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**Notes on the West Front of St. James, Parochial, formerly Priory,  
Church**

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NOTES ON THE WEST FRONT  
OF ST. JAMES', PAROCHIAL, FORMERLY PRIORY,  
CHURCH, BRISTOL.

By SIR JOHN MACLEAN, F.S.A., &c.

THE west front of the church of St. James is very interesting and remarkable. The façade is divided into four stories by string-courses. The lower of which is built of strong rubble masonry,<sup>1</sup> with buttresses of milestone grit at the angles of ashlar work in Dundry stone. The north buttress had a new buttress built against it to strengthen it, about 40 years ago, but the upper part of the Norman buttress appears above it, and on the top of it are the remains of a pinnacle of the same original work. The upper part of the southern buttress may also be seen above the buildings erected against it. In this story is a circular-headed Norman door, with segmental arch, having a tympanum within it. This doorway has been re-worked. The second story contains an arcade of nine intersecting arches of varying width. The centre one, being the widest, is pierced as a window, as are also the two adjoining ones, whilst the others on each side, which are much narrower, have pointed arches, and are unpierced. The arches, which are enriched with chevron mouldings, rest upon slender shafts with cushioned capitals. The string-course above this story separating it from the next, is of the same height as the eaves of the building. In this third story is a very remarkable circular window in the gable, and above the third string-course, which is of a lighter character, is a long narrow window, now glazed, but, probably, originally constructed for ventilation, and above it a small sculptured ornament.

<sup>1</sup> It is not improbable that this rubble masonry may be an indication that the buildings on the ground floor originally extended further westward, for it is scarcely likely that this rough work was exposed to view as a base of the more ornate work above; moreover, the wall is not pierced for windows.

The circular window has been described and figured on many occasions, but never, except in one instance, accurately. Probably this has arisen in consequence of the height of the window and the decayed state of the stone-work. Pryce, in his *History of Bristol*, writes: "The circular window, near the summit of this gabled west-front, is both rare in design and elegant in execution. In it is seen the germ of those beautiful and elaborate Catherine-wheel windows, one of which is inserted over the entrance to the

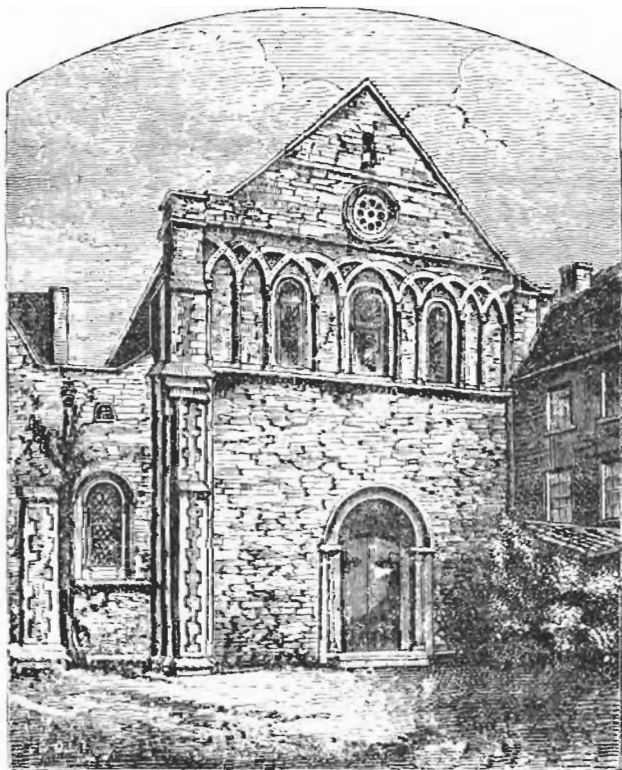
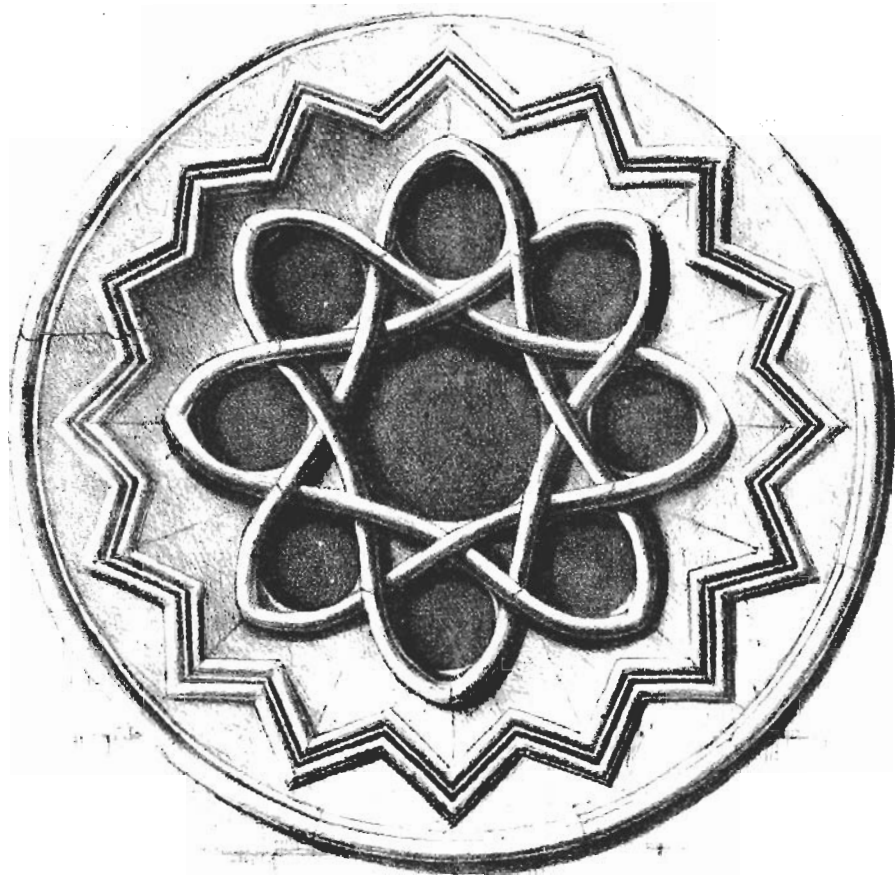


