fewer understand what they communicate.

These symbols were originally designed as a clear visual language. They signalled authority, ownership, belonging and hierarchy. Over time, however, their meanings have become obscured. While the symbols remain highly visible, their messages are no longer easily read. They function as part of the city's visual background rather than as active forms of communication.

This project explores coats of arms in Winchester as an invisible communication system. Through photographing, categorising and decoding these symbols, the project examines how institutional power and identity continue to operate visually, even when their original language has faded. By reframing these overlooked artefacts as designed signals, the project aims to make visible what has gradually become unnoticed.

Methods & Process

Observational Walks

This project began with a series of observational hiking activities in Winchester. I was not looking for landmark buildings or tourist attractions; instead, I focused my attention on the overlooked details within the architectural environment.

This approach enabled these symbols to be encountered during the daily travels of the citizens, thereby highlighting their frequency of occurrence and the fact that people often tend to overlook them.



(Workshop)

Process

Visual Collection & Categorisation

Power / Institutional Categories



College / Religion / Elite System



Daily but overlooked badges



After collecting the images, the photographs were reviewed and grouped according to their function and context rather than their historical origin. The symbols were categorised into three types: civic authority, institutional or elite systems, and everyday overlooked markers.

This process shifted the focus from individual symbols to patterns of repetition and difference, revealing how similar visual languages operate across different scales of power and visibility.

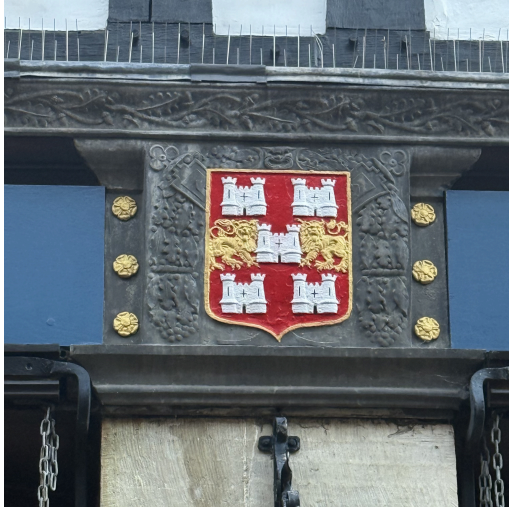


Decoding Through Design Analysis

Subsequently, I conducted a design-based analysis of all five badges. The project no longer delved into the detailed history of the emblems, but focused on aspects such as their visual structure, placement, reuse, and audience. By posing questions such as who the symbol is aimed at, how it conveys authority, and why it is no longer read, this analysis process was guided.

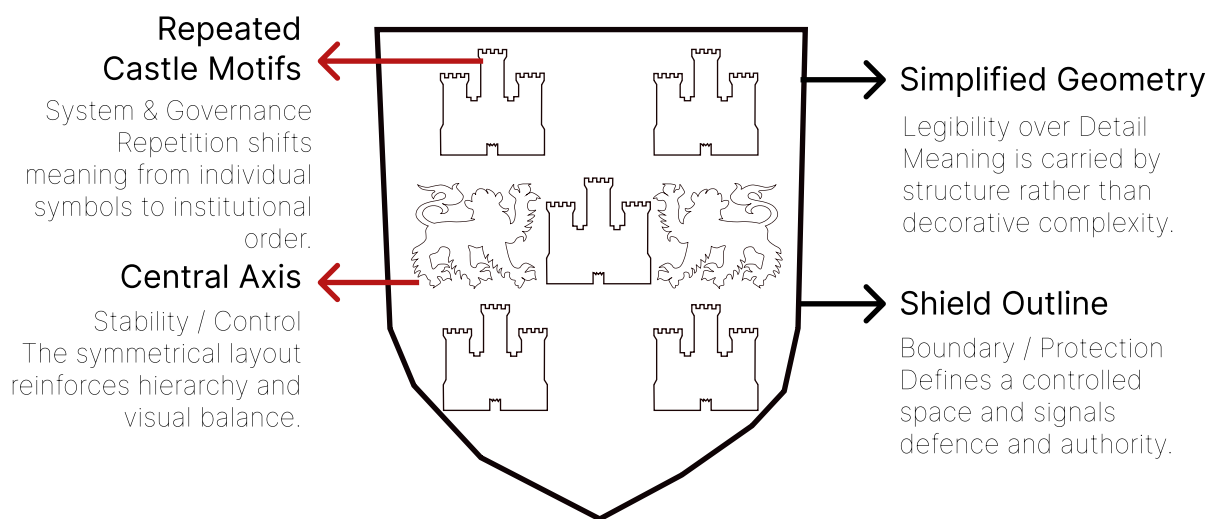
By re-drawing and isolating the key visual elements, these symbols transformed from historical objects into dynamic communication systems.

