

The Medieval Churches of Bristol

Anniversary Address 1989

by

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This paper is divided into three parts. The first section describes briefly the medieval growth and prosperity of Bristol, its strategic situation, the volume of its trade and commerce during the Middle Ages and the consequent wealth of its merchants. The second part discusses the proliferation of parish churches and other religious institutions in and around the town, and the evidence for their growth and architectural development. A map showing medieval Bristol and the major ecclesiastical foundations is given in Appendix I, and a list of the parish churches and religious institutions is provided in Appendix II. The final section is concerned with the extent of late-medieval documentation, and the evidence which this provides for Church life in Bristol, for the wealth of the parish churches and the splendour of their furnishings and treasures during the century before the Reformation.

THE MEDIEVAL DEVELOPMENT OF BRISTOL

The key to the growth and medieval prosperity of Bristol lies in its geographical situation. It developed at the confluence of the Avon and the Frome, close to their junction with the Severn, the greatest of all English rivers. It is on a well-defended site, with a rich and fertile hinterland; an exceptional tidal range—as much as forty feet, one of the largest in the world—easily brought the small medieval ships up the winding channel of the Avon to the security of the port of Bristol. It was with these advantages that the late-Saxon town was established, and it was here that the Normans founded one of their strongest, stone-built, castles (Fig. 1). By 1125 William of Malmesbury could describe Bristol as ‘the most celebrated town called Bristol, with a port, which is a commodious and safe harbour for all vessells, into which come ships from Ireland and Norway and from other lands beyond the seas’.¹

A few years later, the anonymous author of the *Gesta Stephani* could write that ‘Bristol is well-nigh the most opulent city in the country, admitting shipping both from the neighbouring and foreign parts; seated in a very fertile part of England, and, in point of situation, the most impregnable of all the English cities.’²

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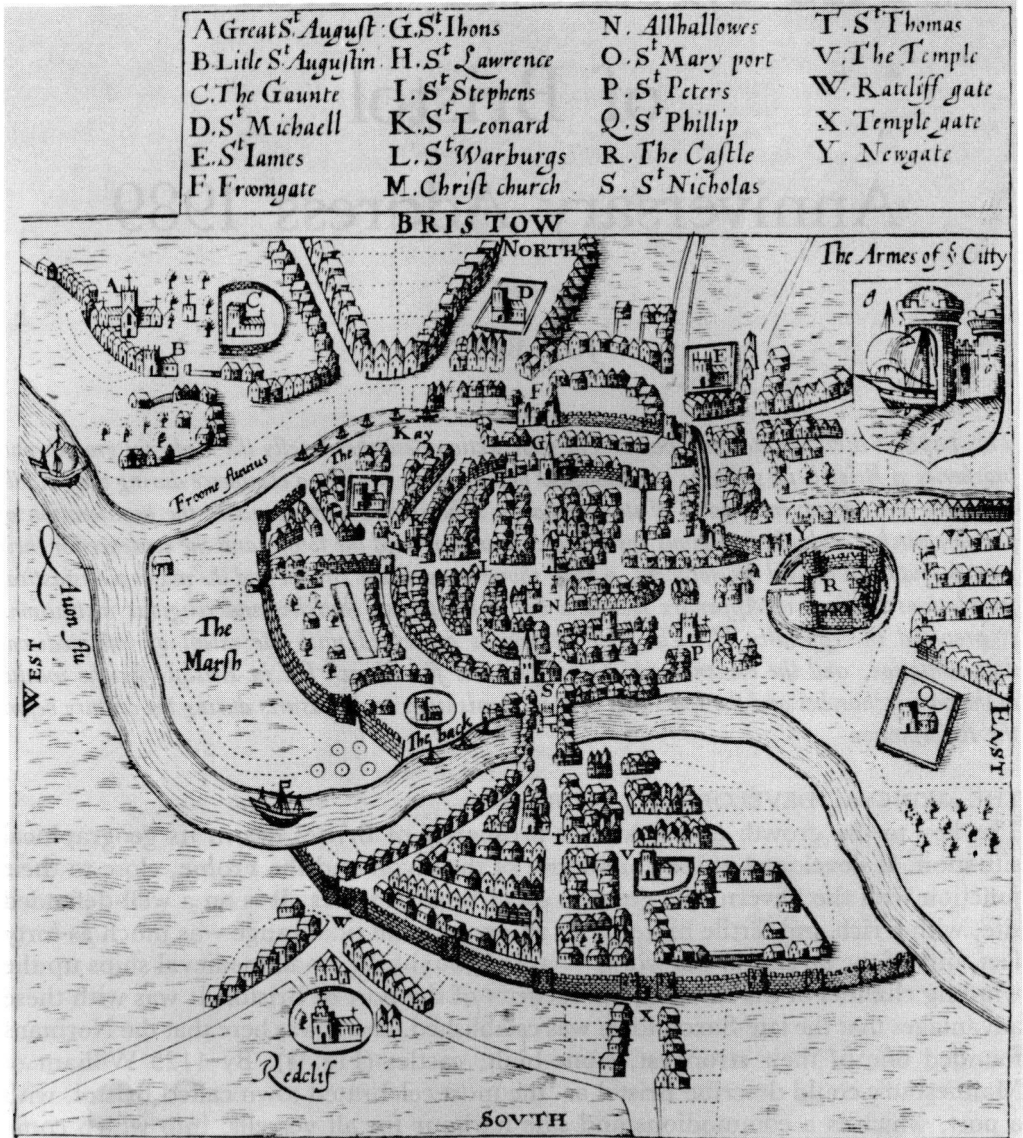


Fig. 1

John Speed's Map of Bristol, 1610

Speed's map illustrates the importance of the site of Bristol, at the confluence of the Avon and Frome, and protected on the east side by the great medieval castle. It also shows Bristol Bridge with the chapel of the Assumption built over the carriageway. Early-seventeenth-century Bristol remained small, and was still largely contained within its medieval walls, with small extensions to the north and across the Frome into the industrial suburbs of St Thomas, Temple and Redcliffe. Above all, the map shows the way in which, even after the Reformation, the town was still dominated by its eighteen parish churches

The town developed rapidly during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, trading with Ireland, particularly with Dublin where Bristol merchants enjoyed special privileges, with Scandinavia, and increasingly with European ports. The marriage of Henry II to Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1152 brought greater trade with France, and by the thirteenth century Bristol's commerce was increasingly based on two essential commodities, the export of wool and woollen cloth and the import of wine, especially wine from Bordeaux. In addition, goods such as hides and leather, cattle and sheep came down the Severn and Wye by 'trows' or barges, cloth from Ludlow, Shrewsbury, Leominster, Coventry and the Midlands, even from as far as Kendal and the north-

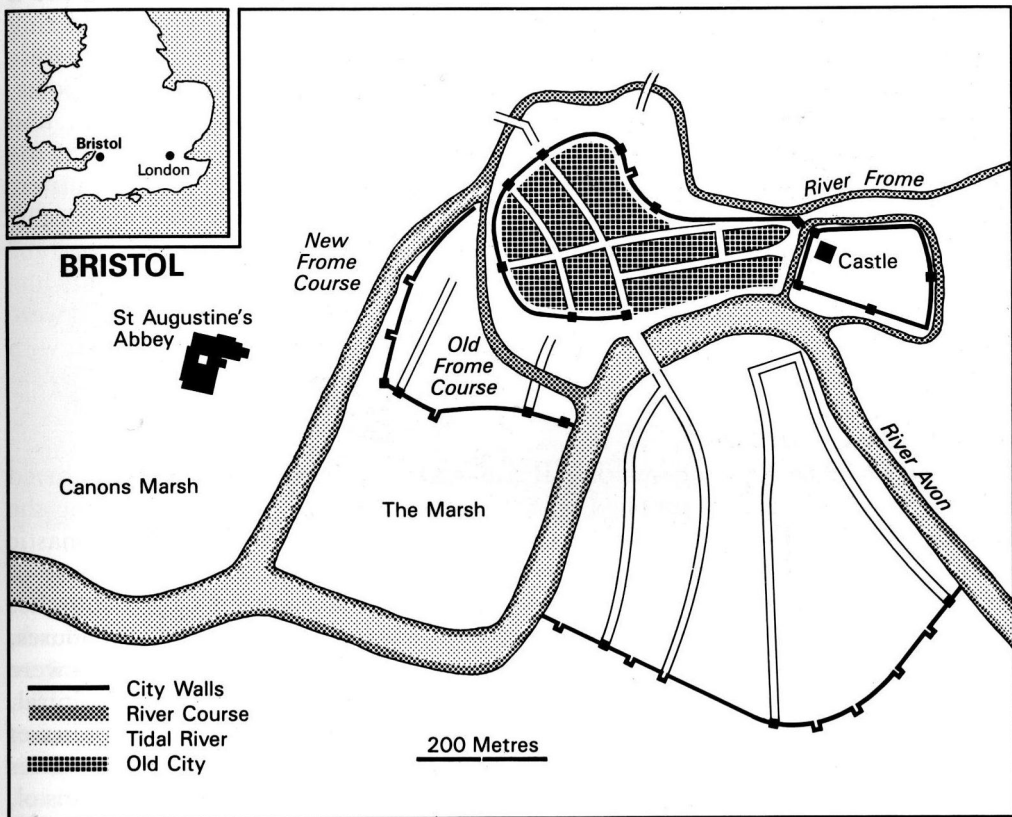


Fig. 2

Plan of the Diversion of the River Frome in Bristol, c. 1240

This remarkable project reveals the growing wealth and commercial activity in the port of Bristol during the early thirteenth century. In order to provide better harbour facilities the ambitious task was undertaken of diverting the Frome into a new and deeper channel some 750 yards long, thus providing stone quays along the banks, a deep channel and a soft muddy bottom for ships to lie safely when the tide was out