FIG. 1.

Mayor's chapel." Barrett describes it (p. 387) as "a pretty gothic window," an expression which naturally leads to the inference that it is constructed in the pointed style of architecture, instead of which, upon examination, it is found not to possess a single feature of that beautiful style of building, but it is in every particular

ANCIENT WINDOW  
— IN —  
ST JAMES'S PAROCHIAL, FORMERLY PRIORY CHURCH,  
BRISTOL. CIR. 1130.



0 1 2 3 4 Feet

J. LAVARS, DEL.  
1878

decidedly Anglo-Norman. In Chilcott's Bristol is an illustration just as far removed from being accurate. Mr. John Taylor, in his *Book about Bristol*, writes of it as "a small but beautiful rose-window," and the same author, in *Bristol Past and Present*, describes it as "a small but exquisite wheel-window of the same date (Norman), and the elevation of this front is there given (see *fig. 1*).<sup>1</sup> The same author, in his *Notes on the Architecture of the Middle Ages in Bristol*, refers to it as "a very curious circular window," nevertheless, the illustration which he gives of it is in every feature of its tracery totally unlike the original.

The most correct illustration, generally, of the west front of this church, and of the window in question, will be found in the beautiful engraving No. 1. in the abortive work of Messrs. Burder, Hine, and Godwin, entitled *The Architectural Antiquities of Bristol*, of which, unfortunately, one number only was printed in 1851.

Our attention was specially directed to this window by Mr. John Lavars, of 51, Broad Street, Bristol, who kindly favoured us with a sketch of it which he had made some time ago,<sup>2</sup> and to Mr. Lavars we are indebted for the illustration (*Pl. III*). Some of the details in Mr. Lavars' sketch not appearing quite satisfactory, it occurred to us that possibly Mr. T. S. Pope, architect, Bristol, might have a drawing, and on applying to that gentleman we found that he had one very carefully made to scale from a scaffold at the same level, which he very obligingly placed at our disposal for the correction of the original sketch, and this, as corrected, forms the illustration referred to above.

Mr. Lavars, a short time ago, in looking over Ruskin's *Stones of Venice*, noticed an ornament on the archivolt in St. Mark's Church, Venice, which, in his opinion, is exactly identical with the window in question. He thought it remarkable that the same design should occur in St. Mark's Church and St. James, both being built at the same time, the early part of the 12th century,

<sup>1</sup> For the use of this wood-cut we are indebted to the obliging courtesy of Mr. J. W. Arrowsmith, Publisher.

<sup>2</sup> It will be observed that the reticulation consists of three equal trefoils formed of one interlacing ribbon, and Mr. Lavars suggests that it may symbolize the Trinity in Unity.

and at so great a distance from each other. Mr. Lavars thereupon sent a sketch of St. James' window to Mr. Ruskin, and requested to be favoured with his opinion as to whether the design is Byzantine or Anglo-Norman. Mr. Ruskin replied: "I can offer no conjecture as to the origin of the design, it is indeed like a Byzantine reticulation, but the resemblance is probably accidental. I can easily credit a Norman builder with the ingenuity of it."

There cannot, we think, be any doubt that the whole façade is Transition-Norman of the first quarter of the 12th century.

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