

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

Bristol City Coat of Arms

by F. Were
1901, Vol. 24, 136-141

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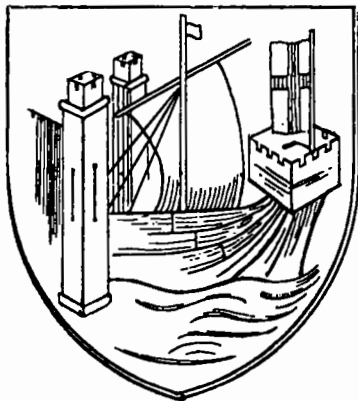
BRISTOL CITY COAT OF ARMS.

By F. WERE.

THE origin of this paper is the publication by the Council of Bristol, comparatively lately, of the city's *Little Red Book*, in which is the *facsimile* of a Charter granted by Edward III. in 1373 (vol. i., p. 115), thus constituting the town a county. Now, on its illuminated capital letter, hanging by a cord, is a heater shield, terribly blurred. I have not seen the original, but this is evidently a very carefully executed copy, sufficiently clear to prove its heraldic character; and as I cannot find any earlier blazon, all earlier forms that are engraved being round and therefore seals, it is very valuable as a starting-point for this discussion.

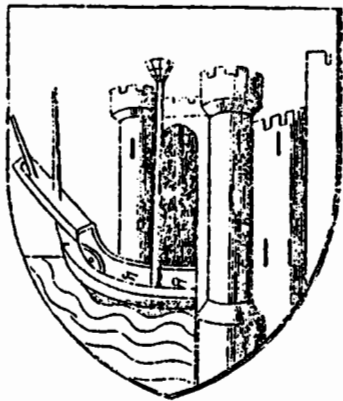
I have chosen three examples as types for blazoning, which seem to have been in use, but shall allude to others while analysing these separately, first stating that as regards the tincturing there seems to be no ground for thinking that it has varied much; only in its disposition at different eras has there been any change.

I. The shield on the Charter at once shows an especial



difference from the modern ones; the annexed illustration, being a sketch from the original MS., supplied by Mr. Arrowsmith, certainly brings out greater details, in that the castle is on the dexter side. This would be its proper position, as it was on the right bank of the river. The sketch makes it have two bastions in close perspective, the parapets are corbelled out and machicolated, but it shows no foreshore such as the *Red Book* would lead one to suppose. The ship, of bold design for such an early date, of which about half is visible, is issuing from between the bastions, with one mast flying a pennon, and its rigging, whilst it carries a square sail set to port; it has a bold bluff bow bearing a true forecastle which carries a Jack and flag charged with a cross, say St. George's; it rests upon water of barry wavy lines: the *Red Book* leaves almost all these details to the imagination. The heraldic reading would be: "Gules issuing sinisterways from a castle argent masonried sable, part of a ship or, rigging and part of mast of the third, sail, pennon, and flag of the second, the last charged with a cross? of the first, in base water, barry wavy of six silver and azure." This would seem to imply that the river flowed between the two bastions, so it looks as if the entrance from the Frome was intended, though not yet turned into a regular gate.

II. This next escutcheon appears in Seyer, i. 378, who



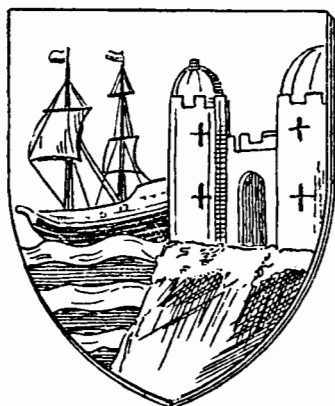
says the original is in Robert Ricart's picture of the ceremony of admitting a new mayor about 1480. Now the first thing that strikes one is that the castle has changed its position on the shield during the past hundred years. But is it the castle? No, it is the water-gate, as the blazon plainly shows, with its darkened archway, out of which the ship is coming. Can it be that during that period the water-gate was built, or generally used for the passage of ships up the Frome, and therefore this was considered the most appropriate charge? But why was its position changed? Simply because it was the only way of picturing the scene which actually took place; viz., that the ship had to turn to starboard, which she is actually beginning to do in the blazon, so as to leave port, which could not be so pictured on the dexter side. Unfortunately, the heraldic blazon is outraged, as only the bow with its sprit and jack, or foremast, and the large top of the mast, unless the archway may be tricked sable, is on tincture, the rest being upon metal. What strikes one is, that there is no foreshore, the further bastion being in the water, and that there are no sails or rigging; also that the mast could not pass through the gate, the turrets are not yet domed, and the water is "barry wavy of five."

