The Council in the Marches of Wales was a regional body of law and administration which covered all of Wales, the Marcher Lordships and the adjoining counties of Shropshire, Worcestershire, Herefordshire, Cheshire and Gloucestershire. It was composed of a Lord President and bishops, judges, lawyers and local gentry. The Council was at its most effective during Elizabeth I’s reign and Sir Henry Sidney was its longest serving President from 1560-1586.

Its origins were in the Council first set up in 1473 to administer the estates of the infant Edward, Prince of Wales, son of Edward IV, who was resident in Ludlow. This Council also acquired judicial powers and eventually developed into a devolved regional government. Ludlow Castle was its administrative base, where it also had courts of justice and a prison. The Council and its courts brought considerable business and prosperity to the town.

Its main role was to maintain law and order. Its courts acted mainly, but not solely, as courts of appeal. These attracted huge volumes of business often at the expense of other courts which was a source of resentment, particularly in the English Counties.

The Council also had a military role, since the President was responsible for the militia in all the counties under his rule. The militia was the only source of men for home defence and foreign wars. It was his duty to conduct the summer musters, at which the militia of every shire was assembled, inspected and trained.

In the 17th century the use and effectiveness of the Council declined and it was abolished in 1689.

The earliest map of Wales by Humphrey Lloyd of 1573 shows the eastern boundary of Wales along the River Severn.
Ludlow Castle was founded by Walter de Lacy in the late eleventh century and was owned by a succession of Marcher families. It came into the hands of the Crown through the Mortimer family when Edward, son of Richard, Duke of York, became King in 1461. Thereafter it was occasionally used as a residence for the Princes of Wales but principally as the administrative centre for royal regional government, the Council in the Marches of Wales.

During his time as President Sir Henry Sidney made a lot of improvements to the Castle for the increased comfort and prestige of the Council. These included a piped spring water supply, a new law court and accommodation for the judges, and enhancement of the private apartments and garden including the provision of a real tennis court, a game made popular by Henry VIII.

The Round Chapel, which was built in the inner bailey of the Castle in the middle of the 12th century, was adopted by Prince Arthur, son of Henry VII, and his wife Katherine of Aragon as their private chapel when they were resident in 1501-2. Alterations to the round nave provided the Prince with a private pew at first floor level overlooking the East end or chancel. Seventy years later the chapel had fallen into some decay and the East end was totally rebuilt and extended by Sir Henry in 1574. This new chancel was decorated with forty-six shields of arms which were to be recorded on the Ludlow Castle Heraldic Roll.
Sir Henry Sidney’s Heraldry

Sir Henry Sidney’s arms appear on the Heraldic roll on a shield encircled with six ragged staffs. The ragged staff, a heraldic badge of the Earls of Warwick, is used here to refer to the descent of Sidney’s wife, Mary Dudley, from the Earls of Warwick. The arms of the Sidney family are a blue spearhead on a gold ground, described heraldically as ‘or a pheon azure’, and his crest was a chained porcupine.

Sir Henry Sidney’s arms are displayed on the tomb of his daughter Ambrosia (named after her uncle, Ambrose Dudley), erected in 1580, and are still to be seen in St Laurence’s church, Ludlow. At the top of the tomb is his shield encircled by the Garter which has the Order’s motto Honi Soit Qui Mal Y Pense (shame to him who thinks evil). On either side are the supporters of a crowned lion and chained porcupine and beneath them his family motto Quo Fata Vocant (to what end the fates call). The shield is divided into eight parts or quarters with the arms of his forebears - the families of (top, left to right) Sidney; Clowfield, or Clunford; Barrington; Merry or Mercy; (bottom, left to right) Mandeville; Chetwynd; Baard or Baare?; Brandon.

Beneath to the right are the arms of Ambrose Dudley, and to the left those of Sir Henry Sidney. Here his arms are on the left side (heraldically ‘dexter’) of the shield with eight of the arms of the ancestors of his wife, Mary Dudley, on the right (heraldically ‘sinister’) of the shield.

The arms of Sir Henry Sidney’s shown on the Roll encircled with six ragged staffs

Ambrosia Sidney’s tomb in St Laurence’s, Ludlow 1580
The Heraldic Roll

Sir Henry Sidney probably commissioned the Heraldic Roll in about 1576 for his own record. Over four and a half metres long, it is made up of seven lengths of parchment sewn together with linen thread. Parchment, made from animal skin, usually sheep or calf, was the main writing material until the advent of printing on paper in the 1470s. The Roll has not always been well cared for. Water has damaged some of the paint and in places it has been eaten by rodents. These areas have been repaired with parchment.

