

## **In fine fettle, like a knight ready for battle**

by Sabine Eiche

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Would you believe that relics of the Middle Ages are to be found not only in museums, but also strewn throughout our language? It's true. Some words have an amazing tenacity.

Consider the phrase to hold the purse-strings. We use it as an idiomatic expression meaning to be in charge of the money. The word purse derives from the medieval Latin "bursa," a bag or pouch. Back in the Middle Ages, money was in the form of metal coins, which were safely stored in leather bags. These bags were closed by drawing together a string threaded through the top, and only the person in control of the purse – the bursar – was authorized to loosen the purse-strings.

Because of its association with money, purse quickly became a synonym for a sum of money, such as a prize or reward. And we use the word bursary, directly linked to "bursa," to mean financial aid given to students.

Most people think of knights in armour when they think of the Middle Ages. Even if the suits of armour now stand empty, knightly words continue to reverberate among us. Several are linked to the ritual of being knighted. In that ceremony, the king tapped the knight-elect on the shoulder with the flat side of the sword and said "I now dub thee Sir Knight." The verb to dub comes from the Old French "adober," to equip with armour. We still say dub when we confer a nickname on someone, as in the recent headline, "Scottish computer whiz kid dubbed the next Bill Gates."

Towards the end of the ceremony, the knight received a pair of gilt spurs, badge of his new station in society. Our idiomatic expressions formed with spur and the meaning of the verb to spur come straight from the Middle Ages. We say someone has earned his spurs to mean that he has received his due merit. When we say a person is spurred on we mean that he is stimulated to do something, like a horse urged on – spurred – by its rider. The verb to spurn is related to spur, but with the opposite sense. To spurn someone is to reject them.

In preparation for battle the knight would don his armour, a complex process. One of the many things he wore was a kind of belt called, in Old English, a “gyrdel.” To girdle up signified to get ready to fight. We’ve kept that sense in the phrase to gird one’s loins, meaning to get ready for action. Another Old English word for girdle was “fetel.” To fettle oneself used to mean to prepare for war. Nowadays, we say someone is in fine fettle to imply they are in prime condition, like a knight ready for battle.

Hilt, the word for the handle of a sword or knife, has also survived from medieval times. A knight entering battle would be described as armed to the hilt, in other words fully armed. As with fettle, hilt has lost its martial connotations. Hence, while the expression to the hilt still means fully, we use it in contexts that have nothing to do with weapons. We say we are mortgaged to the hilt – or, on a happier note, that we are enjoying life to the hilt.