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# Flowers in Stone As Applied to the Church Architecture of Bristol

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# FLOWERS IN STONE AS APPLIED TO THE CHURCH ARCHITECTURE OF BRISTOL.

### BY IDA M. ROPER, F.L.S.

WHEN visiting our ancient churches or mediæval buildings in order to enjoy the beauties or interests preserved within them, one of the points certain to attract the antiquary is the carved stonework, whether in window, capital, corbel, or roof. Much may be learnt from such carvings, as the workman who executed them gave clear indication of the art that was familiar to him, and showed thereby the century in which he lived and the civilisation which surrounded him.

Apart from mouldings and figures, the ornamentation to be obtained by foliage was early recognised, in fact as soon as buildings of stone were erected for important public purposes. Going back to the period of the sculptured temples of Egypt and Assyria, there survive amongst the ruins representations of trees and vines used in decorative scenes, while in the Bible the references to the ornaments shaped after flowers and fruits are too numerous to detail. Amongst the larger plants we know that about the walls and doors of Solomon's temple were carvings of the palm with rows of pomegranates on the capitals.[1]

The acanthus leaves crowning the columns in Greek buildings of the Corinthian order are familiar to all, and these, with some leaves of water plants, were copied by the Romans nearly as beautifully, until the art of carving was overlooked in the Dark Ages.

In England, of the few Anglo-Saxon churches remaining, only that one at Britford, near Salisbury, shows any ornaments of foliage, and in this instance, and on Acca's Cross at

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[1] I Kings vi. 29, and vii. 20.

Hexham, the whole of the decoration is floral, with bunches of grapes and tendrils. The Norman buildings, however, of the many religious orders were decorated in parts by carvings inspired by examples from the vegetable kingdom.

This became marked at the close of the Norman period, from A.D. 1175 to A.D. 1200, when designs based on Roman models were common on capitals. Even at that early date the carvers or masons living in England were influenced by their surroundings, and here and there on capital or corbel the young fronds of the bracken fern can be recognised as they uncurl in the early spring, and the large arrow-headed leaves of the cuckoo-pint or wild arum, as carved in the spandrels of the triforium of Wells Cathedral.

It belongs rather to the architect to follow the changing style from A.D. 1200 to A.D. 1275, the century in which foliage and sometimes flowers were freely used for ornamentation in our cathedrals and churches, but in nearly all of them the marked characteristic of the period is the conventional, rather than the naturalistic treatment of the plants used as models. Although the foliage was thus altered in passing through the hands and mental vision of the masons, it is possible to easily recognise from their distinctive but conventionalised shapes the clusters of rounded leaves inspired by the campanula (the blue-bell of Scotland), the common plantain of our gardens and the trefoil. The vine leaf of course, is twisted over capital and boss, carrying on its symbolical meaning from the time of the early Fathers, and another leaf constantly met with is that of the holy herb, now known to us as the yellow avens, or herb bennet.

For many centuries this plant was looked upon by the monks and herbalists as a potent plant to protect human beings from the influence of evil spirits, and to cure their bodies of many ills, earning thereby the name of Herba Benedicta. The small leaves in nature are deeply cut into three rounded lobes, but in the conventional carving they are shown nearly separated into three leaflets.

Good examples of it are seen in the Elder Lady Chapel of Bristol Cathedral amongst the fancy sculptures on the Purbeck columns and the moulded archivolt, and again on the corbels of the entrance doorway into the Hospital of St. Bartholomew at the foot of Christmas Steps, Bristol.

A three-leaved decoration was much favoured in all religious buildings in the South of England at this period, because the three lobes were suggested by, or emblematic of the Holy Trinity.

The only flower that seems to have been used at this period is the rose, which was early associated with Christ the Saviour, and became so common in English buildings as an emblem of the kingly power of the Tudor sovereigns. The south doorway of Iffley Church, near Oxford, dating from the beginning of the thirteenth century, shows a good example of its use in the moulding.