Adjoining this last shield on the same plate are two more, showing the successive artist's license employed on them, the first being the arms as appearing on a Grant by Queen Elizabeth: by "Grant," I do not know whether Seyer means a "Patent of arms," or only illuminated roll, but it contains the first mention of a crest, as well as supporters (p. 380), and so is very valuable; therefore one can but conclude that it had a Herald's authority. This is the one evidently reproduced in the *Book of Public Arms*, though the engravings are not identical, and I am inclined to think Seyer's the more correct. But there evidently has been here an honest attempt to reconcile the artistic and the heraldic views. Instead of the archway between the two bastions, a very singular slit has been made in the further turret bastion,

evidently with the idea of making the ship on the field, thus leaving only a very narrow streak of metal upon metal. The ship has fore and main masts, bowsprit, sails, rigging, and very high forecastle; the water-gate is treated as stated; the turrets are domed with a pennant on each, thus copying the view of the water-gate printed on plate (p. 380); the foreshore appears now in the shape of an heraldic mount, so that the base of the coat is strictly "party per pale." But the dexter water is curiously blazoned, looking more like fragments of "barry wavy"; or it might be fish or water-fowl, which I suppose would have to be read proper; but it is certainly not a seascape, as in the *Public Book of Arms*. It would, of course, be quite impossible for the ship to come out of the archway as its masts are throughout the escutcheon. The second, taken from Millerd's works, 1670—1700, shows the ship with two masts visible, and the shrouds of the third almost filling the narrow port as in the last; it has top and lower sails, one on each mast bent and furled, while each carries a flag charged "quarterly argent and gules," which would not be heraldic; the bowsprit and forecastle are non-existent, there not being room in the shield, but its rigging extends to the outside; the water-gate's domed turrets have been ribbed and flattened on top, more like Imperial crowns, and each carries a double pennant, gules with a Canton argent, not heraldic. The mount has become boulder cliffs reaching into the dexter half, and the water has returned to its "barry wavy," though in this case of eight. This quick change looks almost as if it was done by authority. To show that water was generally represented by "barry wavy" we have the "gorges" of the Gorges coat as an example, which is "azure," and what might be called "barry mazey argent, a whirlpool."

The Bristol farthing, 1652, shows a three-masted ship coming out of a coved archway, which would not violate the heraldic law. This has no mount and very little water; but being a stamp, it could not be said to set a type.

III. I come now to the last example: this is given on



the title-page of Barrett's *History of Bristol*, 1789. Here the water-gate idea is abolished, it having become a castle on a very pronounced mount—quite a cliff, suggestive of St. Vincent's rocks,—the real castle, and I suppose its water-gate, having been demolished previous even to the last shield mentioned. It has the top of the domes finishing in a knob and no pennants; the ship may be a three-master, the mizen being hidden by the castle, and is full-rigged, outward bound; the water is "barry wavy of six argent and azure," both it and the field being heraldically lined. The Armory and Papworth's reading must have been taken from one somewhat similar to this, as they give the masts and rigging "sable," which might be correct if they were on the sails; whereas they certainly ought to be "or," as the sails would be argent on the gules field. All this has been caused no doubt by the change of position of the ship.

Crest.—This usually appears on a wreath. This arrangement, of course, is an anomaly, for the wreath is part of the helmet, and is the moulding that hides the junction of the crest and helmet; therefore it is like cutting a slice off the latter. But it seems very difficult to see how a city could wear a helmet. If it was intended for its mayor, he was a man of peace, and did all his fighting by deputy;

and it is still harder in modern times, seeing that it might have to be altered every year according to the rank of the mayor. Surely a more suitable structure to ensign the crest would be either one of the old gateways in a walled city, or else the gable or pediment of its town-hall in a modern one.

To sum up, seeing that the castle has vanished, and with it the water-gate, so that the mediæval varieties of the city arms bear no longer any relation to fact, and present the absurdities of a camel going through the eye of a needle, as well as an outrage of heraldic law, it would be an advantage (though, of course, it would be an annoying one for a time) to revert to the earliest form as used in Edward III.'s Charter, but this would require a new Grant.
