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Arms of St. Augustine's Abbey, Bristol

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THE ARMS OF ST. AUGUSTINE'S ABBEY, BRISTOL

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THE arms of Bristol Abbey, azure three crowns in pale or, adopted after the Dissolution by the See of Bristol with the variation of a sable field, are commented upon by the Rev. J. Woodward in his *Treatise on Ecclesiastical Heraldry*, who says (p. 177) that he does not know their origin, and that Mackenzie Walcott's suggestion that they are the arms of King Edward the Elder, buried at Pucklechurch in 946, is entirely without foundation, but that possibly they refer to the dedication of the church to the Trinity.¹ But this dedication only dates from 1542, when the abbey church became a cathedral: the old dedication was to God and to Augustine the apostle of the English.² Nevertheless Mackenzie Walcott may have been on the right tack, for while crowns are not obviously representative of the Trinity, they are the ordinary symbols of royalty, and appear in fictitious arms assigned to various Saxon kings. The best known were those ascribed to the martyred St. Edmund of East Anglia, or rather those invented for the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds, where his body was enshrined, which were sometimes elaborated by inserting a pair of arrows in saltire in each of the three crowns arranged 2 and 1 on the shield.³

The earliest example of the Bristol Abbey shield appears to be that still in the glass of the eastern window on the

¹ See the paper by Rev. H. Candole on the arms of the Dean and Chapter, printed pp. 137-44.

² J. F. Nicholls and John Taylor, *Bristol Past and Present*, 1881, II, 46.

³ Woodward, *Ecclesiastical Heraldry*, 360.

south side of the Lady Chapel in the abbey church, now the cathedral, carried out, like the whole of this part of the church, by Abbot Edmund Knowle (1306-32) about 1320. The subject of the great east window is the Tree of Jesse, while the side windows are filled with single figures of saints and notabilities, but only one subject, *viz.* the martyrdom of St. Edmund of East Anglia in the lower part of the western window on the south side of the Lady Chapel. This must be Abbot Edmund Knowle's personal recognition of his name-saint ; and if the abbot was so interested in his patron as to have him represented in this exceptional way, it suggests that it was he who introduced the shield of the three crowns at Bristol derived from the arms of St. Edmund, with the variation (necessary for the sake of distinction) of setting the three crowns in pale instead of two and one, but retaining the azure field. I expect that sable later replaced it in the bishop's arms because in some painted example, taken as a pattern, the blue pigment, as often, had turned black. Probably the shield originally was personal to Abbot Knowle, and was taken over by the abbey as its arms after his death.