

From the *Transactions* of the  
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

**The Crypt of St. Nicholas Church, Bristol**

by J. F. Nicholls  
1878-79, Vol. 3, 168-181

© The Society and the Author(s)

## THE CRYPT OF ST. NICHOLAS CHURCH, BRISTOL,

By J. F. NICHOLLS, F.S.A.,

Chief Librarian of the Free Libraries, Bristol.

---

It is stated by Barrett and others that a church, dedicated to St. Nicholas, was founded in 1030 by Brihtric, Earl of Gloucester.<sup>1</sup> If so, and we see no reason to doubt the assertion, it could scarcely have been on the same site as the Church of St. Nicholas, the crypt of which forms the subject of this paper. Until sometime after A.D. 1247 the area upon which the present church stands was occupied by the great wall which surrounded the town,<sup>2</sup> and it is not probable that the Lords of the town would have suffered its defences to have been pierced and weakened, by a church constructed in the thickness of, or, perhaps, beneath the wall. That a previous church, dedicated to the same saint, did exist, probably near the present site, but on higher ground, is, however, clear.

In 1172 Robert Fitzharding gave the church of St. Nicholas to the Abbey of St. Augustine in Bristol,<sup>3</sup> and, in 1200, Robert Wombstrong,<sup>4</sup> gave his bakehouse to build a chapel to the church of St. Nicholas, which by some has been supposed to be this crypt. I need scarcely point to the style of the architecture, which is some two centuries later, as a proof that this could not be the case, and moreover as Wombstrong specially reserved "the cellar under the bakehouse" for his own use. Besides, until A.D. 1809, the adjoining part of the Avon was a tidal river, and boats, in times of flood, have sailed up to the door of the present crypt; a cellar, therefore, under its floor must have been a mere "soak-well."

<sup>1</sup> Barrett's History of Bristol, p. 494.

<sup>2</sup> See Plate vi., fig. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Barrett, 494.

<sup>4</sup> MSS., City Library.

Wherever the first church stood, this fact seems certain, that it could not, for the above reasons, have been on the site of the existing edifice.

About the middle of the 13th century, it was found desirable to extend the limits of the town<sup>1</sup> a new loopwall was built on its western side, and a broad deep trench was dug, that carried off the waters of the Frome from the foss to the Avon.

The old wall was, consequently, no longer required, and, as space was valuable in the town, it was gradually demolished, and its site used for building purposes, the foss being made into the street now known as Baldwin Street. Amongst the buildings erected on the site of this old wall, I contend, were a number of churches for the "*secular clergy*;" St. Leonard's, with its triangular gateway, built at the intersection of Baldwin, Stephen, and Corn Streets. St. Giles' Church, built over the gate at the bottom of Small Street; it was incorporated with St. Leonard's in 1301.<sup>2</sup> St. Lawrence was on the wall site adjoining the Gateway of St. John's Church, which latter still stands at the bottom of Broad Street. The Dove Tower (possibly ecclesiastical), above an archway on the wall site, leading to Aylward's Gate. St. Peter's, which stands right across the line where there was a gate of access to the Castle, and St. Stephen's Church (but not its tower) erected circa 1304, in the pomærium of the ancient wall. St. Leonard's, which was destroyed in 1770. St. Lawrence incorporated with St. John's A.D. 1580.<sup>3</sup> St. John's, and lastly, the north aisle of St. Nicholas church crypt; these were all in the direct line of the wall, and occupied each the apparent breadth thereof, viz. : from 27ft. to 28ft.

The gate opposite to Bristol Bridge (then newly built of stone) was secured for a new church of St. Nicholas, and the unevenness of the site the more readily allowed of the construction of the crypt.

I have a copy of a deed by which Walter Derby, Mayor of Bristol, gave a lamp to burn before the image of the Blessed

<sup>1</sup> Charter 24th, Henry III., see Plate VI., fig. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Evans' Chron. History, p. 71.      <sup>3</sup> Evans, fig. 289. Ibid., 156.

