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Order Of St Michael And St George

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The Order of St Michael and St George: A Comprehensive Guide to its History and Significance

Few honours in the British honours system carry the mystique and diplomatic prestige of the **Order of St Michael and St George**. Established during a period of imperial expansion, this distinguished order recognises service in foreign and commonwealth affairs, rewarding those who have made exceptional contributions to international relations, diplomacy, and overseas service. For those unfamiliar with this chivalric order, its history, structure, and symbolism offer a fascinating glimpse into the traditions of British honours and the individuals who have shaped global diplomacy.

The Origins of the Order of St Michael and St George

The **Order of St Michael and St George**was instituted on 28 April 1818 by the Prince Regent, later King George IV. Its creation was driven by the need to honour the inhabitants of the Ionian Islands, which had come under British protection as a result of the Treaty of Paris in 1815. The order was also intended to recognise military and civil service in Malta and other Mediterranean possessions, as well as service in foreign affairs more broadly.

The choice of patron saints is deeply symbolic. Saint Michael represents courage, protection, and celestial warfare, while Saint George is the traditional patron saint of England and of chivalry. Together, they embody the ideals of the order: bravery, service, and integrity in foreign relations. The motto of the order, *"Auspicium Melioris Aevi"*, translates as "Token of a Better Age," reflecting the optimistic vision of British diplomacy and influence in the world.

The Ionian Islands Connection

The original connection to the Ionian Islands is often overlooked in modern discussions of the order. When Britain took on the protectorate of the Ionian Islands following the Napoleonic Wars, there was a need for a local honour system that could reward both British administrators and Greek islanders who served the crown. The **Order of St Michael and St George**filled this role perfectly. After the islands were ceded to Greece in 1864, the order's focus shifted entirely to diplomatic and overseas service, a remit it retains to this day.

The Three Classes of the Order

Like many British honours, the **Order of St Michael and St George**is structured into three classes. Each class confers distinct privileges and insignia, reflecting the level of service being recognised. These classes allow for a graduated system of recognition, from distinguished service at the highest level to commendable contributions at a more junior rank.

Knight or Dame Grand Cross (GCMG)

The highest class of the order is the Knight or Dame Grand Cross (GCMG). Recipients of this honour are entitled to use the post-nominal letters GCMG and may wear the star and sash of the order. Knights Grand Cross are also entitled to the prefix "Sir" and Dames Grand Cross to "Dame." This grade is typically reserved for the most senior diplomats, foreign secretaries, governors-general, and ambassadors who have rendered exceptional service to British interests abroad. The GCMG is among the most prestigious honours in the diplomatic service and carries with it the right to bear heraldic supporters.

Knight or Dame Commander (KCMG or DCMG)

The second class is Knight Commander (KCMG) for men and Dame Commander (DCMG) for women. This grade is awarded to senior diplomats, high commissioners, and other officials who have demonstrated outstanding service in international affairs. Recipients are also entitled to the prefix "Sir" or "Dame" and may wear the appropriate insignia. The KCMG and DCMG are often awarded to individuals who have served as ambassadors to major nations or who have held key positions in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Companion (CMG)

The Companion of the Order (CMG) is the third and most junior class, though it remains a highly respected honour. The CMG is frequently awarded to mid-career diplomats, consular officers, and other civil servants who have made significant contributions to foreign policy or overseas service. It is also sometimes awarded to individuals outside the diplomatic service who have made notable contributions to international relations. In the diplomatic community, receiving a CMG is often seen as a mark of being on a trajectory toward the highest ranks of the service.

The Insignia and Symbols of the Order

The visual identity of the **Order of St Michael and St George**is rich in symbolism. The insignia includes a badge, a star, and a ribbon, each carefully designed to reflect the order's values and history. Understanding these symbols provides deeper insight into the order's meaning.

The Badge

The badge of the order features a depiction of St Michael slaying the dragon, surrounded by a blue garter bearing the motto in gold letters. The reverse side of the badge shows St George on horseback. This duality reinforces the connection between the two patron saints and the order's mission. The badge is worn suspended from a ribbon of dark blue with a central red stripe, colours that are instantly recognisable within diplomatic circles.

The Star

The star of the order varies by class. For Knights and Dames Grand Cross, the star is an eight-pointed silver star with a central medallion showing St Michael and the dragon. For Knights and Dames Commander, the star is similar but smaller. The star is worn on the left breast, and its design is a clear indicator of the wearer's rank within the order.

The Riband and Collar

The riband of the order is a wide sash worn across the body from the left shoulder to the right hip. It is dark blue with a red central stripe. The collar, worn only by Knights and Dames Grand Cross on special occasions, is a gold chain featuring alternating symbols of lions and crosses, with a central medallion. The collar is a powerful symbol of the highest honour within the order.

Notable Recipients of the Order

Over the centuries, many distinguished individuals have been admitted to the **Order of St Michael and St George**. Their achievements span diplomacy, exploration, military service, and even literature. Examining a few

notable recipients highlights the breadth of service the order recognises.