When it comes to considering the general application of flowers and foliage as ornaments for the various parts of the church buildings, it has to be remembered that almost without exception they were placed there solely for decorative purposes and not as symbols, and hence it follows that an intimate connection existed between the plants and the styles of architecture to which they were applied. When Decorative architecture flourished flowers were studied and copied for the effects produced, and when at the end of the fourteenth century the Perpendicular style was in favour the foliage ornament was largely abandoned, and the plain, deep-cut mouldings took its place.

The reason why such a close association of the similar ornaments existed in buildings in different parts of the country is answered by recalling that, at the period now under consideration, there were no architects such as are recognised at the present day, whose art is occupied in planning, making drawings and superintending. The work was in those days carried on by officers often called " masters of masonry," who not only designed the building and its decoration, but carved these with their own hands, helped no doubt by other craftsmen that put into rough shape the ideas of the master.

It seems certain that such workers were closely bound together in schools of carving which flourished where suitable stone was found, such as at Ham Hill by Yeovil, Doulting by Wells, and the Isle of Purbeck in Dorset. Each monastery probably had also a permanent staff of workmen attached to it, and by some means not clearly known the bands of workmen were in touch with each other to make known the designs, and to keep up a uniformity of style in the ornament. Only in such a way can the use of the similar foliage and flowers be accounted for at the same limited periods in many different parts of England.

When regarded from a botanist's point of view, the leaves of those plants already named—the campanula, plantain, trefoil and herb bennet—that were used at this early period, are found to be of species with small leaves and a well-marked stalk and central rib. These two characteristics of the leaves treated in a conventional manner rendered them specially suitable for the designs of the carver, who desired to decorate the capitals in such a way that the leaves appeared to be growing around them, rather than placed there to cover a blank space, and the knowledge of how to adapt the plants to this style was still on trial.

Having experimented to produce these small conventional ornaments, the craftsman passed on to more complicated productions, which show from the ease with which the different leaves and flowers can be recognised that he had gone more and more to Nature herself—gone, in fact, into the fields and woods and copied in stone the common plants he found growing at his feet.

To continue the architectural aspect of the subject a little further, a change came again after this naturalistic period, and the mason showed signs of returning to conventionalised designs of the natural plants, so that the botanist finds the number of flowers and leaves grow more scarce, and the source of the craftsman's inspiration more difficult to trace. The art of the period from A.D. 1350 onwards sought to twist the conventional foliage into regular or geometrical patterns, and to ignore the natural growth of branch and stem.

By the beginning of the fifteenth century the curved forms were largely abandoned, and were replaced on capital and arch by mouldings more or less deeply cut.

It is thus the fourteenth century, and especially the first half of it, that possesses most interest to show the development of " flowers in stone," a period described by a recent writer[1] as " the moment when carving burst into full leaf—the June of architecture—before there was a sign of the crumpling which evidenced approaching decay." The word " flowers," however, must not be used with too narrow a meaning, but rather as including several portions of the plant.

Not till the beginning of the naturalistic period does Bristol excel in floral sculpture, but then at once the city is fortunate to possess some good examples in the tower of St. Mary Redcliffe, built about A.D. 1292, and in the original choir of the Cathedral from A.D. 1298 to A.D. 1332. These two buildings come within the period of the true Decorated style, although the earlier portions of them, such as the Chapter House and the inner north porch of Redcliffe, which is contemporary with the lower part of the tower, show but few examples of the inspiration which Nature gave to the ornamentation of our city.

Those portions of the Cathedral built within the time of Abbot Knowle, from A.D. 1306 to A.D. 1332, are the choir with the well-known stellated recesses and the Berkeley Chapel, and they show subjects clearly derived from trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants, reproduced in genuine naturalistic form and with great decorative effect.

