

THE  
MOST HONOURABLE  
ORDER OF  
THE BATH



From mediæval times to the Coronation of King Charles II it was customary in England to confer with great ceremony a 'Degree of Knighthood' which, from its preparatory rite, came to be described as 'The Knighthood of the Bath'.

This Knighthood was not an 'Order' having its own Chapel, Statutes, Seal, and Officers—like the Order of the Garter—but simply a 'Degree of Knighthood', greatly esteemed, owing to the distinction of the persons on whom it was conferred and the solemnity of the ceremonies connected with the creation of such.

King George I, by Letters Patent dated 18<sup>th</sup> May 1725, created a Military Order of Knighthood to be known as 'The Order of the Bath'. Statutes of subsequent date laid down the ordinances to be observed within the Order. The installation of Knights was provided for, and the attendant ceremonies (each with allegorical significance) included that of a bath.

From 1725 an invaluable record of stall-holding members of the Order has been built up through the armorial stall-plates in the Chapel of the Order in Westminster Abbey.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1815 the Order was enlarged by The Prince Regent and, instead of one class of Knights, three were formed: Knights Grand Cross, Knights Commander, and Companions. At the same time provision was made for the admission of a small number of distinguished civilians to the highest class.

On 14<sup>th</sup> April 1847 Queen Victoria ordained that certain changes should be made in the constitution of the Order 'With a view to the altered state and circumstances of Society'. Included in the changes was the addition to the Civil Division of Knights Commander and of Companions.

In 1913 King George V commanded that the ceremony of installation, omitted for almost a century, should be carried out, and on 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1913 a service was held at which forty-six senior Knights Grand Cross were installed. There the erection of banners, mantlings, and stall plates also resumed.

Installation services followed in 1920, 1924, and 1928. However, between 1932 and 1935, the Chapel of the Order was closed so that repairs might be carried out following damage to the fabric caused by vibration. During that period a new Altar was erected—a reproduction of Torregiano's 1526 Altar, parts of which were incorporated in the new one.

Its baldacchino which incorporates the painting of the Virgin and Child by Bartolomeo Vivarini, a contemporary of Torregiano, was presented by the Viscount Lee of Fareham GCB. On 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1935 the Chapel was re-opened with a service during which existing vacancies were filled by the installation of several Knights.

During the war of 1939–45, to prevent damage by enemy action, certain parts of the woodwork of the stalls, together with the banners, were removed from the Chapel, and it was not until 1947 that the Chapel was restored and re-opened to the public.

Ladies were admitted to all classes and to both divisions of the Order, with effect from 1<sup>st</sup> January 1971; Her Royal Highness Princess Alice, Duchess of Gloucester, being the first Dame Grand Cross.

On 10<sup>th</sup> June 1974 the former Great Master of the Order, His Royal Highness The Duke of Gloucester, died. On 28<sup>th</sup> May 1975 a service was held to mark the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Order of the Bath. On that occasion the newly appointed Great Master of the Order, His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales, was installed by The Sovereign.

Immediately after the installation in 1994 the Chapel was closed to the public, filled with scaffolding, and underwent the most extensive examination, conservation, and restoration (inside and out) in nearly 500 years. The Officers of the Order were present in October 1995 at a great Thanksgiving Service for the completion of the Abbey's restoration programme, at which The Sovereign unveiled a new west window in the Chapel. By means of heraldic arms, ciphers, and initials—featuring the insignia of the Order as part of the arms of The Sovereign, and The Great Master—the window both records the trustees, donors, collegiate officers, and craftsmen involved in the restoration, and celebrates its completion.

During the present ceremony certain Knights Grand Cross will be installed to fill those vacancies which have occurred since 2014. New banners and crests replace those of deceased Knights Grand Cross, whose stall plates, however, remain in their stalls in perpetuity.