Power



The castles and Royal Lions "passant guardant", or "Lions of England" suggest a derivation from the Common Seal of 1253, consisting only of a single triple-towered castle, and the Statute Merchant Seal of 1283, comprising the bust of Edward I between two castles and a single Royal Lion.

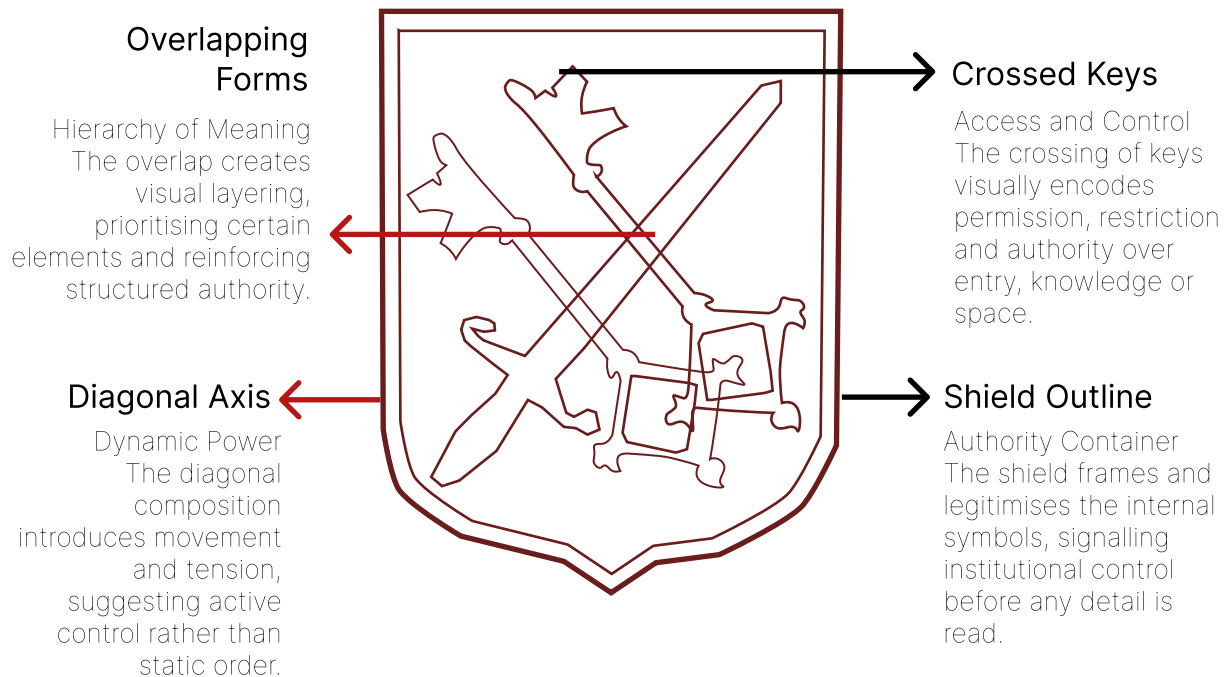
Winchester, the ancient capital of England, continues therefore to use its Arms in the original form and has never sought to add a crest, a motto or supporters, which emblems were not in use for towns at the time when Winchester's Arms originated.