M.A. Aston

west of England, alabaster from Nottingham, iron and timber from the Forest of Dean, wheat from the Midlands, wool from the Cotswolds and the Wiltshire downs, tin and fish from Cornwall, lead from Mendip, west-country cloth from Bridgwater, Minehead and Barnstaple. As well as wine, medieval imports included fruit, furs, olive oil, salt, soap from Spain, woad from Picardy, Toulouse and the Azores, alum, madder and other dyestuffs, high-quality iron from Spain and silks from Italy.³ By the mid thirteenth century Bristol was second only to London for the volume and importance of its trade, and was established as the metropolis of the west. It was also a major manufacturing centre, especially for woollen cloth. The rapid growth and prosperity of Bristol was marked by two important landmarks in its medieval history. The first occurred during the 1240s and involved the major improvement of its harbour facilities, including the ambitious task of diverting the Frome into a new and deeper channel, a remarkable example of medieval civil engineering (Fig. 2).⁴ The second landmark came in 1373 when Bristol was created a separate county, independent of both Gloucestershire and Somerset. For ecclesiastical purposes, however, Bristol remained without its own diocese and bishop until 1542, and throughout the Middle Ages most of the town lay at the farthest extremity of the large diocese of Worcester, while the suburbs of Temple, Redcliffe and Bedminster, south of the river Avon, came under the jurisdiction of the diocese of Bath and Wells.

By the fifteenth century, when documentary sources for Bristol's history become abundant, the town had grown to some 10,000 inhabitants; Bristol merchants had established trading links all over northern Europe and the Mediterranean, and were already looking to the Atlantic and beginning the long involvement of the port with overseas exploration.⁵

THE MEDIEVAL CHURCHES

By the later Middle Ages the wealth of Bristol and the piety of its merchants ensured that the town was amply supplied with churches and that they had become the dominant landmarks in the Bristol scene. The town was surrounded by monastic establishments, notable among them the priory of St James, the major house of Augustinian canons, the four houses of the Friars, and eighteen parish churches clustered in and around the town.⁶ There were also numerous hospitals, almshouses, chantries and chapels. In Bristol, as in other towns and villages, the churches were at the heart of community life and were the social, educational, charitable and cultural, as well as the religious, centres of the communities which they served. Supplies of good-quality stone for church building were readily available from the nearby quarries at Dundry. No architectural features survive from the pre-Conquest churches of Bristol, although Saxon foundations have been uncovered during excavations on the site of St Mary-le-Port, of which only the tower now survives.⁷ Within the strong walls of the Norman town several churches were established during the twelfth century, in a massive expansion of ecclesiastical provision; three were at the cross-roads in the centre of the town, later the site of the High Cross: these were Christchurch, St Ewen and All Saints. Nearby was St Werburgh's, while St Peter's stood in front of the castle and was in existence by 1106. All Saints' retains its massive Norman pillars with their scalloped capitals, and was certainly established by 1153. Churches were

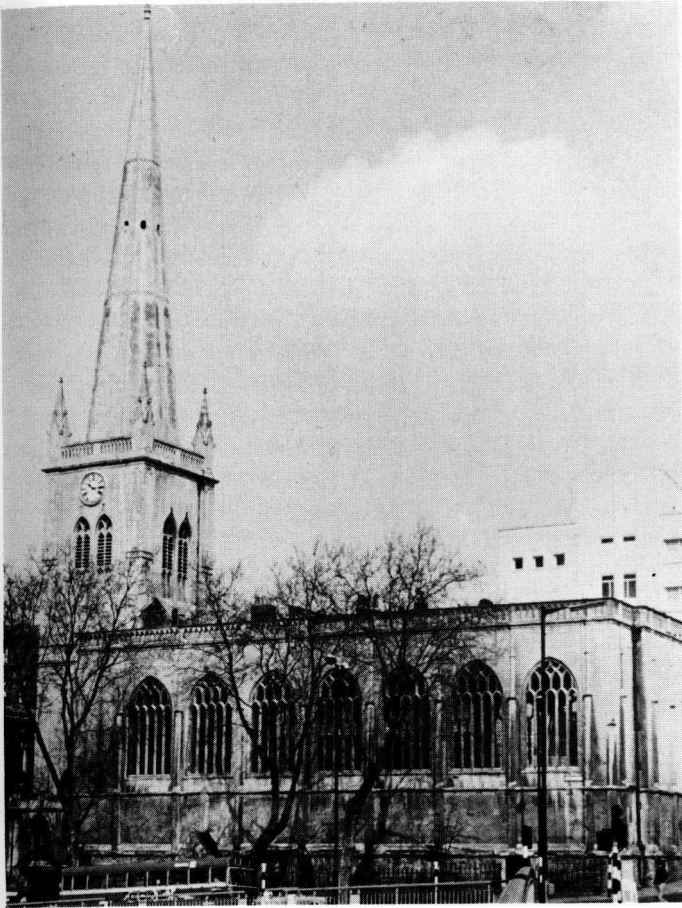


Fig. 3
The Parish Church of
St Nicholas

St Nicholas was built along the medieval wall of Bristol, beside Bristol Bridge, and dominated the approach to the town from the south and across the Avon. Like St John's, it stood beside one of the gates into the town. The interior of the church was destroyed by bombs in 1940, but the vaulted crypt escaped destruction, and is a fine example of fourteenth-century architecture

also built over the principal gateways of the town, their narrow naves occupying the width of the wall; St Nicholas and St John still exist, while St Leonard, St Lawrence and the chapelry of St Giles have been demolished (Fig. 3). Outside the walls, the priory of St James was established by Robert, Earl of Gloucester, an illegitimate son of Henry I, as a cell of Tewkesbury abbey in *c.* 1140; as Bristol expanded during the fourteenth century an agreement dated 1374 was made between the abbot of Tewkesbury and the parishioners that the nave of St James should be used for parochial worship, while the parishioners undertook to build a bell-tower. Thus the church of St James survived the Dissolution of the Monasteries, and its west front, although badly eroded, displays some of the best Romanesque work in Bristol, with boldly-interlaced blank arcades and an elaborate, circular, west window with plate tracery decorated with rope-work and zig-zag carving.⁸

The finest of all the Romanesque work in Bristol is in the Augustinian abbey, now the cathedral. This was founded by the wealthy Bristolian, Robert Fitzharding,

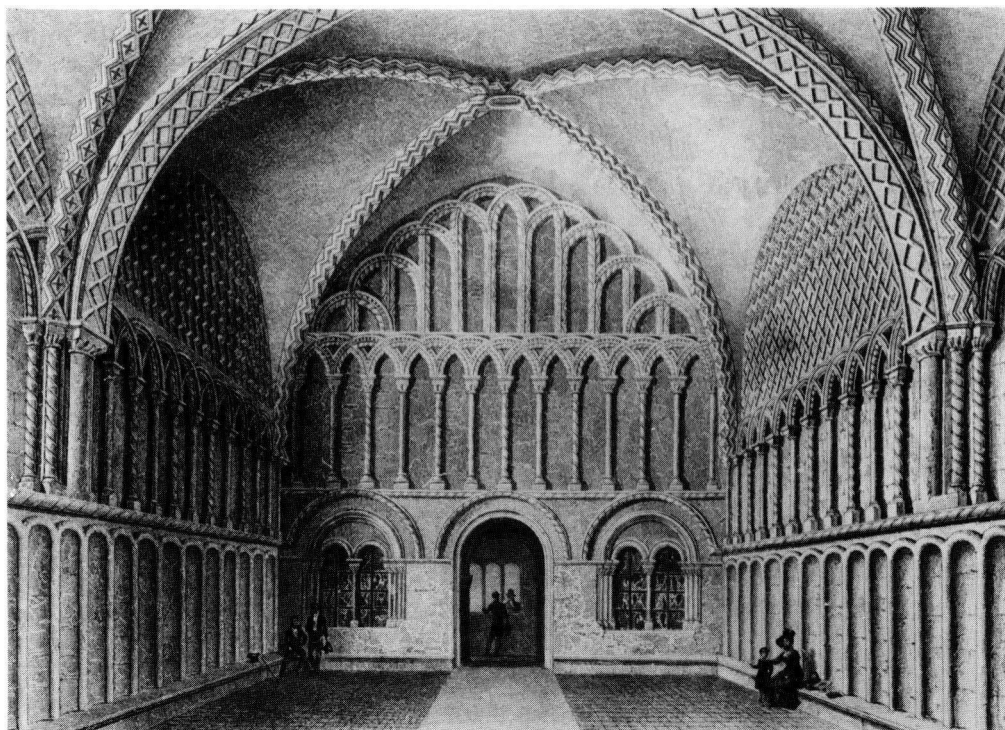


Fig. 4

Bristol Cathedral Chapter House

This Chapter House of *c.* 1165, together with the entrance from the cloister, is the finest piece of Romanesque architecture in Bristol. It remains as impressive evidence of the wealth and splendour of the Augustinian abbey founded in 1140 by Robert Fitzharding, first Lord Berkeley.