Two people worked on the Roll. First, a skilled heraldic painter set out and painted the shields. He used a wide and sophisticated palette of colours often employing very expensive pigments such as azurite and ultramarine. Next, a scribe added the inscriptions identifying the owner of each of the arms.

The Roll begins with the arms of eleven of the owners of the Castle from its founder Walter de Lacy to Queen Elizabeth I. Next are the arms of the President, Sir Henry Sidney, followed by the arms of the twenty-two members of the Council in the Marches of Wales appointed in 1570 which were placed on the left side of the chapel. The arms of the twelve Presidents from 1473 were placed opposite on the right side. Only eight of these appear on the Roll. The end of the roll containing the arms of the last four Presidents is lost due to past neglect.
The Order of the Garter is the most important English order of chivalry. It was founded by Edward III in 1348 and limited to twenty four members nominated by the Sovereign. The early members were largely the military leaders and companions-in-arms of Edward III.

Sir Henry Sidney was installed as a Knight of the Garter on 14th May 1564, and his enamelled stall plate with coat of arms was placed on the back of his stall at St. George’s Chapel, Windsor. Garter knights were entitled to surround their heraldic shield with the Garter. They were also expected to attend the annual service on St George’s day (23rd April) at St George’s Chapel, Windsor. However, if this was not possible, they were required to celebrate the day in their chapel or church in a service in the same form as that at Windsor.

In 1582 Sir Henry celebrated the day in Ludlow. At St Laurence’s church, Sir Henry, dressed in his Garter robes and regalia, was attended by the town councillors, officials and trade guilds of the town, also in formal attire. Banners displaying the arms of the garter knights were made and placed in the chancel and singing men came from Hereford to enlarge the choir. Afterwards the town council provided twenty sheep and an ox for the feast, and drink for the singers. This special occasion was much prized by Ludlow, since eighty years later the banners were still preserved with an inscription recording the event.
What Happened to the Heraldic Shields?

Sir Henry Sidney placed many coats of arms not only in the castle chapel but also on the walls of the Council Chamber which was adjacent to the Great Hall. These were added to, sometimes in the chapel but principally in the Council Chamber, until the abolition of the Council in the Marches of Wales in 1689.

These arms were drawn and described by a Shropshire antiquarian, William Mytton (1693-1746), Rector of Habberley. He collected material on all aspects of the county’s history and, in particular, recorded funerary monuments and coats of arms mostly found in churches throughout the county. Mytton visited Ludlow in the 1730s and recorded the arms and monuments in St Laurence’s and the Castle. He found over 250 coats of arms in the Castle most of which were displayed in four rows in the Council Chamber. Mytton also recorded a further fifty-five arms from the Castle, which had been removed to the Bull Inn in Corve Street. Most of these were displayed in the Upper Chamber or ‘best room’ of the inn.

Just thirty years after Mytton’s visit, the chapel had become so dilapidated that Sidney’s chancel had been completely demolished leaving just the 12th century round nave we still see today. The fate of the arms recorded by Mytton is unknown. All had disappeared from the Castle by 1800, while those in the Bull Inn remained there until the 1920s when it is thought they were sold to an American.

Drawings of arms in Ludlow Castle by William Mytton. The shading on the black and white drawings indicates the colours on the arms e.g. vertical lines indicate red. © Cadbury Research Library
The Death of Sir Henry and the Lead Heart Case

Sir Henry died at Worcester on 5th May 1586, and his body was taken to Penshurst, Kent, the family seat, where he was buried in the church with the full heraldic ceremony due to a Knight of the Garter. His coffin, draped in black velvet and decorated with the family coats of arms, travelled from Worcester accompanied by two heralds and over 150 mourners dressed in black. At Worcester, his bowels were interred in the Dean’s Chapel of the Cathedral, close to Prince Arthur’s chantry chapel. His heart was brought back to Ludlow to be buried at St Laurence’s church near to his daughter, Ambrosia. The practice of burying the heart, considered as the centre of religion and the seat of the affections, separately to the body, was an ancient one. It continued to be popular among noble and royal families in the mid sixteenth century. Both Henry VIII and Edward VI had their hearts buried separately.

Sir Henry’s heart was buried in a lead case, with his name on the side and a simple version of his arms on the lid. Sometime in the eighteenth century, this lead case was removed from the tomb of Ambrosia and came into the possession of the Revd. George Coningsby, Rector of Pencombe and Bodenham, near Leominster. After his death, it was owned by Samuel Nicolas, postmaster of Leominster, in 1794. It then disappeared but was acquired by the British Museum, London, at an unknown date and is now on display there.