This badge represents the coat of arms of the Diocese of Winchester in England.

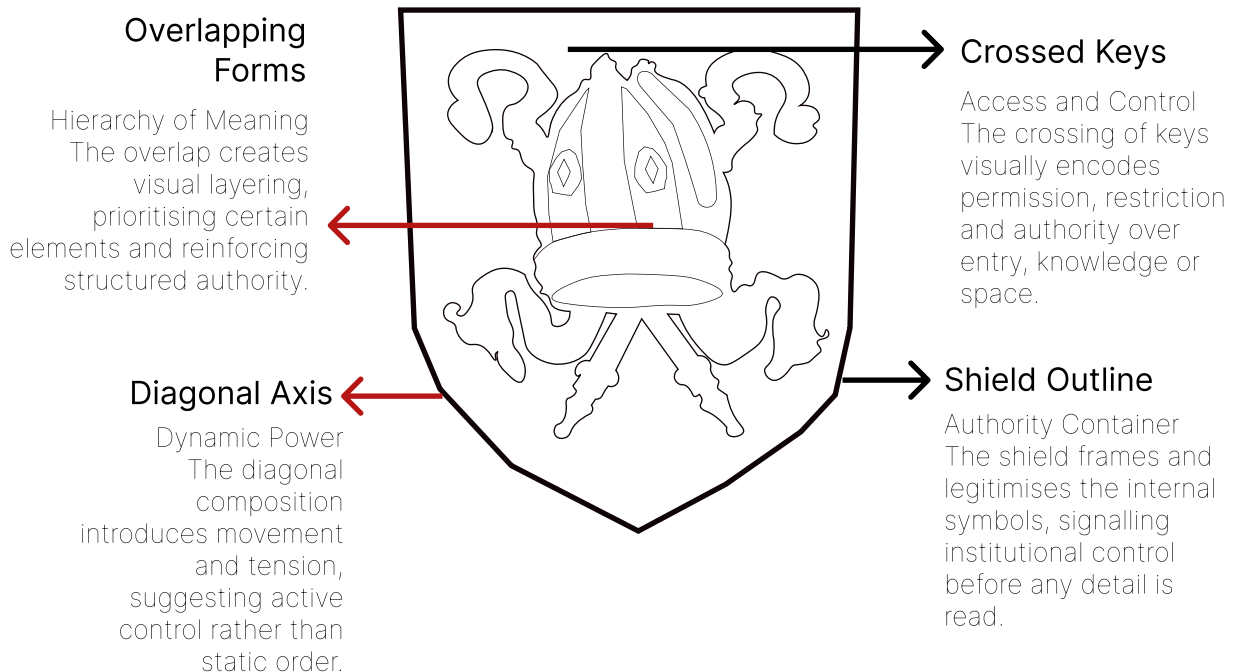
In ecclesiastical heraldry, the simultaneous use of a key and a sword typically indicates that the diocese or institution in question is associated with both Saint Peter and Saint Paul, the two apostles. The Winchester diocese has adopted this as its official coat of arms.