(Britton, J., *History and antiquities of Bristol Cathedral* (1836))

later Lord Berkeley, during the 1140s, and the church was dedicated in 1148. Fitzharding was a supporter of Matilda and of her champion and half-brother, Robert, Earl of Gloucester; he was also a friend of the future Henry II, who spent part of his childhood in Bristol and may have watched some of the early stages of building work at the abbey.⁹ Most notable is the Chapter House of *c.* 1165 with its fine vault and impressive entrance (Fig. 4). Although the Chapter House was damaged during the Reform Riots of 1831, and is now shorter than it was, it remains together with its vestibule a remarkably fine and accomplished building. There is also notable Romanesque work in the gatehouse and in parts of the former abbots' lodging now incorporated in the Cathedral School. There has been much speculation about the possibility of an earlier church on or near the site of St Augustine's. A late-medieval tradition associated the site with an alleged visit of St Augustine of Canterbury, and with the burial of one of his followers named Jordan. Certainly there was a late-



Fig. 5
The Harrowing of Hell,
Bristol Cathedral
This remarkably fine late-
Saxon carving of Christ in
Hell is the earliest surviving
feature of the cathedral, and
suggests that the site was
already a place of worship
long before the monastery
was founded

medieval chapel dedicated to St Jordan on College Green. Much more definite evidence for an earlier church is provided by the remarkable Harrowing of Hell carving, now displayed in the Cathedral (Fig. 5). This powerful carving has been dated to the first half of the eleventh century; it was found beneath the floor of the Chapter House during alterations in 1831. Whatever the original location of this carving, its size and sophistication make it clear that it comes from a wealthy and well-connected religious establishment.¹⁰

During the prosperous years of the thirteenth century several new churches were built in Bristol and others enlarged to serve the growing population and the wealthy merchant community. These include St Mary Redcliffe, where an earlier church is recorded as being given to Salisbury cathedral in 1158, and the churches of the friars: the Dominicans *c.* 1227, the Franciscans *c.* 1234, the Carmelites *c.* 1267 and finally the Austins in 1313.¹¹ The most important surviving thirteenth-century work is to be found in the beautiful Elder Lady Chapel of the Cathedral, and in St Mark's, which was the chapel of the Gaunt's Hospital across College Green, now the Lord Mayor's Chapel (Fig. 6).

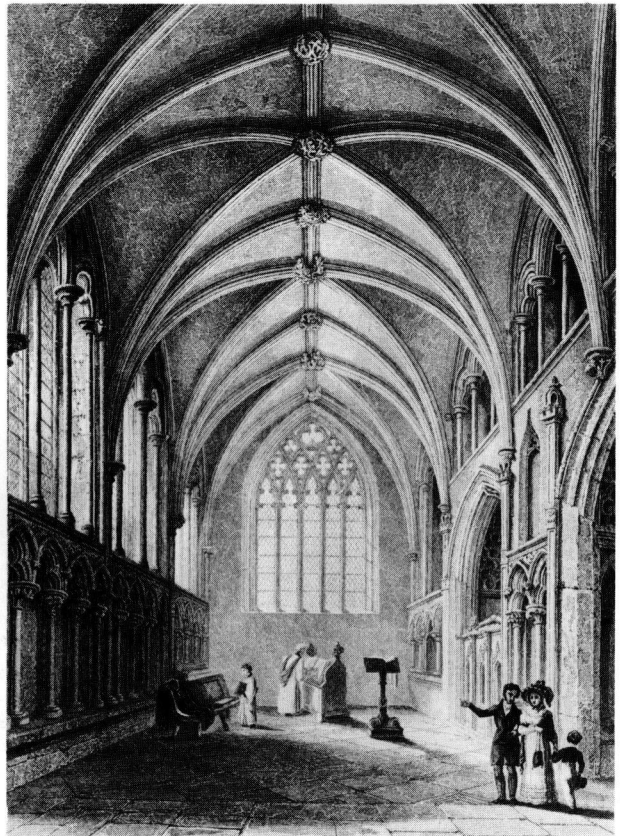


Fig. 6
The Elder Lady Chapel,
Bristol Cathedral

This elegant chapel was built by Abbot David in *c.* 1210–20 and was vaulted some fifty years later. It is one of the finest examples of Early English work in Bristol, and includes fine carving with a monkey playing on pipes, a goat playing the fiddle, a fox and goose, St Michael fighting the dragon and other lively scenes

(Britton, J., *History and antiquities of Bristol Cathedral* (1836))

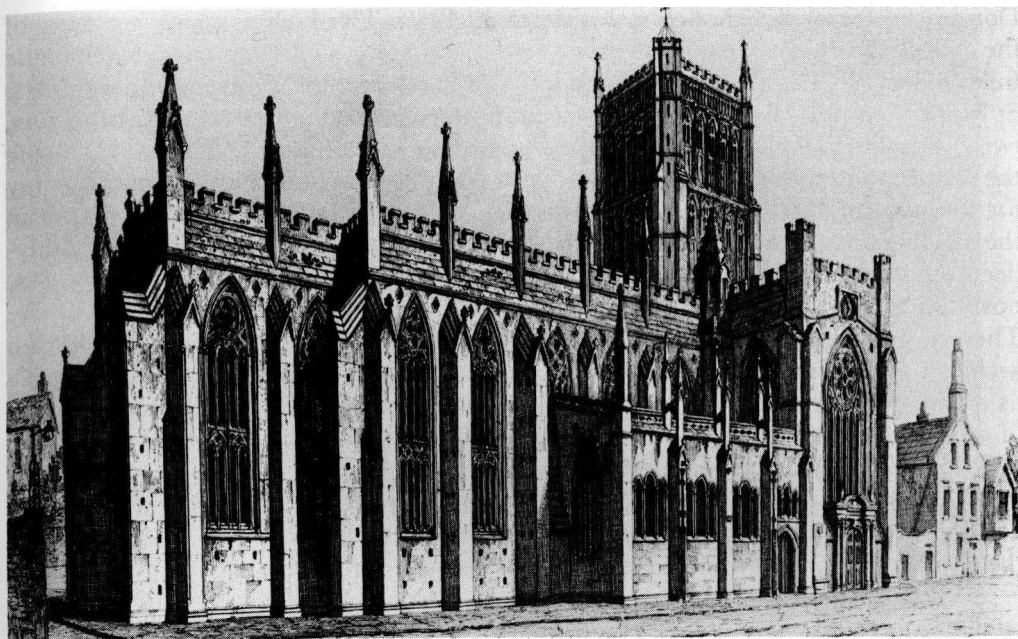


Fig. 7

Bristol Cathedral from the north-east

Building work on the nave of the Augustinian abbey had only just begun when the monastery was suppressed in 1539, and when the cathedral was founded in 1542 it remained without a nave or western towers for more than three centuries. This view of 1821 shows houses on the site of G.E. Street's nave of 1868-88

(Dugdale, W., *Monasticon Anglicanum* (1830 ed.), vol. 6)

The Elder Lady Chapel was built as a detached chapel on the north side of St Augustine's, with tall, elegant shafts, and the liveliest carvings to be found in Bristol, many of them grotesque or satirical, and having close links with similar carvings at Wells. It is, therefore, pleasing to know that Abbot David of St Augustine's (abbot, 1216-34) wrote to the Dean of Wells in *c.*1220 asking for the loan of a certain workman to carve the spandrels of his Lady Chapel.¹² Later, in *c.*1275 a fine vault was constructed for the Lady Chapel, and in *c.*1330 the south wall was pierced to provide two large tomb recesses and join the Lady Chapel to the main body of the church. Abbot David's purbeck-stone tomb slab is on the floor by the entry to the Elder Lady Chapel, while the continuing dominance of the Berkeley family is emphasized by a large tomb chest bearing the effigies of Maurice, Lord Berkeley, who is said to have died of wounds received at the Battle of Poitiers (1356), and a Berkeley lady, possibly his mother (Fig. 7).