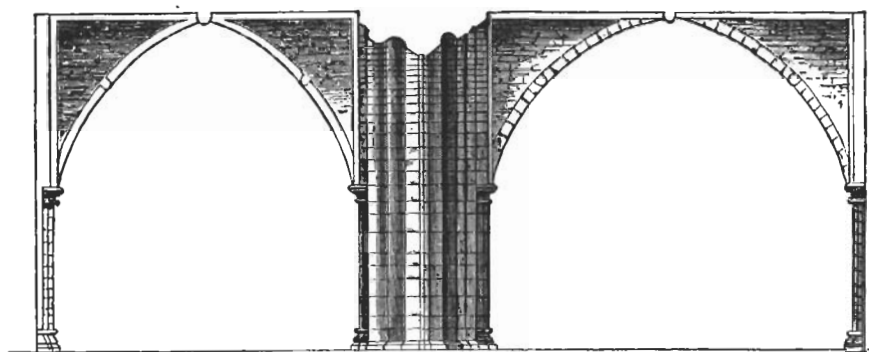
Virgin, in the crypt of St. Nicholas, for ever. This is dated 1276, but the date is, I think, erroneous, arising from a clerical error on the part of the copyist. The first mayor of this name served the office in 1363, then in 1367, 1376, 1380, and 1384.<sup>1</sup> I believe the correct date to be 1376, and if we take either of the early dates above stated as the period of the erection of the crypt to which the lamp was given, we shall find, I think, that the style of the architecture of the north, or earliest, portion, agrees with that period (see engraving, p.172). I conclude, therefore, that it was built immediately after the first half of the 14th century, although, probably, an earlier church occupied the site from the middle of the 13th.

A more recent examination has revealed a small portion of the vaulting of this former church. At the extreme east end of the fourth bay of the north aisle is part of a crypt destroyed to make the High Street. Above the arch thrown to carry the street, is found a fragment of vaulting small but enough to prove that the present crypt was a later addition, built up against an earlier structure. The heights of the roofs do not coincide. There is one cross-rib of the older building—this does not spring from the clustered shaft, but from a spot in the north wall, now built up in the arch of the roadway. The mouldings of this rib are larger and earlier, and the rib itself is about double the size of those in the present crypt, and the vaulting appears to have been waggon-shaped.

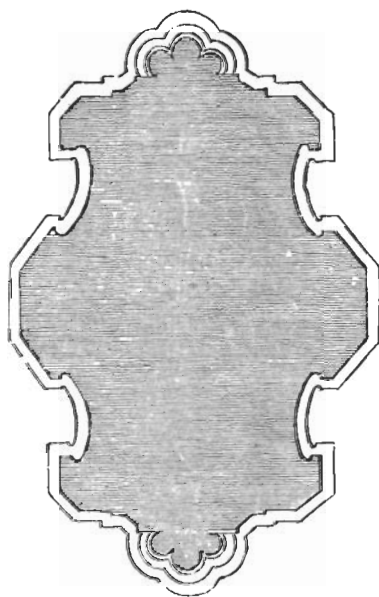
The beginning of a central rib running eastward can be seen, and at the junction is a truly magnificent cross, with the head of Edward II. The fine aquiline nose, delicate lined mouth, three spiralled beard, and flowing hair, resemble the same points of his effigy in Gloucester Cathedral. Seen from the floor this head has the appearance of a ram's horn head-dress; on closer examination it is found that the curves are formed by four maned beasts, like lions, two face each other on either side of the frontal bone, their bodies curve round behind the ears of the effigy, two others join them and curve round to the chin and beard, where they face each other. This vault must be that fifth vault, described by William of Worcester, which is not shown on the accompanying plan

<sup>1</sup> Ricart's Calendar, pp. 35-6.

CHURCH OF ST. NICHOLAS, BRISTOL.