College / Religion

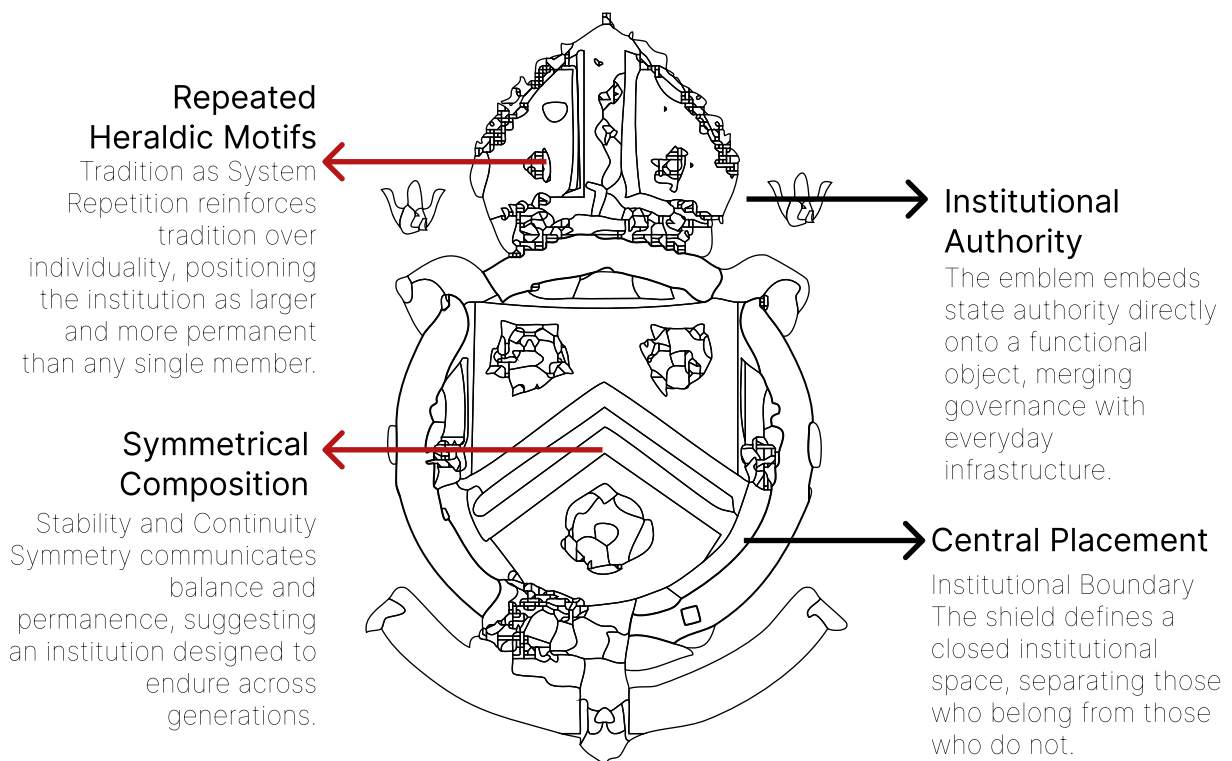


The actual location of this relief is within Winchester Cathedral. It might be a personal coat of arms: Many bishops have their own personal coats of arms, which might only consist of a sword rather than the typical combination of Peter and Paul. It is very likely to be part of a specific bishop's monument or tombstone, used to commemorate bishops who have a special connection with Saint Paul or use this as their personal emblem.