The other notable thirteenth-century work is in St Mark's chapel which was part of the Gaunt's Hospital founded in 1220 by another member of the Berkeley family, Maurice de Gaunt, Robert Fitzharding's grandson, who also founded the

Dominican friary shortly before his death in 1230. The earliest surviving parts of the church date from some fifty years after the foundation of the hospital and include fine work of *c.* 1275, with stiff-leaf capitals and Early English tracery in the windows. St Mark's, or the Gaunt's hospital, was founded to support a master, three chaplains, twelve scholars, and to provide alms and accommodation for poor Christians. During the century and more after its foundation it was providing one hundred meals a day for the poor of Bristol.¹³ Early English work of good quality can also be found in the north porch of St Mary Redcliffe, though it is now concealed by the highly-decorated outer porch. The proliferation and extension of churches, chapelries, hospitals and almshouses in Bristol continued during the early fourteenth century. The most notable and impressive work, and Bristol's major contribution to architectural advance, is undoubtedly the reconstruction of the choir of St Augustine's as a vaulted hall church with three aisles of equal height. This is clearly the work of outstanding designers and craftsmen of great originality, among them possibly William Joy, master mason at Wells, who is said to have trained at St Augustine's *c.* 1330. The manner in which the vault is supported, the feeling of space and the light which is brought into the whole interior is a remarkable achievement and provides the most exciting and forward-looking piece of medieval architecture in Bristol.¹⁴

Much of this work, together with the new eastern Lady Chapel, with its notable 'stellate' tomb recesses and highly-decorated east end, was done during the time of one of the greatest of Bristol's abbots, Edmund Knowle (1306-32). The Berkeley dominance is again made plain by the heraldry of the windows, the many shields with which the Lady Chapel is adorned, and by the delightful Berkeley chapel on the south side of the choir, entered through a small sacristy with a fine 'flying-rib' vault. The Berkeley chapel also contains a late-medieval candelabrum, constructed of latten and of very high quality, which was rescued from the ruins of the Temple church Victoria Street, during the blitz of 1940 (Fig. 8). The Black Death of 1348-9 and subsequent visitations of the plague hit Bristol and the west country very hard. In Bristol itself, between thirty-five and forty per cent of the population fell victim to the disease, and a list of fifty-two members of the town council in 1349 has fifteen names struck through to indicate that they were dead.¹⁵ Recovery was however remarkably rapid, and the 1350s and 1360s witnessed a period of outstanding prosperity for Bristol as the export of woollen cloth increased greatly, superseding the earlier trade in raw wool. Expanding trade brought great profits to the merchants of Bristol, such as Robert Cheddre, who more than a century later, was remembered as the richest man ever known in Bristol. This wealth and prosperity provided the money for the rebuilding, enlargement and decoration of Bristol parish churches, and in addition, several new chapels, almshouses and hospitals were founded. Most notable was the rebuilding of St Mary Redcliffe, and the hexagonal north porch with its complex and elaborate decoration survives from this period. Another fine building of the late fourteenth century was the Chapel of the Assumption, built over the roadway of Bristol bridge, which was lined on either side by shops. This was a chantry foundation, charged with the duty 'to keep and repair the Bridge of Bristol, piers arches and walls for the defence thereof against the ravages of the sea, ebbing and flowing daily under the same.'¹⁶

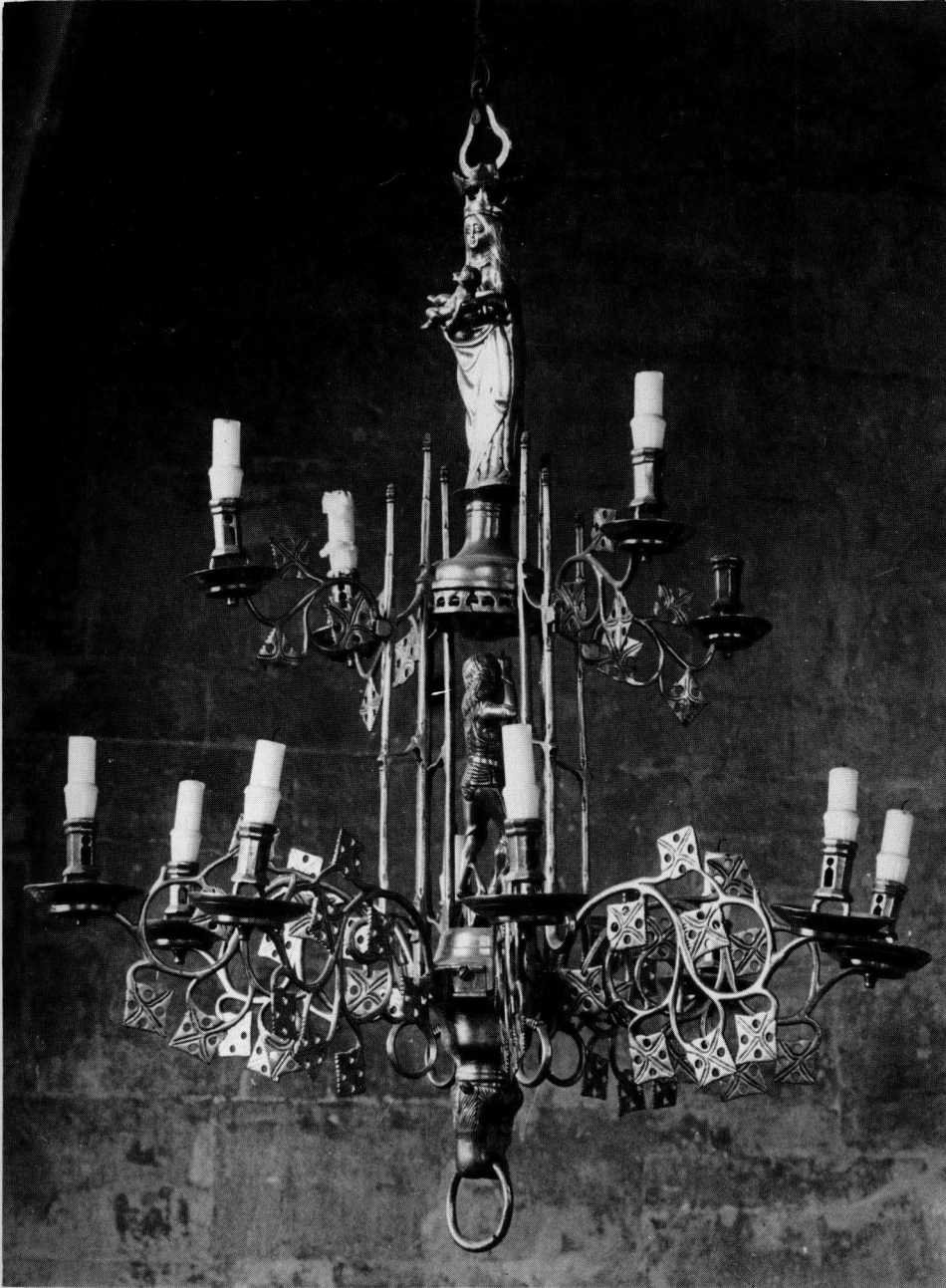


Fig. 8

Medieval candelabrum in the Berkeley Chapel, Bristol Cathedral
A fine latten candelbrum of the late fifteenth century, with figures of the Virgin and Child and of St George. It was originally in the Temple church

Wealthy merchants and ship owners such as William Canynges the Elder, Richard le Spicer, John Spicer, Walter Derby, John Barnstaple, Edmund Blanket, Walter Frampton, and William Spencer financed building work and founded numerous chapels and chantries during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. An example is Thomas Knappe, who in the late fourteenth century left money towards the rebuilding of St Nicholas' church, and also endowed a chapel of St John the Evangelist, where mass was to be said daily at 5.00 a.m. for merchants, mariners, craftsmen and servants.¹⁷ Other merchants contributed generously towards the lavish rebuilding of St Werburgh's, St Peter's, St John the Baptist and St Mary-le-Port.

The most conspicuous expenditure of all was witnessed at St Mary Redcliffe, which was almost totally reconstructed on the grandest scale. The task of tracing the history of this great church has been made more difficult by the misleading reports of late-medieval chroniclers and by the fanciful imaginings of charlatans such as

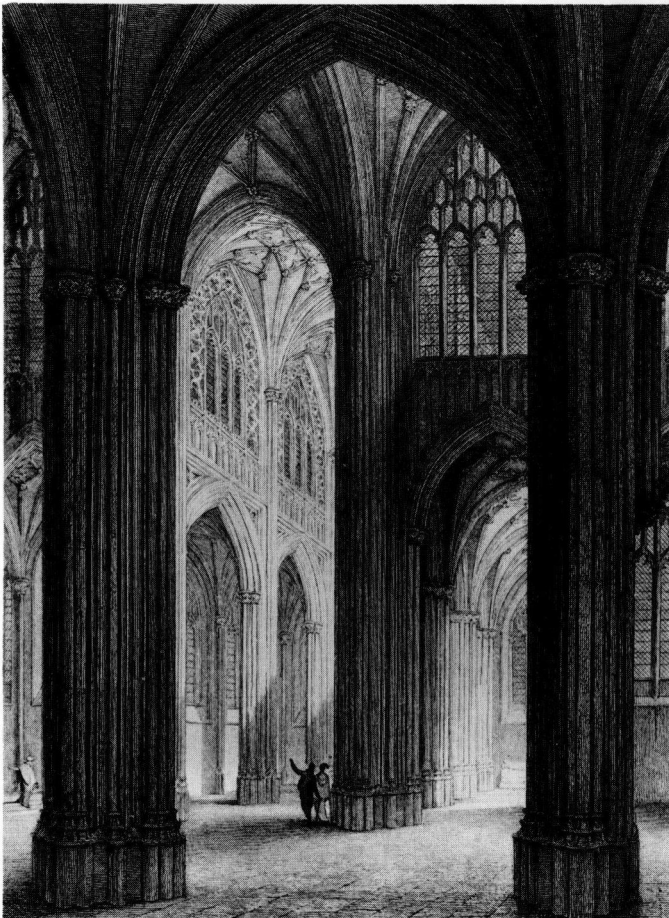


Fig. 9

St Mary Redcliffe:
view of the interior

This drawing of 1813 shows the splendour and great height of the vaulted nave and transepts, and is a reminder of the wealth and piety of the Bristol merchants who financed its massive reconstruction during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries

(Britton, J., *History and antiquities of Bristol Cathedral* (1836))

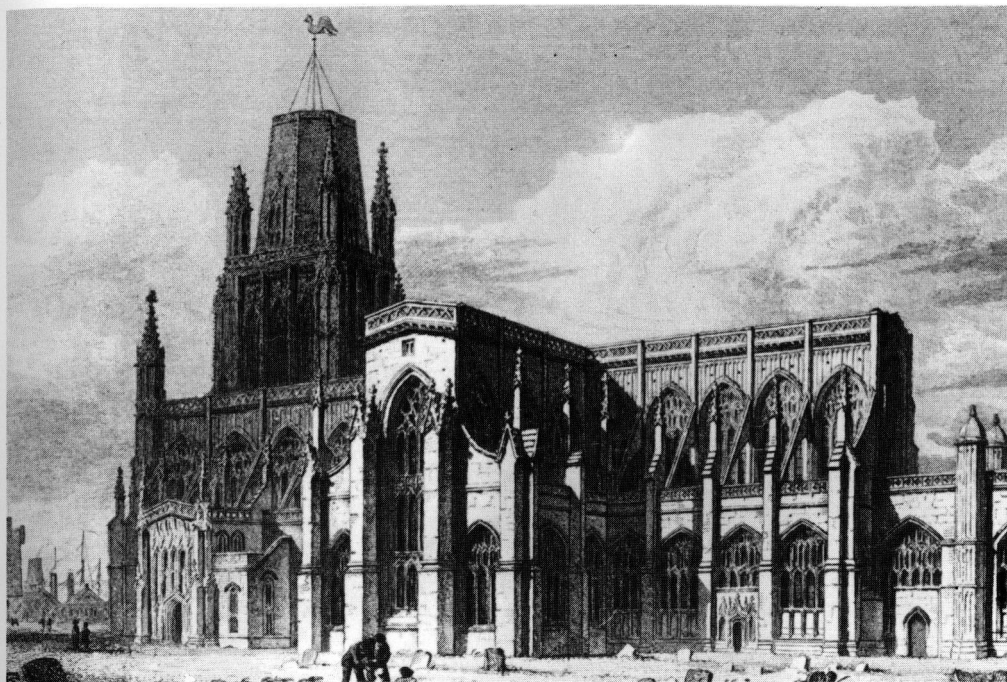


Fig. 10

St Mary Redcliffe from the south-east

On a slight rise above the Avon, the massive church dominates the harbour and the industrial suburbs from which so much of the wealth of medieval Bristol was derived. The spire was struck by lightning in 1446, and the topmost section was not added until 1872

(Britton, J., *History and antiquities of Bristol Cathedral* (1836))

Thomas Chatterton, but the main sequence of its architectural development is clear. The first church on the site was built early in the twelfth century to serve the needs of the industrial community which had grown up on that side of the Avon, within the large parish of Bedminster, and in 1158 this church was granted to Salisbury cathedral. By *c.*1200 a porch had been built, and the lower stage of a tower at the north-west corner, possibly replacing an earlier central tower. The elaborately-decorated, hexagonal, north porch was added to the original porch by *c.*1330. During the prosperous years of the second half of the fourteenth century, the church was greatly enlarged in an amazingly ambitious scheme, with a high nave complete with aisles and transepts, the whole building vaulted throughout (Fig. 9). The main part of the work was completed by *c.*1380. St Mary Redcliffe is the most potent reminder of the wealth of medieval Bristol and of the way in which this community of merchants, ship-owners and cloth-workers was prepared to lavish their profits upon such grandiose essays in ecclesiastical architecture (Fig. 10). Since St Mary Redcliffe was so much

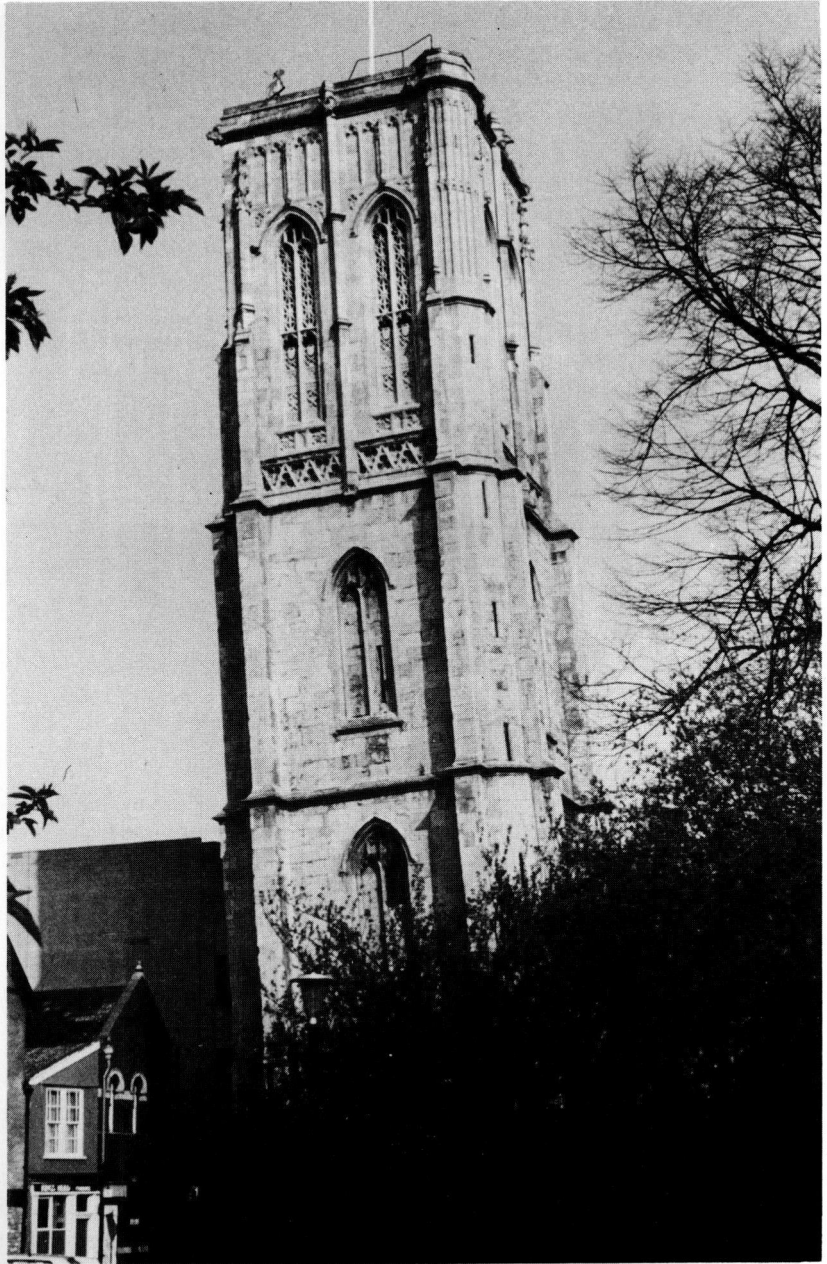


Fig. 11

The Tower of the Temple Church

The tower is all that remains intact of the Temple Church which was gutted by bombing. In spite of its remarkable lean, the tower resisted the bombs and is a good example of the fine towers which were added to so many Bristol churches during the fifteenth century