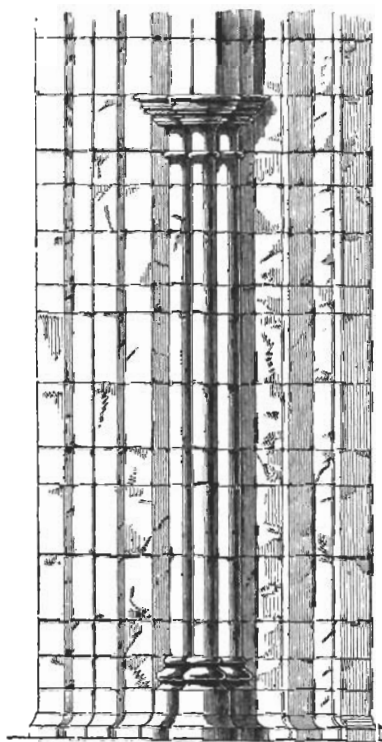


TRANSVERSE SECTION.



P 171 (172 is blank)

Plan



and Elevation of Pier in Crypt.

(p. 178). It occupied, probably, a greater area than the blank space with the stone coffin in its N.E. corner.

On the key rib of the first groining of the west side of the south aisle, of somewhat later date, is the head of Queen Phillipa, and on the south tierceron key, that of, apparently, Edward III.; Pryce<sup>1</sup> has taken exception to this *tradition*, saying that neither the character of the head-dress nor the style of the architecture agrees with the period in which she lived. The head-dress is, however, the same, though somewhat shortened, as shewn in her effigy in Westminster Abbey; and as she died in 1370, she was contemporary with the introduction of the perpendicular style of architecture. Assuming Walter Derby's gift to be really 1376, it is highly probable that the work of the crypt was begun in her lifetime, and the south aisle finished after her decease. Neither is it unreasonable to suppose that so great a benefactor as this Queen was to the town of Bristol should have her memory perpetuated in this roof, as it was in several other churches in the town.

Error clings to the history of this crypt and church. Barrett<sup>2</sup> says, in A.D. 1503, Thomas Knappe, then Mayor, gave £20 to the church of St. Nicholas, and the mistake has been copied by recent historians. Thomas Knappe was Mayor in 1387 in 1400, and in 1404<sup>3</sup>, and it was at the second date he made the gift. His name does not again occur as Mayor.

Those who are familiar with the history of Bristol will remember the fierce internecine strife that prevailed in the period from 1250 to 1350, between the burgesses and their feudal Lords, and that from 1312 to 1316 the towns folk were in arms against their king in defence of their privileges, during which time they built another short wall between their town and the castle, only yielding when 20,000 men surrounded them. Their communication with the sea was cut off, and their walls were shattered by the battering rams of the besiegers; this will account for the apparently slow progress of the church building within these dates.

<sup>1</sup> Pryce, p. 273.      <sup>2</sup> Barrett, p. 494.

<sup>3</sup> Seyer's Memoirs, cap. xiv., 2-25.

<sup>3</sup> Ricart, pp. 36-7.

The crypt was a favourite place of interment, probably on account of its being the chapel of the Holy Ghost.<sup>1</sup> Formerly the inner walls were surrounded with stone coffins, and on the floor were a large number of incised slabs. In 1821 a stone coffin was exhumed, having on the lid a fine sculptured cross, above which was a partly obliterated mask or face, and around the edge an imperfect inscription. Enough remained to shew that the coffin contained the remains of Richard le Draper, and Mabel his wife, interred in 1311. On its being opened a perfect male skeleton was found, and at his feet a skull with some fragments of bones, probably those of the woman, whose body appeared to have been burnt to admit of her remains being deposited in the same coffin with those of her husband.

This interment shews that the ground was consecrated if it was not built upon, before the date commonly given for the Perpendicular era, and not long after the demolition of the wall. Of course the coffin may have been brought from some earlier structure.