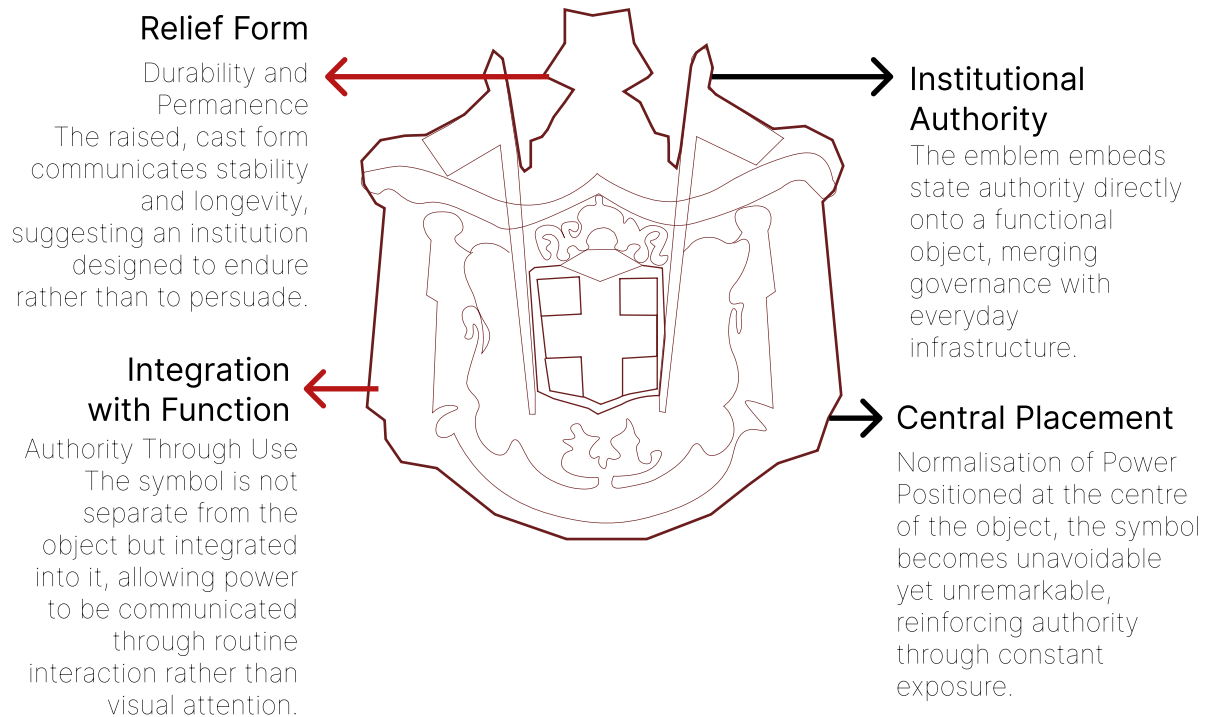
The Winchester College coat of arms communicates authority through tradition, symmetry and institutional placement. Rather than dominating public space, it signals legitimacy through historical continuity and formal structure. Although visible within the urban environment, its meaning relies on cultural and institutional knowledge, functioning as a marker of belonging and status for a specific audience while remaining largely unreadable to the general public.



Daily badges



The coat of arms on the post box communicates authority through everyday use rather than visual prominence. Integrated into public infrastructure, it becomes part of routine interaction, reinforcing institutional presence through familiarity. Although frequently encountered, its heraldic language is rarely read, allowing authority to operate quietly in daily life.



Relief Form

Durability and Permanence
The raised, cast form communicates stability and longevity, suggesting an institution designed to endure rather than to persuade.

Integration with Function

Authority Through Use
The symbol is not separate from the object but integrated into it, allowing power to be communicated through routine interaction rather than visual attention.

Institutional Authority

The emblem embeds state authority directly onto a functional object, merging governance with everyday infrastructure.

Central Placement

Normalisation of Power
Positioned at the centre of the object, the symbol becomes unavoidable yet unremarkable, reinforcing authority through constant exposure.

Re-framing

In this project, I began by noticing how coats of arms repeatedly appeared throughout Winchester's urban environment, often overlooked and rarely questioned. Rather than approaching them as historical artefacts to be explained, I chose to treat them as designed communication systems that continue to operate in everyday space. This shift in perspective allowed me to move away from researching symbolic meaning and instead focus on how authority is constructed and maintained through visual form.

By redrawing and reducing each coat of arms to its essential structure, I was able to see how elements such as symmetry, repetition, scale and placement function as tools of communication. Stripped of colour and ornament, the symbols revealed themselves not as decorative heritage objects, but as persistent signals embedded within architecture, infrastructure and routine interaction. This process reframed the coats of arms from something to be read into something to be recognised.

Through this reframing, the project became less about understanding what each symbol historically represents, and more about questioning why these symbols remain effective despite widespread loss of heraldic literacy. The act of decoding through design analysis made visible an invisible system of authority—one that operates quietly, continuously, and largely without conscious engagement.

Reflection

Through this process, it became clear that authority does not rely on being understood to be effective. The coats of arms function through familiarity, permanence and repetition, allowing them to shape perception without conscious engagement. This project highlights how designed symbols can persist as invisible signals within everyday space, raising questions about how other forms of unnoticed visual communication continue to influence behaviour and understanding.



