

Owls in Royal Air Force Heraldry

By Ken Delve Historian RAF Heraldry Trust

Owls have long held associations far and wide beyond the natural world; in folklore, art and even in military insignia! Here, Ken Delve from the RAF Heraldry Trust tells us more about the background to the owls that were chosen to represent some of our airborne units.

The Royal Air Force (RAF) introduced an heraldic badge scheme in the 1930s whereby units could apply for a badge (or, incorrectly, 'crest') for their unit.

An active unit could provide its proposed badge to the College of Heralds for review, after which it was approved by the RAF Inspector of Badges. These badges are described in heraldic terms, which can seem archaic, although translations are included below!

The unit would choose a **blazon**, the decorative centre-piece, and a **motto**, the majority of which are in Latin or English. Both were meant to have some meaning for the historic or current role of the unit.

Owls were a fairly frequent subject for the blazon, not surprisingly by units that had a night-based role. Here is just a small selection.

No.58 Sqn



Blazon: On a branch, a Long-eared Owl all proper.

Motto: *Alis Nocturnis* (On the wings of the night). Latin.

Being a night bomber unit, the owl, was considered a suitable pictorial representation.

No.151 Sqn



Blazon: On a Hurt an Owl affrontee Argent wings elevated alighting on a Seax Or.

Motto: *Foy pour devoir* (Fidelity unto duty). French.

The owl and hurt are both symbolic of the night. The seax is representative of the County of Essex where the unit formed in 1936.

Descriptive Heraldic Terms

Affrontee	Two animals facing each other
Argent	Silver
Gules	Red
Hilted	Hilt of a sword
Hurt	Circle of blue
Increscent	A crescent moon pointing left
Mullet	Star
Or	Gold
Proper	Naturally coloured
Saltire	A cross
Seax	A broad, curved sword

RAF Calshot



Blazon: On a Hurt an Owl affrontee proper perched on an Increscent Argent between four Mullets of the same.

Motto: *Ducant astra* (Let the stars be your guide). Latin.

The owl symbolises wisdom and the ability to navigate by night, and the stars in the form of the square of Pegasus, operations in the air.

RAF Lossiemouth



Blazon: Alighting upon two Claymores in saltire Argent hilted Gules a Snowy Owl affrontee wings expanded and inverted proper.

Motto: *Thoir an aire* (To be watchful). Gaelic.

The Snowy Owl alludes to the vision and wisdom being given to the squadron which uses radar. The local claymores symbolise the location and attack potential of the station.

Badges are reproduced here courtesy of RAF Heraldry Trust. To find out more about the trust, and the birds and animals chosen by military units, visit www.rafht.co.uk