The elder Robert Thorne, by will, desired to be buried in this crypt with his wife. He died, however, in London, when in attendance on Parliament as Burgess for Bristol, and was buried in the Temple Church, London, wherein Hakluyt says "stood his monument. bearing a Latin inscription," of which the last clause is to this effect: "By will he devised certain property for the erection,<sup>2</sup> foundation, continuance, and supportation of a Free School of Grammar to be established in Bristol.<sup>3</sup> His sons, Robert and Nicholas, with Master Goodryche, his executor, carried out his bequest, Robert adding considerably thereunto. His will, dated 20th January, 1517, is very interesting. He bequeaths his body to the "hollie churches grave in the crowde of Sent Nicholas Church," also, I will have, he says, a good priest to pray for my sowle in Sent Nicholas Church vj. yeres, and he to have vj. li. a yere." He names his sons Nicholas and Robert, and Joanna his wife; to the latter he gives £200 in ready money, and

<sup>1</sup> Barrett, 497.      <sup>2</sup> Hakluyt, p. 220.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Thorne's Deed Poll, July, 1561.

200 ounces of plate. "Also," he says, "I bequeath to Sent Nicholas Church, where my bodie shall be buried, a howse that I bought of John Colas, that house in Nicholas Street."

Joanna Thorne, who survived her husband, on her death, gave to the Church of St. Nicholas a suit of vestments, of black velvet, to honour God and St. Nicholas with, and "that I may be prayed for every Sunday. If the said vestments be hyred out to any place, then I wish to be received for the loan of them 10 shillings sterling, of the which, I will 8 shillings to be given immediately to the four orders of Fryars of thys towne, and that restithe to St. Nicholas Church;" and to the same church she bequeathed pair of gilt silver candle-sticks, weighing eighty-seven ounces.<sup>1</sup>

As the patron saint of this church was also the patron saint of Children, the Boy Bishop and his companions had their chief services here at St. Nicholas's-tide. The Mayor and his brethren seem to have been ready at all times to take part, as a matter of right and custom, in the popular festivals and plays of the age. Indeed it is prescribed in the Bye-laws for their government: "on St. Nicholas day, (6th December,) all join in the festival of the Boy Bishop." On St. Nicholas Eve the Maire, and Shiref, and their brethern to walk to Scynt Nicholas Church, there to hire their even-song; and on the morrowe to hire their masse and offre, and hire the bishop's sermon, and have his blessing; and after dyner the said Maire and Shireff, and their brethern to assemble at the mairez counter, there waytyng the Bishoppes comming, pleyng the meane whiles at Dyce, the towne clerke to finde theym Dyce, and to have 1d. of every Raphile; and when the bishope is come thedir, his chapell there to syng, and the bishope to give them his blessing, and then he and all his chapell to be seured there with brede and wyne. And so departe the Maire, Shiref, and their brethern to hire the Bishope's Evesonge, at Seynt Nicholas church forseid."<sup>2</sup> In the records of St. Nicholas there are numerous entries with reference to the festival of the

<sup>1</sup> Smith's Guilds, p. 442.

<sup>2</sup> Ricart's Kalendar, pp. 80, 81. Those who have visited Salisbury

Boy Bishop, shewing the importance attached to it. A.D. 1520, paid for hanging of the church at St. Nicholas-tyde, and for meat and drynke, xijd; paid to the mynstrells, xijd. There are other entries for dressing up the Bishop's stall, and general instructions are given to dress up the Bishop's gate against St. Nicholas day, under pain of ijd.<sup>1</sup> On the following day they attend the Church of St. Nicholas for a different purpose: "Item, upon the morowe of Seynt Nicholas day, hit hath been vsid the Bailliffs of Bristowe to make deliuerce of the Towne ray lyverceis vnto all thoficers of the same, in maner and forme followyng: that is to say, to the Toune Clerk, xlij. rayes, and as moche pleyne cloth accordyng,"<sup>2</sup> and to the other officers in proportion.