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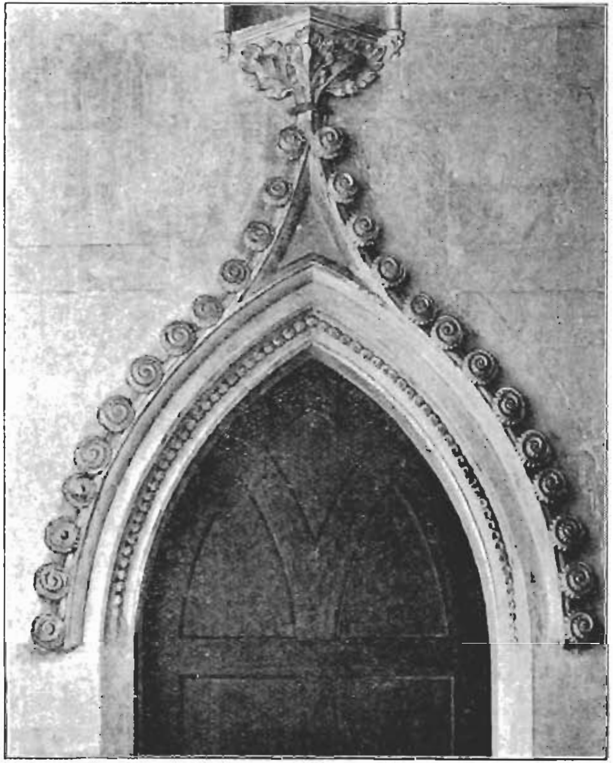
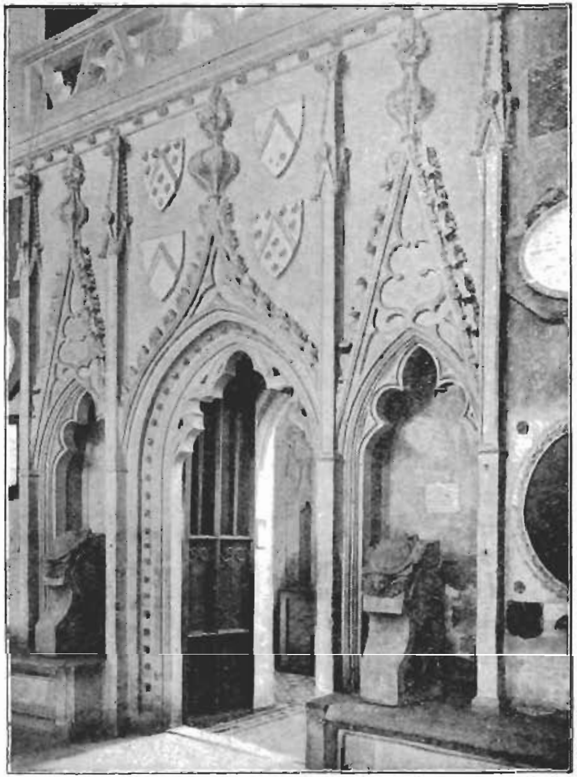
[1] Professor W. R. Lethaby, *How Exeter Cathedral was Built.*

# BRISTOL CATHEDRAL.

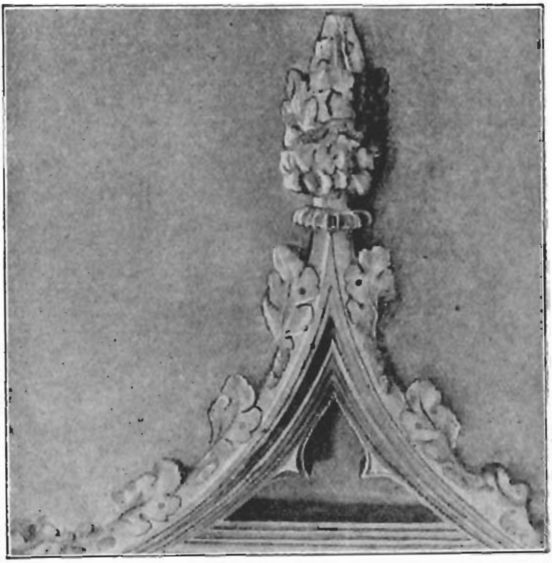


THE BERKELEY DOOR.