Diplomatic Giants

Among the most famous recipients is Sir Ernest Mason Satow, a legendary British diplomat who served in Japan and China during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His contributions to Anglo-Japanese relations were immense, and his GCMG reflects his towering legacy. Similarly, Sir Harold Nicolson, a diplomat and author, was appointed CMG for his service during the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. More recently, Sir Peter Westmacott, former British Ambassador to the United States and Turkey, was awarded the GCMG for his exemplary diplomatic career.

Literary and Cultural Figures

The order has also been awarded to individuals outside the strict diplomatic sphere. The author and adventurer Sir Richard Francis Burton was made a Knight Commander (KCMG) for his extraordinary contributions to exploration and cultural understanding. More surprisingly, the fictional character James Bond is often associated with the order, being made a CMG in Ian Fleming's novels, reflecting the character's service to the crown in international settings.

Governors-General

Governors-general of Commonwealth realms frequently receive the GCMG. For example, Sir Paul Scofield, the distinguished actor, was appointed CMG for his services to the arts on the international stage, demonstrating the order's reach beyond purely diplomatic roles. The appointment of governors-general underscores the order's connection to the broader Commonwealth and the British sovereign's role as head of the order.

The Chapel of the Order

The spiritual home of the **Order of St Michael and St George**is the Chapel of the Order within St Paul's Cathedral in London. This chapel, known as the St George's Chapel of the Order, was established in 1906 and serves as a place of worship and reflection for members. The chapel features the banners, crests, and stall plates of the Knights and Dames Grand Cross, creating a living history of the order's membership.

Services held at the chapel include the induction of new members and commemorative events. The chapel's ornate design incorporates symbols of the order, including representations of St Michael and St George. For those interested in British honours and chivalric tradition, a visit to the chapel offers a tangible connection to the order's history and ongoing mission.

Stall Plates and Banners

Each Knight or Dame Grand Cross has a stall plate affixed to the chapel's stalls, bearing their name, arms, and date of appointment. These plates create a permanent record of the order's membership. Banners displaying the armorial bearings of members hang above the stalls during their lifetimes, adding to the visual splendour of the chapel. After a member's death, the banner is removed but the stall plate remains.

Modern Relevance and Evolution

In the 21st century, the **Order of St Michael and St George**remains a vital part of the British honours system. While its origins lie in the colonial era, its focus has shifted to recognise service in international relations, diplomacy, and overseas development. The order continues to be awarded twice a year, in the New Year Honours and the Birthday Honours, as well as through special honours lists.

The order has evolved to reflect changing times. Women were first admitted in 1929, and the order now honours individuals from all backgrounds who have served British interests abroad. The order also recognises individuals from Commonwealth nations who have contributed to international understanding and cooperation.

Contemporary Appointments

Recent appointments to the order include diplomats, trade negotiators, humanitarian workers, and military personnel involved in international peacekeeping. The order's flexibility allows it to honour contributions in an ever-changing global landscape. For instance, individuals who have played key roles in conflict resolution, climate diplomacy, and international development have been recognised in recent years.

How the Order Compares to Other British Honours

The **Order of St Michael and St George**occupies a unique position within the British honours system. It is distinct from the Order of the Garter, which is limited to the British monarch and a small number of companions, and from the Order of the Thistle, which is primarily Scottish. It is also separate from the Order of the British Empire, which covers a much wider range of civil and military service. The focus of the St Michael and St George order on foreign and overseas service sets it apart and gives it a distinctive identity.

Precedence and Protocol

In the order of precedence for British honours, the **Order of St Michael and St George**ranks below the Order of the Star of India and the Order of the Indian Empire (both now dormant) but above the Order of the British Empire. This positioning reflects its historical significance and its continued importance in diplomatic circles. Understanding this hierarchy is useful for those studying the honours system or researching specific recipients.

Applying for the Honour

The **Order of St Michael and St George**is not something one applies for directly. Instead, nominations are made by government departments, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, or through the prime minister's office. Recommendations are reviewed by the Honours Committee and ultimately approved by the monarch. The process is rigorous and ensures that only those who have rendered truly exceptional service are admitted.

Individuals cannot nominate themselves, but colleagues, superiors, or members of the public can put forward names for consideration. The honours system values integrity, commitment, and impact, all of which are weighed carefully during the selection process.

Conclusion

The **Order of St Michael and St George**stands as a testament to the enduring importance of diplomacy, international cooperation, and service to the crown in foreign affairs. From its origins in the Mediterranean colonial era to its modern focus on global relations, the order has evolved while retaining its prestige and symbolic power. Whether awarded to a veteran diplomat, a governor-general, or a cultural ambassador, the order recognises those who have made a tangible difference in the world. For anyone interested in British history, honours, or international relations, the Order of St Michael and St George offers a rich subject of study, filled with tradition, symbolism, and stories of remarkable service.

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