William, of Worcester, thus describes the church:—"Via ab ecclesia sancti Nicholai cum gressibus areae dictae ecclesiae ad introitum ecclesiae voltae vocatae le crowd, cum spacio latitudinis volte de dicta ecclesia arcus ac spacio latitudine, 20 gressibus,"<sup>3</sup> Cathedral, will perhaps remember the tomb of a Boy Bishop who died during his ephemeral episcopacy.

NOTE:—There is considerable doubt as to diminutive effiges, in which the proportions and costume are those of a man, representing children. See a Memoir by Mr. W. S. Walford, on a cross-legged effigy at Horsted Keynes, Sussex. (Archæol. Journal, vol. III., p. 234.) Mr. Walford remarks: "an effigy is *primâ facie* to be considered as representing that, to which, having regard to the costume and general appearance, it bears most resemblance, irrespectively of its size; for it is unreasonable from size alone to infer that it was not intended for a full grown person."

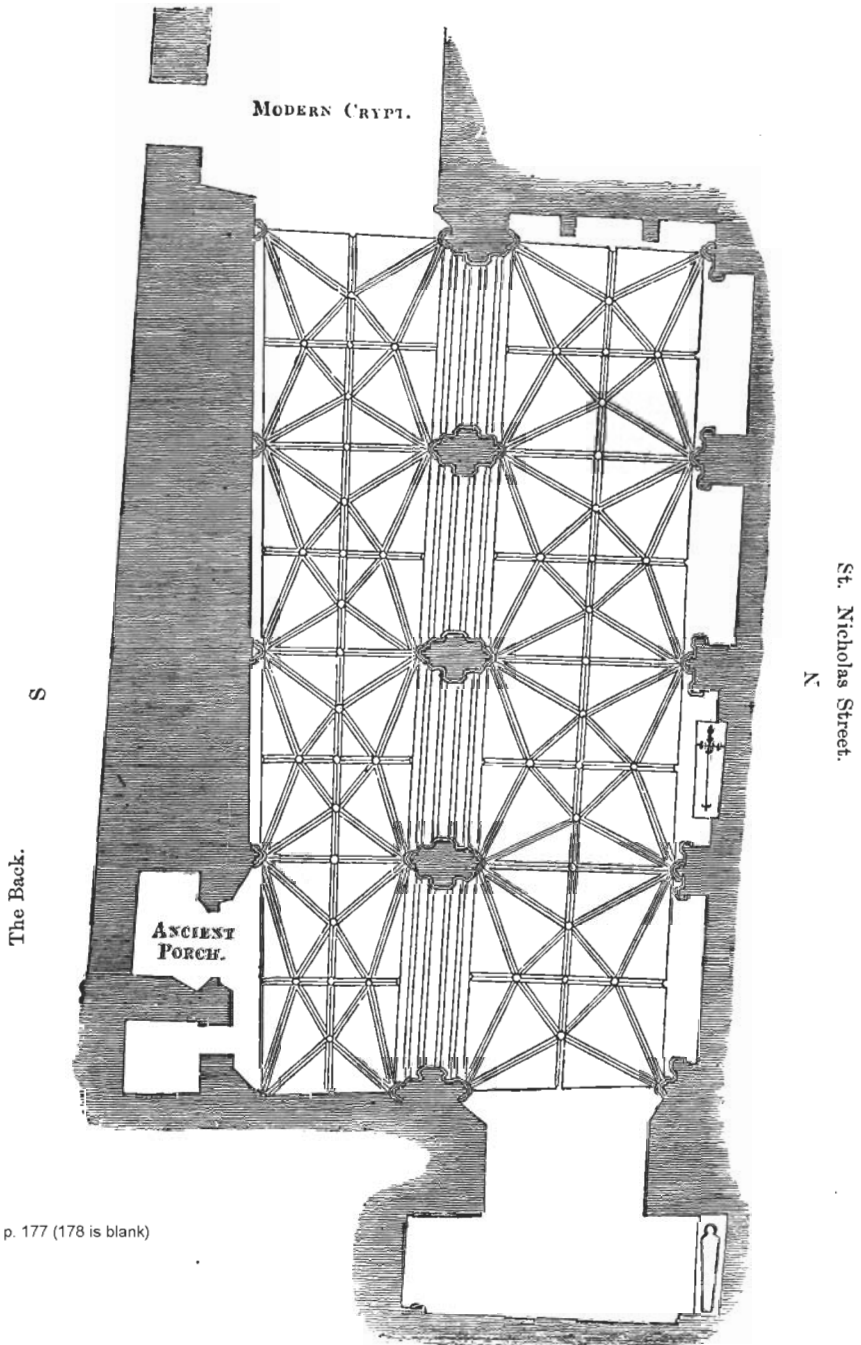
Thus a small effigy, apparently of a knight or priest, is "to be taken as representing an adult; for till a certain age knighthood and priests orders were not usually conferred; and we have no reason *a priori* to expect to meet with an effigy of a child attired as a knight or priest," and he adds: the "story of the Boy Bishop at Salisbury Cathedral needs confirmation." See also notes on the same subject, by Mr. John Gough Nichols, in the Introduction to the Boy Bishop's sermons, pp. xxviii., xxix. (Camden Miscel., vol. VII.) Mr. Nichols, says: "In many cases there is no doubt the diminutive effigy was placed *where the heart of the deceased was deposited* and one of the full size where the body was interred," and he cites several instances. Of this class doubtless were the two small effiges found at Bitton, in which excavation beneath the effiges did not disclose any interment. (See ante p. 34)—ED.