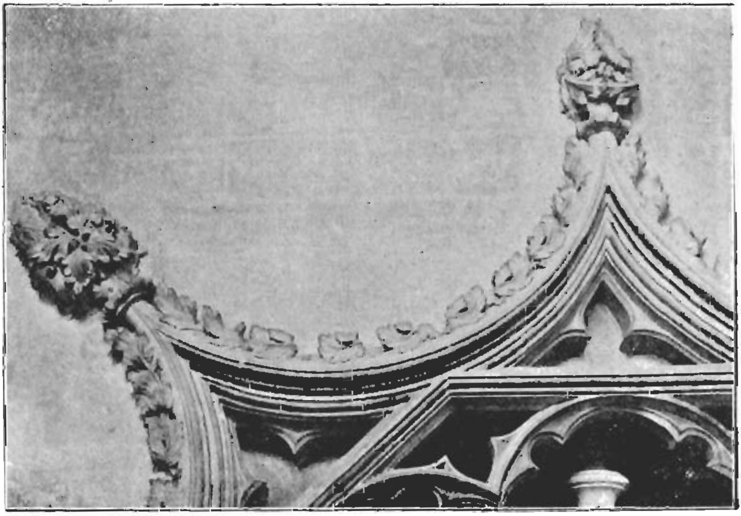


THE SACRISTY DOOR.

BRISTOL CATHEDRAL.



OAK SHOWING GALLS.



HAWTHORN.

The oak is the most frequent. The artist seems to have taken for his model in many examples the Turkey oak, which is common along all the Mediterranean coasts, and is distinguished by the long narrow and much serrated form of its leaves. Others again are shorter and broader, telling of the true English oak.

The recess known as Abbot Nailheart's tomb, on the south side of the lady chapel, has a formal arrangement of such leaves. Another recess in the north aisle shows clusters of açorns amongst the leaves; while the bosses in the vaulting of the vestibule of the Berkeley Chapel, known as the sacristy, show both kinds of leafage.

The design of the stellated recess dividing the Berkeley Chapel from the choir is unusual, because carved on the oak leaves are clearly shown examples of a species of oak-gall, placed like peas on the leaf veins, and known in modern times to be caused by the puncture of a small fly of the cynips tribe, which deposits its eggs in the substance of the leaf. Sprigs of oak, with acorns arranged stiffly in the axils of the leaves, yet excellent reproductions of nature, are again carved on finials of the vestry doorway, and twine around the capitals in the Berkeley Chapel.

Another tree represented in the Cathedral is the maple, its five-lobed leaves and winged fruit forming a handsome border to the western Berkeley recess in the south choir aisle. This fruit, in scientific language the samara, consists of two nuts placed side by side, with two wings spreading horizontally so as to form together one straight line, and by this formation the maple is easily distinguished from the fruit of the ash and sycamore. In course of time the carving at the lower end of the arch became worn away, and at some restoration new fruits were cut, and the workman, being ignorant of his subject, shaped the wings to be at an angle to each other instead of in a straight line. A casual observer noted the carving, and thought he recognised there a representation of the berries and angular leafage of the mistletoe, and pondering apparently on the symbol of the Druids and their religious observances, was led to publish the statement that Bristol Cathedral held the unique position of showing the mistletoe amongst its carved stonework. Had he looked more closely he would have detected the maple fruits and foliage higher up the arch, springing from the same stem, and thus have avoided an error which has been copied and repeated ever since without any truth. The maple in fruit was a common ornament of bosses and corbels in many buildings of this period, and a century later was a close competitor of the oak and vine.

So far the leaves of the beech have not been noticed in Bristol buildings, but they are no doubt rendered amongst the hundreds of bosses that adorn the various lofty vaultings, because the beech took its place in contemporary roofs on account of the artistic treatment possible with the unfolding of its deeply-puckered and slightly serrated leaves, and of its connection with the use of beechen boards, on which were written the early Gospel extracts or books.

In the Elder Lady Chapel is a series of rounded fruit rising above three concentric leaves. It is probably the apple that influenced the carver in his design, but the so-called " nose " of that fruit is simply shown by cross cuts.

The hawthorn is the motive of another of the stellated recesses, the western one in the north aisle, and in the central finial there is a cluster of the well-known haws peeping out through the deep lobes of the leaves.

Roughly carved round the arch of a small niche by the doorway of the Berkeley Chapel is a formal treatment of the foliage of the ivy, with its large egg-shaped and pointed leaves, showing that the design was taken from the tree ivy and not from the leaves spreading on the ground.

