

## Esquire, Gentleman and Yeoman – what does it mean?

When looking at historic documents including birth, marriage and death certificates, Wills and Census returns, it is not unusual to find the 'rank or profession' of a man (possibly one of your ancestors) given as Esquire (Esq.), Gentleman (Gent.) or Yeoman.

### Esquire

Those of a certain age will remember a time when letters sent from solicitors, banks etc. to a man would be addressed to for example E A Jones Esq. with the salutation being Dear Mr Jones. In some documents notably the index of past students of Oxford University *Alumni Oxonienses* the abbreviation Arm. is short for *armiger* which is the Latin version of Esquire and therefore does not necessarily indicate that the person had a Coat of Arms. The usage of the term Esquire has changed over time.

Originally a Squire (*escutifer*) was the shield bearer of a knight and carried not only his shield but also pieces of his armour and would have been from a family within the Gentry. Later these tasks were passed to the Pages. By the 16th century the term referred to an officer of the Crown, who because of their position (e.g. Royal Navy Commanders, Army Officers, Justice of the Peace) carried some authority but they did not always rank above a Gentleman. Usage of the description Esquire changed again and during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries was used to denote a man who had a coat of arms (not all people who used arms did so officially and some were using the arms of a distant relative) and were therefore superior to the Gentlemen. During the 19<sup>th</sup> Century it was common practise to use this style when addressing letters to Gentlemen and later in letters to any man.

### Gentleman

While today the term Gentlemen is used mostly in toilet signs or at the start of a speech "Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen" (Lords being people who have that particular title either by inheritance or having been knighted by the Queen, Lady being the title of a women of the same rank as or the wife of a Lord but also being the polite term for any woman) and is considered the polite term for referring to any man. A Gentleman is generally considered to be a man who is polite and courteous, however, in the past it had a more specific meaning.

Collectively the Gentlemen form the Gentry, originally the term Gentil meant someone who was noble but as early as the 15<sup>th</sup> century a Gentleman was someone who was superior to a Yeoman but inferior to a Baron or Knight. During the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries the Heralds tried to restrict the term to those with a legal entitlement to a coat of arms but they were unable to enforce this. In popular usage a Gentleman was one who did not work with his hands, so a wealthy farmer who did not physically work the land, a professional man e.g. doctor or lawyer, a man who had saved enough to retire and live on his investments would all be considered to be Gentlemen. There has never been a clear

definition and whether or not a Gentleman was Noble was debated into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, by which time people addressing a gathering of people were commonly addressing their audience as “Ladies and Gentlemen”.

## **Yeoman**

Possibly the word Yeoman today brings images of the Yeoman of the Guard (The Queen’s Body Guard, now largely ceremonial) and the Yeoman Wardens at the Tower of London (commonly referred to as Beefeaters). In the 13th-15th centuries a Yeoman was a servant or retainer of a Knight, Yeomen of the King’s Chamber being officials who worked for the Chamberlain. During the Tudor period the word came to mean a prosperous farmer who worked his own land (either rented or owned as freeholder), as he actually worked on his land he ranked below the Gentry. While there was no legal definition of the term Yeoman it came to be used to denote a farmer who was wealthier than the average husbandman. Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century both terms, yeoman and husbandman have been replaced by farmer.

The Yeomen are not to be confused with the yeomanry who were local volunteer soldiers in Victorian times, who rode their own horses.

Although usage of all of these terms has changed over time and in the main had no precise definition hopefully the above gives some idea of the status of the people to whom the rank has been assigned.

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