<sup>1</sup> St. Nicholas Crypt, Bristol, by John Taylor, Esq., printed in Journal of Archæological Association.

<sup>2</sup> Ricart's Calendar, p. 81.

<sup>3</sup> The gressus was two thirds of a yard, says Dallaway. Query, was not the Roman step 2ft. 6in.?—ED.

CHURCH OF ST. NICHOLAS, BRISTOL.



MODERN CRYPT.

ANCIENT CRYPT.

S

St. Nicholas Street.  
N

The Back.

p. 177 (178 is blank)

ANCIENT CRYPT.—Scale,  $\frac{1}{32}$ th of an inch to the foot.

ad descensum voltæ de la crowde ultradict, 20 gressus prætio, 2 virgas, Tamen longitudo tocius voltæ cum duobus alis ex numero, 5 Pillerys archuatis continet 12 virgas, et 5 magnæ columpnæ ac 5 archus sunt in dictæ criptæ 5 volta. Item turris quadratus campanilis ecclesiæ predictæ continet 5 virgas et omne parte.”

“The breadth of the crypt called *le crowd*, with the two aisles arched with the number of five pillars, measures 12 yards, and five great pillars and five arches are in the said crypt, or vault. Also the square belfry tower measures 5 yards on every side.”<sup>1</sup> The length of the crowd of St. Nicholas measures (besides the chapel, with seven yards for the chapel of Holy Cross) 31 yards; its breadth measures 12 yards, 1½ feet. The spire was constructed of wood, and covered with lead, the pieces jointed and let into one another, which William of Worcester calls: *Magnum pinaculum sive spera mearenno (mearemio, timber?) elevato, cum plumbo cooperto.*<sup>2</sup> There were six bells in the tower; and the great clock bell was fixed in the steeple above the rest, with an inscription and the date 1396. After Prince Rupert had captured the city in A.D. 1643, Lord Percy, his General of Artillery, claimed the whole of the church bells of Bristol, with which he cast cannon. This bell, doubtless, shared in the general fate.

The accompanying illustration (p. 178) accurately shews the remains of the ancient Crypt now existing, and the discrepancy between it, and the description given by William of Worcester, is accounted for, ante p. 170.

The present crypt was independent of the church above. It had its own procurators, or wardens, distinct from those of the church, and its own special endowments, possessing in this respect, besides the endowments of seven chantries, eight houses in Baldwin Street, Nicholas Street, and Broadmead.<sup>3</sup> The upper church is

<sup>1</sup> Dallaway, *Antiq. of Bristowe*, p. 77.