Of the shrubs that inspired the artist the vine is the most frequent, appearing in all parts of the early buildings. Representations of it are to be found in the early sculptured monuments of Egypt and Assyria, while the Bible carries its history back to the days of Noah, whom we are told "planted a vineyard." The vine and its fruit became a recognised symbol of the Church in the early centuries of Christianity, while its broad and clearly-veined leaves made it a suitable design for the skill of the workman, and its intertwining and climbing habit appealed to his requirements.

Although the knowledge of the vine may have come to the artists from the South of Europe it would have been well known in England, for the existence of forty vineyards is recorded in *Domesday Book*. To this day a wood near Aust continues to bear the name of "The Vineyard," and the Gloucestershire Domesday mentions two *arpents* of vineyard at Stonehouse—an *arpent* contained less than half an acre of land.

Apart from the use of the vine as an emblem of the Church, it is easy to find carvings of it in the Cathedral as a purely naturalistic decoration, and in some parts with a tendency to the conventional, in which the surface of the leaves begins to show the curious bulbous undulations that became almost universal in the following century.

One of the bosses over the Berkeley tomb in the Elder Lady Chapel, erected about A.D. 1327, is a life-size face of a woman in the veil head-dress and with an unduly wide mouth, from the corners of which spring the stalks of large vine leaves to form a circle round the head, with a cluster of grapes on either side covering the ears. Such bosses formed of a central face wreathed in foliage were very common devices at this period, and probably had their origin in the actor's dramatic mask used by the performers in the Miracle Plays. Such masks would be familiar objects to the craftsmen, who found in them a model for the grotesque. The large opening, left that the actor might speak his part clearly, lent itself when used in decoration for the starting-point of the surrounding foliage, and as these masks were often hung in vineyards in ancient times to frighten birds, this arrangement of the foliage may have been suggested by the tendrils of the vine actually finding their way through the mouth aperture. In this instance, however, the woman's head, dressed in the head-dress of the time, is thought to be a portrait of the Lady Margaret Berkeley, buried in the tomb beneath in A.D. 1327.

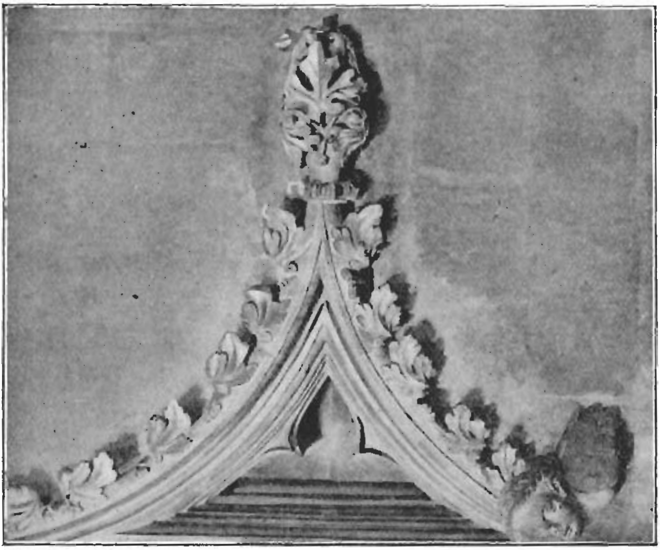
Another instance of a mask being the main feature of ornamentation is the carving of a man's head at the base of a pillar by the Newton Chapel. From the mouth issue two oak leaves, which encircle the face in place of hair, and help to give a grotesque appearance to the whole.

The rose is another plant frequently carved in the stone-work of the Cathedral, and in its first form was double, like the early Provence rose of the garden, but the numerous petals in its naturalistic form soon gave way to the simpler and more easily designed single or dog-rose. It appears to be purely decorative, and to have probably come into use in the Norman period, because it was such a well-known and beloved flower in England, and was suitable for the simple ornamentation then required.

