

History of Each Rank of the Modern Peerage

The modern peerage or titles of nobility given by the king or queen of Great Britain is made up of five ranks, beginning at the highest they are: Duke or Duchess; Marquess, Marquis or Marchioness; Earl or Countess; Viscount or Viscountess; and Baron or Baroness.

History of the Title of Duke

The word Duke comes from a latin word which means leader. The title of Duke early in Britain's history signified Sovereign status. For example, the Duke of Normandy was William the Conqueror and the King of England. The first use of the title Duke as it is currently known was in 1337, when Edward the Third made his oldest son the Black Prince, the Duke of Cornwall. When King Edward's son died before the King, the title was given to Richard II the Black Princes' son. In 1421, a charter was created which states that the dukedom of Cornwall always passes to the Sovereign's oldest son. Today this tradition continues.

The second granting of the title of Duke was given to Henry, who became the Duke of Lancaster in 1351. This title became extinct when Henry died, but was again created in 1362. In 1399 this title was merged with the crown. Throughout the late 1300's and early 1400's Dukedoms were conferred to members of the royal family. In 1448 the first Dukedom conferred upon a person not of the royal family was given to Sir William de la Pole, who was given the title of Duke of Suffolk. The order of Duke did not exist during the reign of Elizabeth I from 1558 to 1603, but was again revived by Elizabeth's successor James I. In 1623 he gave the title of Duke of Buckingham to one of his supporters George Villiers. During the 17th and 18th centuries numerous Dukedoms were created. At one time during this period, there were more than 50 Dukedoms held by 40 Dukes. Since this time there has never been so many Dukedoms. Today there are approximately 25 Dukedoms.

History of the Rank of Marquess

This title was originally given to Counts that guarded borderlands of a country and is derived from a German word, markgraf, which means "frontier count". The Counts were given additional power and precedence over other Counts because of the importance of guarding these territories. By the twelfth century the title had lost its association with the guarding of borderlands and was introduced to England by Richard II, when he gave the title of Marquess of Dublin to Robert de Vere in 1385. In 1397, John of Gaunt was given the second Marquess title but it was removed in 1399. After this, the title was no longer given, until 1442, when Henry VI again began giving the title of Marquess. In 1532, the only woman to ever be given the title of Marchioness in her own right, meaning she was not born into or marry into the title, was Anne Bolyn. Currently there are only 34 marquesses.

History of the Title of Earl

The term Earl means chieftain and it was used in the early days of England to denote a chieftain who has been asked to rule a territory in the king's stead. Before the Norman conquest Earl's had great authority over their regions. They collected fines and taxes and were entitled to one third of all they collected. They led armies for the king and had the right to judge in court. Shires were grouped together to form earldoms.

After the Norman Conquest shires became the largest grouping of land and earldoms no longer existed. The Normans did keep the title of Earl, and even appointed earls, but they only had authority over one shire. Shires eventually became known as counties and the title of earl became synonymous with the title count, which is why the wife of an earl is still known today as a countess. An earl also no longer collected taxes or made decisions in court.

During the reign of King Stephen, many men were given the title of Earl as a reward for their loyalty. Some of these men were given the right to have royal castles and even control the sheriff. Other earls soon also assumed these rights against the wishes of the king. So Stephen's successor decreased the earls power again. During the thirteenth century earls were socially considered just below the king and princes, but weren't always more wealthy or powerful than other noblemen. The title could only be inherited or married into. There were few earls, but they had an incredible amount of power. In 1327 they actually removed Edward II from the throne and did this with other kings they did not like. Then in 1337 Edward III created six new earldoms. During this time the title of earl was no longer always associated with a particular place and some were given the title of earl based on a non-county place or even a last name. Today it is common to give the title of earl to former prime ministers, but this is not always the case.

History of the Rank of Viscount

This title was originally used in other countries for men who held the office of deputy or lieutenant of a Count. By the tenth century the title has become hereditary, and in England was used as a title for a sheriff of a county. The title of viscount is the newest title in the peerage. The first viscount was created in 1439, but there were very few who were awarded this title. The title did not become popular until the seventeenth century. The title of viscount is always created by patent.