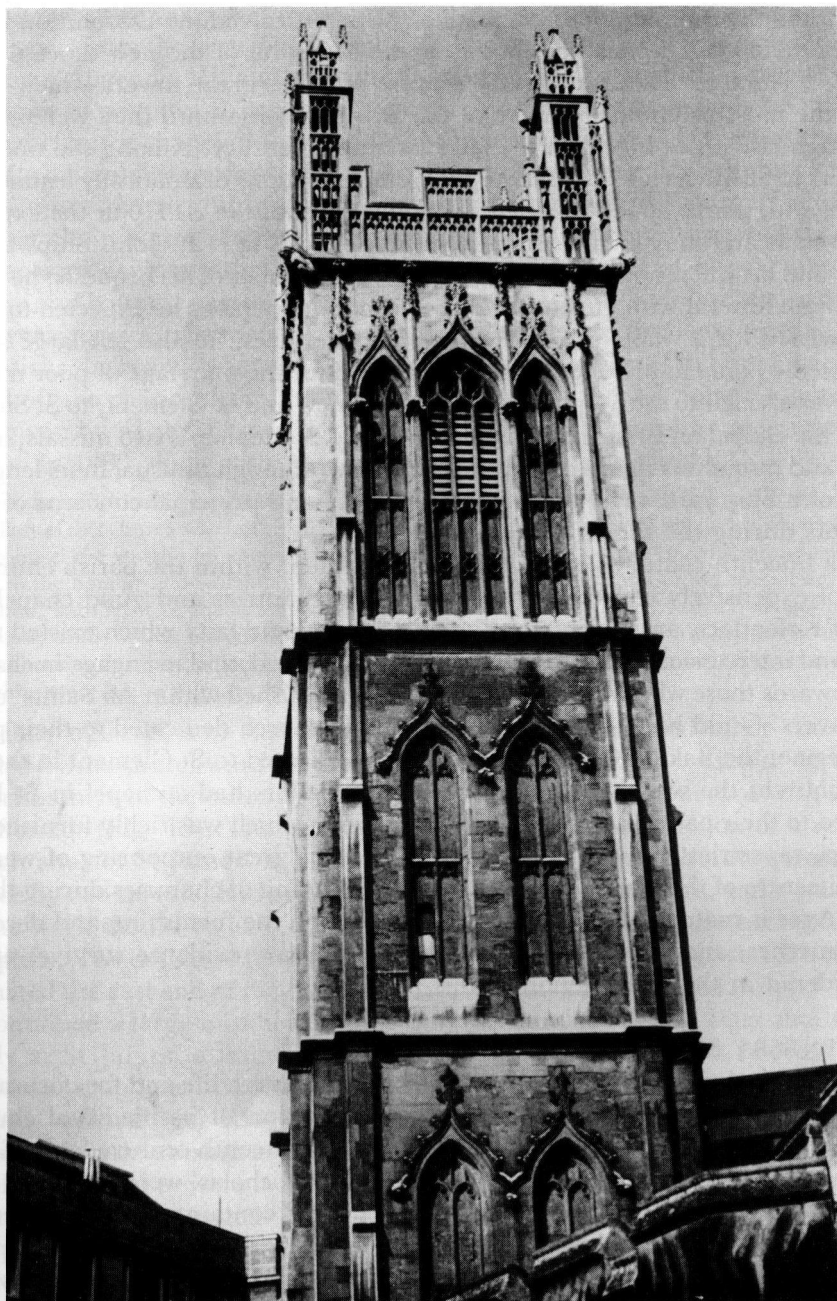


Fig. 12

The Tower of St Stephen's Church

St Stephen's dominated the waterfront along the Frome, and the tower was built c.1470 at the cost of John Shipward, one of the wealthiest of the Bristol merchants

grander than the remnant of St Augustine's which survived the Dissolution in 1539, it is remarkable that it was not chosen as the cathedral of the new diocese created in 1542.¹⁸ Another fifteenth-century feature was the great towers which were to remain the most prominent feature of the Bristol skyline until they were obscured by the high-rise office blocks of the later twentieth century. Among the finest were the towers of St Michael's, St Mark's, the Temple, with its dramatically leaning tower (Fig. 11) and, above all, St Stephen's which was rebuilt in *c.* 1470 at the expense of the merchant and mayor of Bristol, John Shipward (Fig. 12). John Shipward died in 1473, and his will is notable for its length and the number of his bequests; he ordered an elaborate funeral with gifts to the large number of persons he expected to attend, and provision for a whole series of anniversary services; he also left large sums of money to the poor, to prisoners and debtors, and for the marriage of poor maidens; money was also left to the hospitals of St Bartholomew and St Clement, to St Stephen's church, the chapel on Bristol bridge, and he left to St Stephen's two missals, a silver-gilt cup and numerous richly-coloured vestments. Although unusual in its length and detail, John Shipward's will is typical of the piety and principal concerns of Bristol merchants during the fifteenth century.¹⁹

The fifteenth century also saw the establishment within the parish churches of Bristol of expensively constructed and furnished chantries and guild chapels. The Guild of Kalendars, an ancient association of clergy and laity which existed to offer masses and intercessions for the brethren, living and dead, and to engage in charitable works towards those who were old and sick, was established within All Saints' church; the Weavers' Guild had a chantry in the Temple church dedicated to their patron, St Catherine; the Bakers' Guild had a chantry dedicated to St Clement in the Black Friars' church; the wealthy Guild of Merchant Tailors had a chapel in St Ewen's dedicated to their patron saint, St John the Baptist, which was richly furnished with paintings, tapestries, screens and vestments.²⁰ This great outpouring of wealth on the architecture of the parish churches and the founding of chantries during the later Middle Ages is matched by a similar expenditure on the furnishing and decoration of the churches, and for this considerable documentary evidence survives and will be considered in the final section of this paper.

DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Bristol is rich in surviving late-medieval records of Church life and for documentary evidence of the appearance, furnishing and decoration of its medieval churches. Excellent churchwardens' accounts survive from the fifteenth century for St Ewen's, All Saints' and St John the Baptist; the accounts of St Nicholas' were destroyed during the bombing, but detailed notes survive; all of these contain valuable material on parish finances, benefactors, details of church life and inventories of church furnishings and possessions. Six other Bristol parish churches have churchwardens' accounts dating from the sixteenth century; account books for several of the chantry foundations also survive, as do more than three hundred late-medieval wills, and the accounts of religious guilds and fraternities, such as the Guild of Kalendars.²¹ From these abundant sources it is possible to construct a full picture of late-medieval religious life in Bristol, as well as of all the destruction which occurred during the changes

of the sixteenth-century Reformation.

Extracts from the very long inventory of the goods of St Ewen's church in 1454-5 are given in Appendix III, and show the fine furnishings, rich possessions and colourful appearance of a typical Bristol parish church. Also within St Ewen's was the richly-equipped chantry chapel of the Guild of Merchant Tailors.²² Likewise, the Church Book of All Saints' shows that the church was ablaze with colour, lights, vestments, wall-paintings and rich fittings. There were eight altars in the church, all decorated and hung about with elaborate tapestries. In the nave there were wall paintings, a great tapestry depicting the 'Dance of Pauls' or the Dance of Death, stained-glass windows and banners suspended from the roof and walls. There were also numerous fine service books, vestments, seven silver chalices, as well as crosses, censers, candlesticks, bells and other precious objects. A description of the rood screen which divided off the chancel from the nave is contained in the All Saints' Church Book. It was given by Alice Chester, the energetic widow of the wealthy merchant, Henry Chester, in 1483 along with numerous other gifts to the church:

Moreover the said Alice ii years before her death being in good prosperity and health of body, considering the roodloft of this church was but single, and nothing beauty according to the parish intent, she, taking to her counsel the worshipful of the parish, with others having the best understanding and sights in carving to the honour and worship of Almighty God and his saints, and of her special devotion unto this church, hath let it be made a new roodloft in carved work, fulfilled with 22 images on her own proper cost; of the which images be 3 principal, a Trinity in the middle, a Christopher in the north side; and besides this the 2 pillars bearing up the loft, everyone having 4 houses set on in carved work, and within every house a image.²³

Many other gifts of statues, furnishings, plate, glass and other valuables are recorded by the churchwardens of All Saints', and there is no reason to suppose that the parishioners of the other Bristol churches were any less generous with their gifts and offerings (Fig. 13). The contract survives for the construction of a reredos for the high altar of St James' in 1498 at a cost of £110. The elaborate reredos was to be made by two carvers, Richard and Roger Ridge of Staffordshire, and it was specified that the work should be as good or better than the reredos at the nearby church of St Stephen. The details of the contract make it clear that this huge reredos must have dominated the east end of the church, that it was intricately carved, brightly coloured and contained a large number of images of the saints. It is also clear that there was already at St James' a large rood screen. This contract is given in Appendix IV.

Some years later, in 1505, a further addition was made to the furnishings of St James' when Roger Ridge was commissioned to make two screens of the same standard of workmanship as the reredos. The screens were to extend on both sides of the high altar, they were to include an Easter Sepulchre, and among the decorations were to be 'fourteen angells'. The cost of this work, met by the parish, was forty-three pounds.²⁴ Work was also done on the furnishing, decoration and adornment of St Mary Redcliffe, much of it paid for by the extremely wealthy merchant, William Canynges the younger, who before his death in 1474 became a priest and Dean of the Collegiate foundation at Westbury just outside of Bristol (Fig. 14). As well as founding two well-endowed chantries at St Mary Redcliffe, William Canynges also contributed largely to the church, and among his gifts in 1470 was an Easter Sepulchre which included:



Fig. 13

Eagle Lectern from St Nicholas Latten lectern of c.1480, originally part of the possessions of St Nicholas and now at St Stephen's. This is a good example of the many expensive treasures and furnishings which are so carefully listed in the surviving inventories of the medieval Bristol churches. The lectern is referred to in a late-fifteenth-century inventory as 'a gret egypt for to rede the gospel on, of latten'