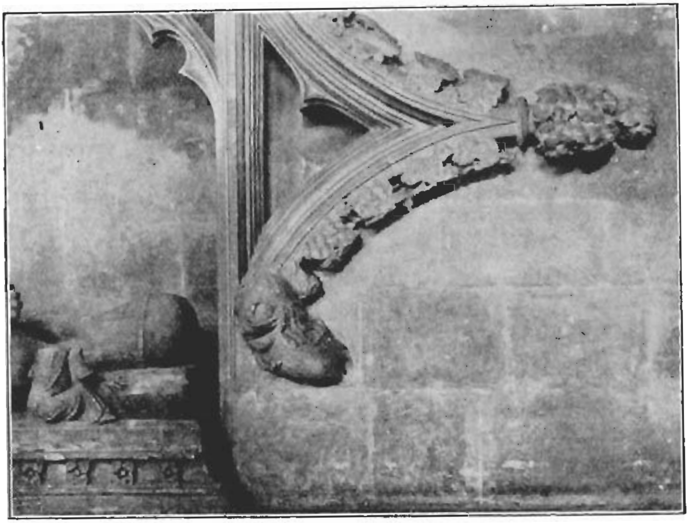
In the arch of one of the Berkeley Chapel windows is a formal row of alternate solitary blossoms of the double rose, and the leaves symetrically arranged in squares carved in a very bold style, and the single rose and leaves appear on finials and mouldings in the same chapel.

Round the doorway leading to this chapel are two forms of ornament which have led to much discussion in the past. Reference will at present be made only to the inner one, which is a row of fruits placed touching one another and showing only the top portions, in the centre being a raised and small opening from which radiate five incised lines, as if to suggest the splitting open of the outer covering. There is no round fruit or bud in nature that agrees with these markings, but it may be safely considered that the common "hips" or fruit of the rose were the source of the suggestion to the workman. This seems more certain after observing three finials over the doorway in the south choir

# BRISTOL CATHEDRAL.



MAPLE.



BUTTERCUP AND FOUR-LEAVED FLOWER.

of the same period, wherein one of them has groups of single rose flowers in gradated series, and the others apparently rows of fruits, similar in appearance to those referred to in the moulding of the smaller doorway. Similar finials are also in the Elder Lady Chapel.

The hazel is another shrub to supply material to the craftsman, and as it grows so frequently in the district, a branch of it may well have been cut off from some neighbouring tree, and then copied into stone to be placed within the sacred building.

It is well represented by its outspread leaves and clusters of three and four nuts on the boss of the vaulting of the Berkeley tomb in the Elder Lady Chapel. This boss is the companion one to that showing the vine already mentioned. The stems of the fruiting branch issue from the mouth and curly beard of a man's mask, while the leaves and fruit spread out and surround the head. This is supposed to be a portrait of Maurice IV, 9th Lord Berkeley, who lies buried beneath with his mother, the Lady Margaret.

Coming to the herbaceous plants which find a place on the capitals, bosses and mouldings, there is the yellow water lily, its thick cup-like blossoms standing erect out of the water being familiar objects in many of our streams and ponds. We find it in bud, lying on its large flat leaves on a capital in the Berkeley Chapel.

Another plant is the white bryony, the hedge vine of old writers, and a familiar flower of the hedgerow.

It is shown in naturalistic style on the recess over the figure of Abbot Hunt on the north side of the Lady Chapel, with the blossoms and clearly-marked tendrils for climbing the into sunlight; and again it gracefully entwines a boss in the Berkeley Chapel, together with its small red berries. The form of its leaves with well-marked veins are very graceful, and this plant and the meadow buttercup were much in favour in the Decorated period of architecture.

Examples of the buttercup are to be found in the eastern Berkeley recess, where the arch is closely decorated with the leaves and blossoms and again in a particularly large form on the walls of the sacristy, with in some instances snails depicted crawling over them. The single blossoms of the buttercup in the vaulting show apparently the greenish yellow sepals behind the brighter portion of the flowers.

