

The Peerage of the United Kingdom

The “**peerage**” (or “nobility”) of the United Kingdom is a legal system comprising both hereditary and lifetime titles, and is composed of various noble ranks, and forms part of the British “honours system”. “Peers” (or “nobles”) are given by the British monarch. The government makes recommendations to the King and the names are approved (or not) by the House of Lords.

The noble ranks (in descending order of importance) are:

1. Duke/Duchess
2. Marquess/Marchioness
3. Earl/Countess
4. Viscount/Viscountess
5. Baron/Baroness



Hereditary titles

As of 2020, there are 814 hereditary peers: 31 dukes (including 7 royal dukes), 34 marquesses, 193 earls, 112 viscounts, and 444 barons. Not all hereditary titles are titles of the peerage. For example, baronets and baronetesses may pass on their titles, but they are not peers.

Lifetime titles

“Life peers” are appointed members of the peerage whose titles cannot be inherited. Life peerages, always created at the rank of “baron”, entitle the holders to sit in the House of Lords. The children of a life peer are entitled to the title “The Honourable”, but they cannot inherit the peerage title.

Lord/Lady

The names “**Lord**” and “**Lady**” are used for people who hold titles of the peerage of the United Kingdom. When talking to peers, you must refer to them as “My Lord” or “My Lady”, or (for example) “Lord Smith” or “Lady Smith”.

1) Duke/Duchess

A “**duke**” is a member of royalty serving below an emperor or king, or it is a title that is granted to members of powerful or influential families. It is the highest hereditary title of the peerage in the UK. The word “duke” comes from the Latin “dux”, which means 'leader'. The term was used by the Romans to refer to a military commander without an official rank. A “**duchess**” is the female equivalent, and it is also used for a lady who marries a duke.

In the UK, there are currently 31 dukes. For example:

Jamie Spencer-Churchill is the 12th **Duke of Marlborough**; a relative of Sir Winston Churchill and of Princess Diana; a Duke since 2014 (title created in 1702).



2) Marquess/Marchioness

A marquess is a nobleman of high rank in various European peerages. The term is also used to translate equivalent Asian ranks, specifically from Imperial China and Imperial Japan. A marchioness is the wife or widow of a marquess, or a woman who holds the rank of marquess in her own right.

In the UK, there are currently 34 marquesses. For example:

- Nigel Paulet, 18th Marquess of Winchester (title created in 1551)
- Henry Seymour, 9th Marquess of Hertford (title created in 1793)

3) Earl/Countess

“Earl” is a rank of nobility in Britain. It is the equivalent of the European word “**Count**”. An earl is a member of the peerage, ranking below a marquess and above a viscount. A feminine form of ‘earl’ was never created, so the word “Countess” is used.

In the UK, there are currently 193 earls. For example:

- William Hastings-Bass, 17th Earl of Huntingdon (title created in 1529)
- Robert Fiennes-Clinton, 19th Earl of Lincoln (title created in 1572)

4) Viscount/Viscountess

A viscount or viscountess is a title used in the UK and some other European countries for noble people. In some countries, the title of viscount is non-hereditary; it represents an administrative or judicial position.

In the UK, there are currently 112 viscounts. For example:

- George Boscawen, 9th Viscount of Falmouth (title created in 1720)
- Henry Hood, 8th Viscount of Hood (title created in 1796)

5) Baron/Baroness

“Baron” is a rank of nobility or title of honour, sometimes hereditary, sometimes life peers, in the UK and various European countries.

In the UK, there are currently 444 barons. For example:

- Delaval Astley, 23rd Baron of Hastings (title created in 1295)
- Nancy Jane Marie Heathcote-Drummond-Willoughby, 28th Baroness of Willoughby de Eresby (title created in 1313)

Note: The titles “**Sir**”, “**Knight**” and “**Dame**” are not peerage titles, but are “**honours**” given to people who have contributed significantly to society. More details can be seen in the document “Knights & Dames”.