Gordon Kelsey

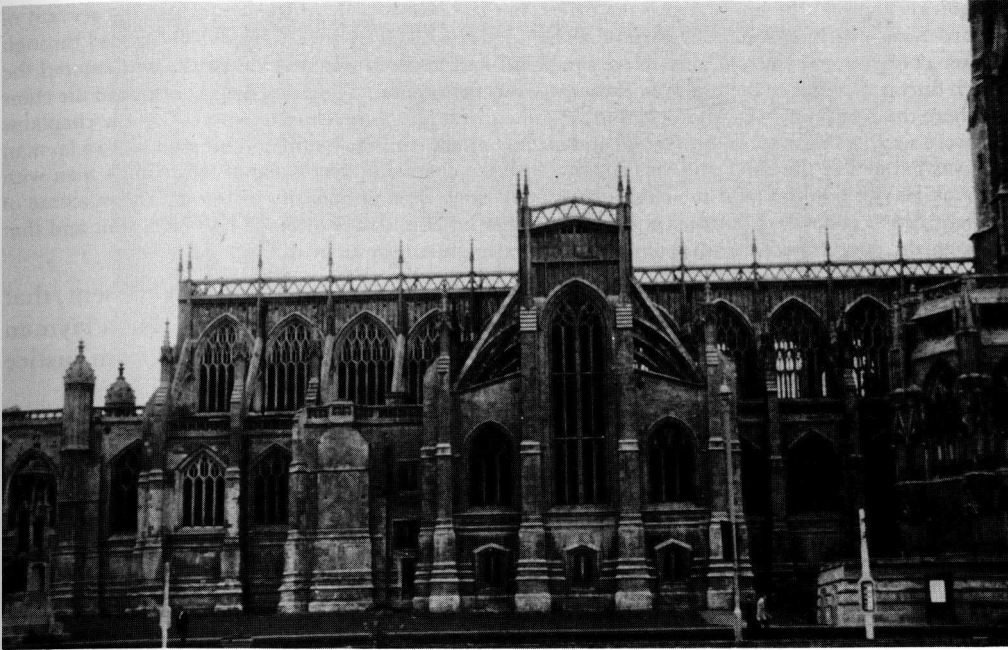


Fig. 14

St Mary Redcliffe from the north

By far the finest of all the Bristol churches, St Mary Redcliffe also provides the best evidence for the great prosperity of Bristol during the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and for the wealth of the Bristol merchants who contributed so lavishly to its sumptuous architecture

- A new sepulchre well gilt with fine gold . . .
- An image of Gold Almighty rising out of the same sepulchre . . .
- Heaven made of timber and stained cloths . . .
- Hell made of timber and iron work with Devils to the number of xiii
- iii Knights armed keeping the sepulchre with their weapons in their hands . . .
- iiii pair of angels wings for iiii angels made of timber and well painted . . .
- The Holy Ghost coming out of heaven into the sepulchre . . .²⁵

Among the deeds preserved in the archives of All Saints' there survives the account of an inquiry held in 1457 concerning a brawl which took place in the church during Vespers on a Sunday evening. This gives a rare glimpse of a medieval service in progress. The inquiry was conducted by Thomas Wheaton, clerk, commissary of the Bishop of Worcester, and was held because of the popular rumour that the church of All Saints' had been polluted by the shedding of blood. From the inquiry the following facts emerged, which may be summarized as follows:

A priest was suspected of having stolen various articles and of taking them away into Somerset. One Sunday evening he was seen in Bristol and entered the inn of a common cook next to the church of All Saints' for food. A bailiff from the Somerset part of Bristol beyond the river Avon was informed

and quickly came to the inn to arrest the priest, but the priest 'seeing his enemies and the servant of the lord King watching him . . . feared that he might be taken by them. He quickly passed through another door into the church. . . .' Here the bailiff and his men pursued the priest, and entered the church during Vespers as the psalm *In Exitu Israel* was being sung. The priest sought refuge in the choir and there the bailiff followed and began to drag the priest out of the church; whereupon the chaplains who were singing in the choir intervened and began to fight with the bailiff and his men. Also a layman who was habited in the choir and was singing with the chaplains struck one of the bailiff's men with the book he was holding, and the clasp of the book drew a small quantity of blood. The outcome of the fight does not appear, but the inquiry found that no abundance of blood had been spilt and that although the church was slightly polluted, services might continue in it.²⁶

It is interesting that no mention is made of any congregation being present, that it was apparently possible to go straight from the inn into the church, that a layman was robed and in the choir with the priests, and that a priest fleeing from justice should have sought refuge not just in a church but also in the next diocese.

It should not be supposed that the Church in Bristol was universally popular or that there were no critics among the laity during the century or so before the Reformation. There are several references to heresy and to the trials of heretics, and it is clear that Lollard beliefs and objections to many aspects of the Church's teaching had found favour with a significant number of people in Bristol, especially among clothworkers and tradesmen from the parishes of St Thomas, the Temple and Bedminster. Early in the sixteenth century, for example, there are references to heresy-trials of dyers, weavers, smiths, carpenters, a carpet-maker, a wire-drawer and a bow-maker. There were other critics who were concerned about the expense of the many religious processions and the cost of the meals, wine and other refreshments provided for the participants.²⁷

But such critics remained in a minority, and for most people in Bristol, civic and guild ceremonies, social life and entertainment were centred on the parish churches and formed a colourful and repetitive annual round of processions, ritual and feasting which provided an ordered framework for the passage of each year. There is abundant evidence of the popularity of the processions around the town, and especially of the great Corpus Christi celebrations. At St Nicholas' there was a large pyx, in which the Blessed Sacrament was carried in procession, and there were regular payments to the priests and choir for taking part in the elaborate ceremonies and services associated with the various processions. At St Ewen's, the cost included breakfast and a substantial dinner for those who participated in the services and processions, and at the church of St John the Baptist a dinner was provided for the priests who attended, while the church possessed banners, torches, vestments and images which were used in the procession, including a large silver image of the Blessed Virgin valued at forty pounds.²⁸

The Church was also totally involved in the civic life of Bristol; the annual round of ceremonies and processions was established by custom for the Mayor and was carefully recorded by the Town Clerk, Robert Ricart, towards the end of the fifteenth century; this emphasizes the essential link between the civic authority and the parish churches (Fig. 15). From the time of his oath-taking in September, the Mayor embarked on an ordered round of visits to the parish churches, inspection of chantries, listening to sermons and attendance at 'obits' or anniversary masses.²⁹ Perhaps the

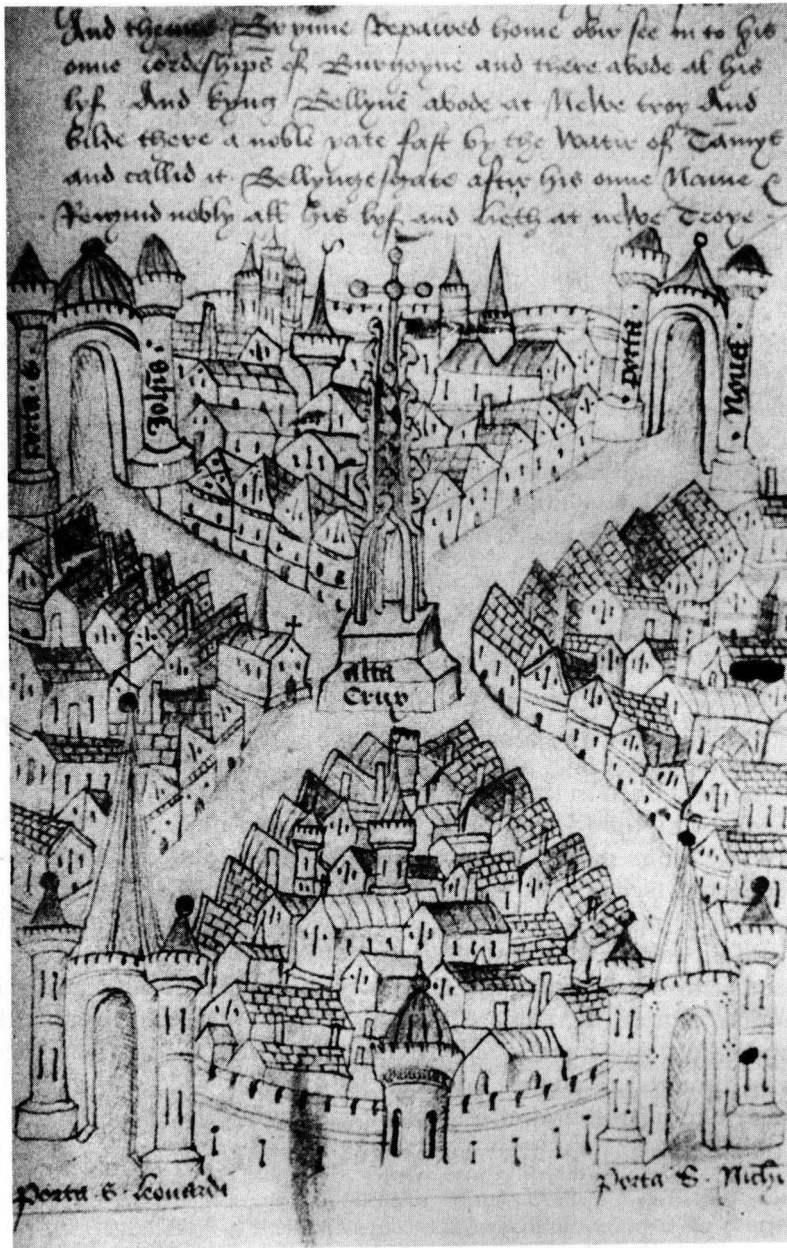


Fig. 15
Plan of Bristol c. 1480

This town plan is one of the earliest of its kind in the country and comes from the *Kalendar or Annals of Bristol* started by Robert Ricart, who was elected town clerk in 1478. It shows the four main streets of the medieval town, with the High Cross at the centre, the fortified walls, the four main gates, the crowded houses and the many churches towering above them

most interesting of all the ceremonies occurred on 6 December, the feast of St Nicholas, when the Mayor and Council walked to St Nicholas' church to join in the ceremony of the boy bishop, hear the boy bishop's sermon and receive his blessing. The elaborate ceremony was evidently taken very seriously in Bristol and an inventory of St Nicholas' in 1433 lists the mitre and crosier for the boy bishop, eight banners to be carried in his procession, together with the statue of St Nicholas.³⁰