<sup>2</sup> Dallaway *Antiq. Bristowe*, p. 138.

<sup>3</sup> There would seem to be some misapprehension here. We have appended to this the certificate, made by the Commissioners appointed to make a Return of Colleges, Chantries, &c. within the Counties of Gloucester and Bristol, from which it appears, that, at the time these foundations were

called in the Proctor's book, the "High Church." The existing records of the crypt begin in 1489; among the obits was one "For all good doers," on Holy Rood eve (13 September). On this occasion attended 12 priests, including two clerks, who were paid collectively 3s. 8d. The religious office ended, as usual, there was a feast, for which cakes and ale were supplied in abundance. In 1523, as much as 18 bushels of wheat, at 18½ a bushel, were consumed; and besides the expense of butter, saffron, &c., 6s. 8d. is charged for baking, with the addition of a Holy Rood Eve at the bakehouse, the cost of a dinner for the priests, and 14s. for ale.<sup>1</sup>

In the ordinances for the observance of Christmas, at Bristol, in the reign of Edward IV., the Mayor was ordered to make proclamation on the market day next before Christmas, or else on Christmas eve: "That no manner of person, of what degree or condition that they be of, go a mumming with close visages, nor go after Curfew rung at St. Nicholas without light in their hands, that is to say sconce light, and that they go in no wise with weapon defensibly arrayed, whereby the king's peace may be in any mannerwise broken or hurt, and that upon pain of imprisonment abolished and their revenues seized into the King's hands, in connection with the *parish* of St. Nicholas, there were six such foundations only, whereof one, the Chapel of the Fraternity of the Assumption of Our Lady, was a separate Gild Chapel, distant a "Butte Shotte" from the parish church. It was situate on the bridge, towards the maintenance and sustentation of which its endowments were chiefly applied (see No. 6). The certificate is dated 14th Feb., 2 Edw. vj. (1547-8). The good objects to which the endowments were applied did not preserve it from plunder.

Appertaining to the Crypt itself, there would appear to have been *only one* endowment which amounted to £6 12s. 8d. per annum, and which, according to another certificate (No. 21), was thus appropriated:—

For a Priest to sing Divine Service .. .. .	10s.	per annu.
For an Obit ... .. .	4s.	"
For a Sexton's Wages ... .. .	7s.	"
For Rents resolute .. .. .	11s.	"
For Bailiff's Fee ... .. .	6s.	8d. "
	<hr/>	
	£6 12s.	8d.

These certificates are of great interest and are well worth printing.--ED.

<sup>1</sup> St. Nicholas Crypt, Bristol, by John Taylor, Esq., printed in the Journal of the Archaeological Association.

and making fine and ransome to the king." In 1481, Curfew was ordered to be rung with one bell at nine in the evening, for half a quarter of an hour, under pain of two pence. The Curfew is still rung at St. Nicholas, at nine o'clock every evening.<sup>1</sup>

The passage over the old bridge, and through the gate of St. Nicholas, in consequence of the increase of the traffic, had, in the middle of the last century, become inconvenient and dangerous; consequently, in 1762, the gate was removed, and the church also down to the vaulting of the crypt. It was slowly re-built, being finished only in 1769.

Besides the benefactors to the city of Bristol, whom we have before mentioned, we ought to notice Alderman John Whitson, who was twice Mayor, and four times represented the city in parliament.<sup>2</sup> He was the founder of the "Redmaid's" School. He died in 1629, and was buried in the crypt; and there are two monuments to his memory erected at different periods. One is beneath the Tower at the west end of the church, the other in the crypt. The latter was erected in 1741. It bears an effigy, which is remarkable as shewing a cut in the face, and commemorates an attempt to murder him by a man named Callowhill, the alderman having given him offence by an award which he gave against him in some dispute.

<sup>1</sup> St. Nicholas Crypt, Bristol.

<sup>2</sup> Nicholls's Life of Whitson.