As already stated, the larger row of ornaments on the Berkeley door has been a source of doubt to many observers. It has often been described as representing the fossil ammonite, one kind of which is found in the neighbourhood of Keynsham. It will be found, however, that a marked character of all the species of ammonites is a series of bars at regular intervals across the coils, and these ornaments have no such bars. The artist who made a water-colour sketch of the doorway in 1824 for the Braikenridge Collection[1] evidently recognised the inportance of the ornament, and gave an enlarged drawing, which materially helps one to recognise in it the fruit of a small plant with yellow flowers of the clover tribe—medicago or medick. Its trefoil-shaped leaves are often met with in carvings of the period, but in this instance the fruit only is chosen, which consists of a long pod, coiled round like the spring of a watch, and having on its outer edge a narrow, crinkly border. All the medicagos that grow in England have these coiled fruits, but their fringe or border consists of prickles, and the pod is not so contracted between the seeds, but there is a common species of the Mediterranean, *Medicago orbicularis*, whose fruit closely corresponds with this carving, and is undoubtedly the source of inspiration to the artist. He was a clever workman and put great skill into the execution, and as in the case of some of his other carvings near by, was not afraid of heroic size.

One of the two remaining ornaments of this period is the four-leaved flower, composed of four simple leaves or petals arranged to form a square-shaped blossom.

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[1] Bristol Art Gallery.

It seems to be a simple geometric figure, suggested by the common floral arrangement of the large family of cruciform plants, and was easily adapted to be placed at regular intervals or closely united in a hollow moulding, or for more general use as a cornice to form a light and graceful finish. In this form it can be seen on the verge of the slab of Maurice III, 7th Lord Berkeley.

The other ornament is the ballflower, characteristic of the West of England, and found chiefly in the counties of Gloucester and Hereford, where its use is very common in church architecture. In Gloucester Cathedral the aisle windows of the nave are studded with no less than 1,400 examples of the ball-flower in each window, and in Badgeworth Church, near Cheltenham, the hollow moulding of every window and doorway is profusely decorated with it.

Many examples are to be met with in Bristol Cathedral, notably round the arch of Abbot Newbury's tomb in the Lady Chapel, and in the Berkeley Chapel, where some are of great size.

The origin of the ball-flower ornament has given rise to much speculation, and at present there is no satisfactory solution. The ornament is represented as a ball, partially enclosed in a round cup or flower, which holds it by three wavy lobes. By some it is supposed to be the globe flower of the North of England, by others to be derived from a horse bell or a hawk's bell, and by others again to be the young bud of the pomegranate.

The ball-flower, however, has a far better resemblance to the ripe fruit of the juniper, and as flower or fruit should be apparently looked for as the motive, it is reasonable to think a fruit is its real origin. The juniper is allied to the Scotch fir, and is common on heaths and chalky hills throughout the South-East of England, as well as in Northern Europe. The use of the juniper berries was well known amongst the early herbalists, and the name is several times mentioned in the Bible, so that the artists in stone would have been acquainted with its peculiar structure, and may well have chosen it as their model.

So far only the floral sculpture in the cathedral has been mentioned, but if a visit be made to St. Mary Redcliffe, reproductions of the foliage of the oak and the vine, the four-leaved flower and the ball-flower, will be found in those parts of the building erected between A.D. 1320 and A.D. 1377, and in addition the church affords an example of a flower not noted elsewhere. The white water lily, beautifully carved and true to nature, appears on the outside of the tower, the blossoms placed singly in the arcade moulding, in a row in the same manner as the ball-flower is used.

St. Mark's is the only other ecclesiastical building in Bristol which contains work of the purely Decorative period, and here the exterior and interior mouldings of the west window, which lights the south aisle, are covered with rows of the characteristic ball-flower.

The series of capitals at the junction of the aisle with the chancel is an example showing clearly the special characteristics of early Gothic work of conventional lobed leaves with well-marked stalks. In such instances the leaves fall over in heavy clusters, and is an arrangement suggested by the curled volutes that distinguished the corners of classic capitals. Birds, suggested by the thrush, are carved on one of the series pecking at the adjoining leaves, and such was a favourite addition to the carver's design because of the appropriateness of placing birds amongst foliage.

