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Arms of St. Mark's or the Gaunts' Hospital, Bristol

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THE ARMS OF ST. MARK'S OR THE GAUNTS' HOSPITAL, BRISTOL

by G. McN. Rushforth, F.S.A.

WHEN Bishop Cantilupe of Worcester drew up the regulations for the Hospital of St. Mark, commonly called after its founders 'the Gaunts', he prescribed a badge to be worn on the habit of the brothers, which was in fact a coat of arms: gules three geese argent.[1] So individual a blazon demands an explanation. The arms of religious houses were often derived from those of their founders, but there are no geese in the Berkeley or Gaunt family heraldry. Another way of inventing arms was to make them represent pictorially the name of the owner, and this is what seems to have happened here. The geese are solan geese or gannets, popularly pronounced 'gants' or 'gaunts' in the Middle Ages and later;[2] so that we have what is called a 'canting' coat referring either to the founders or to the usual name of the hospital, 'the Gaunts'.

The gannet or gaunt would be known in Bristol because in former times it used to frequent the islands in the Bristol Channel as far as Lundy, though now there is no nearer breeding place than the island of Grassholme off the Pembrokeshire coast.[3] It is possible that it may have appeared at municipal feasts in Bristol in the Middle Ages when, we know, seals, and swans and suchlike 'wildfowl' figured in the banquets of the great. And we may recall that one of the dishes served up at the table of Mr Jonathan Oldbuck was 'the relishing solan goose, whose smell is so powerful that he is never cooked within doors'.[4] But the real value of the gannet or gaunt was in its feathers, so that in the Middle Ages they were reckoned

[1] References in my account of the hospital at the Bristol Meeting, pp. 47-52 of this volume.

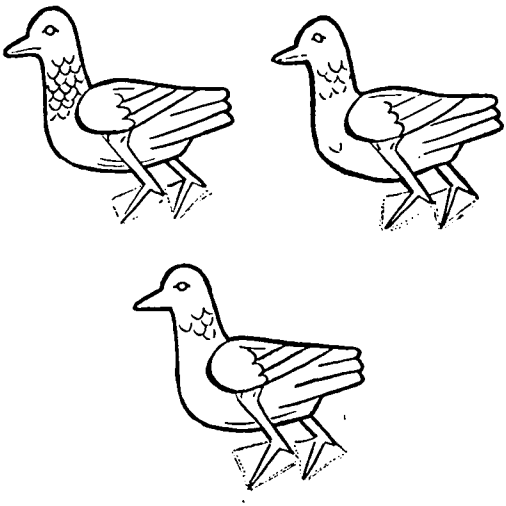
[2] *English Dialect Dictionary.*

[3] R. W. Loyd Lewis, *Lundy its history and natural history* (London, 1925), pp. 186 ff.

[4] Scott, *The Antiquary*, chap. v.

as part of the revenue of Lundy Island,[5] and no doubt found their market in Bristol.

The artist who painted the glass shield of ' the Gaunts ', now in the east window of the Lord Mayor's chapel, either did not know what a gannet was like, or did not take the



Gannets

trouble to reproduce it ; and he has drawn the three rather characterless waterfowl shown in the accompanying figure by the skilful pencil of the Rev. R. Jeffcoat.[6] Examples of the real bird may be seen in the Natural History Department of the Bristol Museum.

[5] Returns of the produce of Lundy are quoted by J. R. Chanter, *Lundy Island* (London, 1877) p. 101, and R. W. Loyd Lewis (op. cit., p. 186), showing that ' a certain rock called the Gannets' Stone (*Petra Ganetorum*) where the gannets settle and breed ' was worth 5*s* in 1274 and 66*s* 8*d* in 1321.

[6] Compare *Transactions*, XLIX (1927), 304. The shield, which is in a rather inaccessible position, is a single piece of glass, on which the ruby flash has been chipped away to show the white birds.