Some parish churches also played a practical part in Bristol life. A few controlled the water supply in their respective parts of the town, and St Johns', All Saints', St Nicholas' and St Mary Redcliffe all had conduits and taps, and operated a public water supply. A fourteenth-century deed belonging to St John's church still has attached to it a piece of the lead pipe by which the water was brought from Brandon Hill, and the water still flows along the pipe in a well-built culvert beneath Park Street and across the Frome, and still emerges from the cock attached to St John's church on the city wall. The clock at St Nicholas' provided the standard time for the town, sounded the curfew, and established the time at which the services were to be conducted in many chantries. The St James' fair, which was so important in the economic life of the whole region, was controlled by the churchwardens of St James' and the records of the trade and standings at the fair survive among the parish records. The parish churches and chantries between them provided a considerable amount of education for the children of Bristol citizens.³¹ Other annual ceremonies closely linked to the parish churches included the rogationtide processions, the St George's day celebrations, the Robin Hood and Little John appearances on May Day and the 'setting the watch' ceremonies on the feast of St John the Baptist (24 June) and the feast of St Peter (29 June). Those taking part in these latter ceremonies were encouraged in their attendance and sustained in their efforts by the provision of no less than 114 gallons of wine dispensed by the Mayor on St John's day and by the Sheriff on St Peter's day.³² Such occasions no doubt provided a valuable outlet and release for the inevitable tensions which built up in such a tightly-packed yet rigidly-structured society as late-medieval Bristol, where all classes lived closely together and yet where there were great differences in wealth and social status.

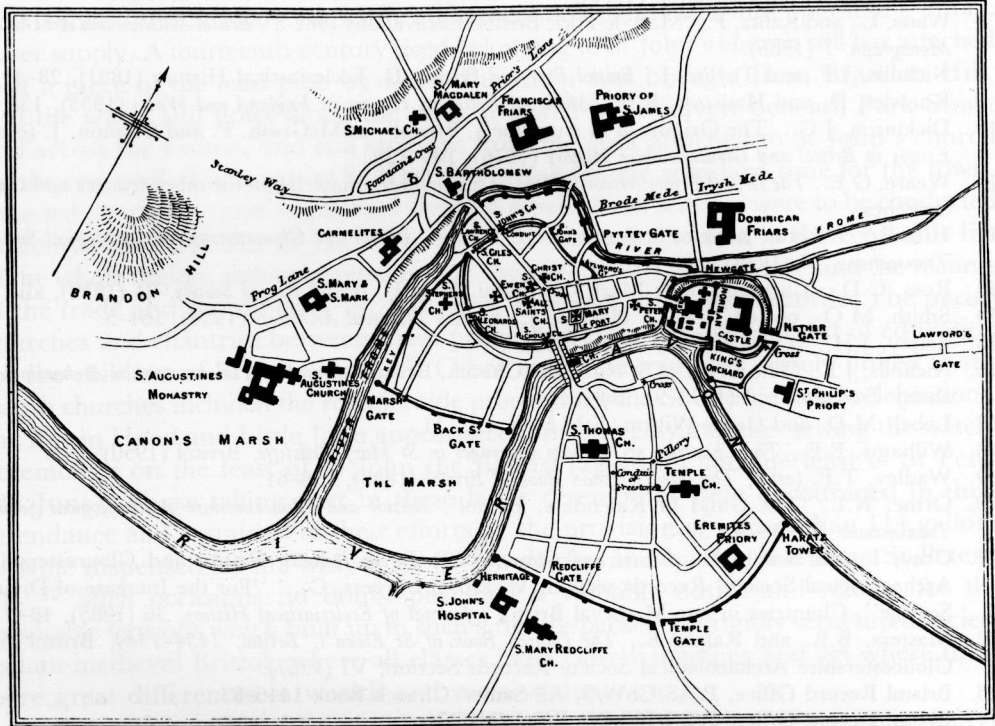
As in other towns throughout the country, the destruction or secularization of the rich annual pattern of religious festivals, ceremonies, processions, drinkings, bonfires and plays which occurred as part of all the manifold changes of the Reformation, brought an abrupt break in the social as well as in the religious life of Bristol and had a profound effect upon community life in the town.

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Appendix I

Churches and Religious Institutions in Bristol during the Thirteenth Century



Appendix II

Bristol Parish Churches and Major Religious Institutions
at the end of the Middle Ages

	Parish churches	Houseling Population in 1547
*	St Werburgh	160
*	St Lawrence	100
	St James	520
	St Thomas	600
	St Philip	514
	St John the Baptist	227
	St Mary Redcliffe	600
	St Nicholas	800
+	St Peter	400
	Christ Church	326
	St Stephen	461
	All Saints	180
+	Temple or Holy Cross	480
*	St Ewen	56
	St Michael	252
*	St Leonard	120
+	St Mary-le-Port	180
+	St Augustine the Less	—
*	= Demolished	
+	= Destroyed by bombing	

Monastic Houses

Monasteries	Order	Net Income in 1535	Number of Religious at Dissolution
St Augustine	Augustinian	£670	12
St James	Benedictine	57	4
St Mary Magdalen	Augustinian Canonesses	21	2

Friaries

Order	Number of Friars at the Dissolution in 1538
Dominican	6
Franciscan	6
Carmelite	4
Augustinian	8

Major Chapels, Hospitals, etc.

St Mark's Hospital or the Gaunts	St Catherine's Hospital
St Bartholomew's Hospital	St Lawrence's Hospital
Chapel of the Assumption on Bristol Bridge	Chapel of St John the Evangelist
Almshouses and Chapel of the Three Kings of Cologne	Almshouses of the Holy Trinity and St George
The Fraternity of the Kalendarers	Spicer's Almshouse
St Peter's Hospital	All Saints' Almshouse
St John's Hospital	Canynge's Almshouses

Sources

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Appendix III

Extract from the Inventory of St Ewen's Church 1454-5

Inventory of Books	Mass Books, antiphoners, portuas, psalters, graduals, ordinals, legends, processional, manuals and other books 'not after the Use of Salisbury'.
Inventory of Vestments	Numerous vestments, copes, altar-hangings, towels, banner-cloths of green, gold, yellow, blue, red and white.
Inventory of Jewels of the Church	<p>'A cross of silver and over gilt, hanging there images, first of St Ewen, our Lady, St John, St Katherine, St Margaret, St John the Evangelist, the iiii Evangelists, iiii Patriarchs and other stuff more as it appeareth, which weigheth clean gold and silver justly and truly weighed 116 ounces'.</p> <p>The best chalice of silver, a little chalice of silver, a cup of silver, a box of ivory bound with silver, a censer of silver, a ship and spoon of silver, a paxbred of silver and gilt, a chalice gilt, a chalice of silver part gilt, a standing maser.</p> <p>Crosses, basins, lamps, candlesticks.</p>
Other possessions	<p>A pair of organs, iii bells in the steeple, the Easter Sepulchre, images, banners, carvings for the images and the Rood during Lent.</p> <p>Coats and other clothing for the images 'The long ladder to go up in to the Steeple'.</p>

Sources

The Church Book of St Ewen's, Bristol Record Office, P/ST E/A1; Masters, B.R. and Ralph, E. (eds), *The Church Book of St Ewen's*, Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society (1967), 1-11. The spelling of the extracts has been modernized.

Appendix IV

Contract for Making a Reredos for St James' Church 1498

This Indenture made the xxvi day of the month of February in the year of the reign of King Henry the viith after the conquest of England the xxiiiith, between Robert Rickard and Richard Bird, baker, procurators of the parish church of St James in Bristowe, John Swayne, Thomas Keynes, Thomas Prout and William Nele, by the consent and assent of all the hole parishioners of that one party, and Richard Ridge of Kynwar in the County of Stafford and Roger Rygde, son of the said Roger of the said Town and County, Kervers, of that other party, witnesseth, that the said Richard Rygde and Roger shall sufficiently make or do to be made to the said church off St James a Reredos at the high altar thire after the forme and effect of a reredos being at the church of St Stephen's of Bristol at the high altar thire, in all manner workmanship to be as good or better.

To arise in height with iiii storeys of principal images, and secondaries to fulfil after the height. And in breadth from wall to wall, and in height upwards to the wallplates of the said church of St James. And from the reredos to the foremost part of the Rood loft to be set with principal beams as need is, with a flat roof, clean ceiled, and to be brought on paynes after the wideness. And at every cross a Knot clean wrought. And from the seilor down to the foot of the crucifix to be clean gilded without knots.

And the said Richard Rygde and Roger shall find all manner stuff to the said work pertaining, except iron work. And the said Richard and Roger to bring or carry the said work and set it up at the forsaid church of St James by Easter come v years next coming after the date of this present writing upon their own proper costs and charge. And the said Robert Richard and Richard Bird and their successors, procurators, shall pay or do to be paid to the said Richard Rygde and Roger for the said work, so sufficiently done, v score and v li of lawful money of England, and other v li in reward, if the said Richard and Roger deserve it.

Source

Bristol Record Office, Parochial Records of St James'. The spelling has been modernized.