In other parts of England there are most beautiful examples of naturalistic sculpture ; but reference need only be made to the shrine of St. Frideswide, in Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, and the vaulting of Exeter Cathedral, with its many hundred bosses. In the shrine, erected about A.D. 1289, there are no less than twelve different plants represented in the carvings of the spandrels, and in the

Exeter bosses the number of floral decorations is very large by repetition. From these two sources it is possible to realise how completely the naturalistic school in its short reign of forty years was inspired by the flora of the fields and woods. Other plants made use of, in addition to those already described in Bristol, are found to be the pear tree, the birch, the poplar, the mallow, and the fig. These plants were probably chosen and repeated by the craftsman because some of them, such as the vine, oak, maple, bryony and meadow buttercup have broadly-shaped leaves, with clearly-marked veins to give their beauty to the arch, the finial, and the boss, while the rose, hawthorn, ivy, and pear have smaller leaves, whose veins or folds lend themselves to produce an equally good effect in closer form. Only the very best artists in stone could run riot amongst the crowd of flowers and fruit, and such men were scarce to do the work with their own hands ; the average workman, therefore, had to repeat the designs taught to him in the school of carving, and study only those plants with prominent characteristics, and this is the explanation why the total seems to be limited in number to about twenty different species.

The natural foliage was carved with the utmost patience and loving care, and therefore settled into a fairly uniform type. With that uniformity came monotony, and about the middle of the fourteenth century it was abandoned as being too troublesome, and conventionalised work took its place. In Bristol, when the building of churches started afresh in the first half of the fifteenth century, at Redcliffe, and a little later in other churches, all the foliage ornamentation was of the conventional kind, with the leaves arranged horizontally on the capitals and in geometrical pattern on the bosses.

Turning to Redcliffe Church, the vaulting of the aisles and choir contains an excellent series of examples, where every junction of every rib in the many-ribbed vault is completed by a carved keystone or boss. The plants of the previous century are used over and over again, but in addition it is possible to recognise the holly, fig, bay, hop, thistle, hard fern, dandelion, crinkly cabbage leaf, and sunflower.

In the Braikenridge Collection is a series of water-colour drawings of these bosses, which give one an idea how the carvers sought to decorate the intersections with floral designs done in the workshops and then placed in position. Some of the plants depicted are the vine, the hard fern, the oak, the ivy, the bay in fruit, a conventional leaf often used in architecture, the dandelion, the rose-en-soleil, a badge of Henry VII (A.D. 1487), therefore one of the later bosses, holly with prickly leaves and well-marked veins, hawthorn in blossom, single rose arranged geometrically on a branch, and dandelion and maple leaves together.

The recesses originally erected in A.D. 1460 to receive the effigies of William Canynges, jun., and his wife Johanna, are decorated in a similar manner to the earlier series of stellated recesses in the cathedral. The lady's recess has a band of oak leaves, acorns, and empty cups with two of the finials of ivy, while that of her husband shows the vine and the fig. In the Perpendicular Church of St. Thomas the Martyr (rebuilt A.D. 1789), there were a number of noble bosses, several of which, taken from the vaulting of the north aisle, are still preserved under the tower. The vine, the white bryony in fruit, and the oak with acorns and cups, are shown entwined in a free and graceful manner that makes them as handsome as anything of the kind in the city.[1]

The handsome tombs in the chancel of St. Mark's, erected and restored by Bishop Salley about A.D. 1500, are good examples of later foliage decoration and ornate ornament, in which the cornice is limited to a running pattern of grapes and foliage and the spandrels made up of isolated leaves without branch or tendrils, looking as though they were gummed into position. Hundreds of such examples are to be seen in the stone monuments and wooden screens in the work of the parish churches of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and a good deal of modern church carving is but a copy of the characteristic reign of naturalistic foliage.

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[1] *Transactions.* xxvii, 350.

In drawing to a close the consideration of "Flowers in Stone," it must be clear that although the work of the craftsman at the different periods could be excellent, yet his best efforts are no more than a coarse resemblance of Nature's handiwork; the humblest weed that grows in the cranny of a wall has a beauty that no mason can emulate, and his most faithful reproductions must ever disappoint the true lover of Nature.