

The Wooden Watching Loft in St. Albans Abbey Church.

BY ERNEST WOOLLEY, F.S.A.

IN St. Albans Abbey Church there were two specimens of Watching Chambers.

The older one shows high up in the West Wall of the South Transept next to the corner into the South Choir Aisle. Having been in the thickness of the wall it is now, however, filled in with concrete in order to assist the arch over the aisle in resisting the thrust of the South Western arch of the tower which showed signs of movement some few years ago.

It was necessary to have an observer on duty there to see that marauders ran off with none of the treasures contained in the opposite chapels which occupied the East side of the South Transept.

Especially that was the case with the chapel next to the South Presbytery aisle, which was then "the Saint's Chapel."

As such it became the depository of the Relics of St. Alban and other priceless treasures, any of which, even occasionally, the most pious worshippers were not above acquiring for their own monastery if they could.

After the church was extended eastwards, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the bejewelled and costly shrine, containing the Relics of St. Alban and of a number of other Saints, was a large silver casket or chest, or perhaps of wood overlaid with silver or gold, and studded with jewels. It stood on the pedestal still to be seen, in part, in the new Saint's Chapel which was built for the purpose during the extension of the church above referred to.

The pedestal had entirely disappeared, but more than two thousand pieces were found during alterations and restorations, and in 1872 put together as we see them to-day.

PLATE I.**The South, Saint's Chapel, side.**

This Watching Loft of oak is stated by Mr. William Page to be the only one now existing with the exception of a similar loft at Christchurch Cathedral at Oxford (St. Albans Cathedral and Abbey Church Guide, 1911), which is part stone and part wood and is illustrated in the Great Western Railway "Cathedrals," 1924. It faces into the Saints Chapel, and a monk who was called keeper of the shrine kept watch and ward in the shelter of the Loft. The back, completely closed, extends into the North Aisle. The length of the South front is 17 ft. 2 ins.; its height 17 ft. $\frac{3}{8}$ in.; height of lower cornice containing the small carvings, 5 ins., and height of the Loft at back, 19 ft. 2 ins., the level of the North aisle being lower than the floor of the Saint's Chapel.

That series of carvings is a wonderful epitome of the story of the Martyrdom of St. Alban, the Angel Host, the daily occupations, the recreations, amusements, and current tales of the people of the place and the whole country.

Those carvings are of the most spirited and descriptive character, and in most cases have, even where to some extent damaged, enough detail left to identify the subject portrayed.

PLATE II. FIG. 1.

Starting in the Saint's Chapel and at the East end of the Watching Loft, the feathered Angel, as I think, singing, seems to me to be nothing short of fascinating. Even though its stature is but little, its pose and expression seem to give it life and character of the finest order.

PLATE II. FIG. 2.

The front eastern end commences with a conventional ornament. The following scene is much damaged, but two men are engaged in gathering grapes, while on the ground in front is a basket containing bunches already gathered.

PLATE III. FIG. 1.

Next to this is an Angel, which I infer from its posture, damaged as it is, was playing a wind instrument, and just showing westwards part of a Hart in the next

scene, badly damaged, and not shown. It is the badge of King Richard II. which is repeated on the back.

PLATE III. FIG. 2.

An Angel badly mutilated but mercifully its exquisite wings survive.

No collection of sculpture such as this would be complete without the favourite oak with its provision of good acorns.

I therefore judge that what is left of this indicates that subject.

PLATE IV. FIG. 1.

The attendant Angel plays a stringed instrument with a plectrum.

I have seen the next variously described, but I have no doubt that it is mowing rye, and indeed the series would be singularly incomplete without that important food of the day.

PLATE IV. FIG. 2.

The central scene gives a dramatic representation of the martyrdom of St. Alban, derived from the wonderful "Vie de St. Auban" ("Life of St. Alban"), written in St. Albans Abbey Scriptorium, illustrated by Matthew Paris, who entered the Monastery in 1217 and died in 1259. (See Plate V., Figs. 1 and 2.)

The headless body of the Saint lies prone, one arm and hand outstretched.

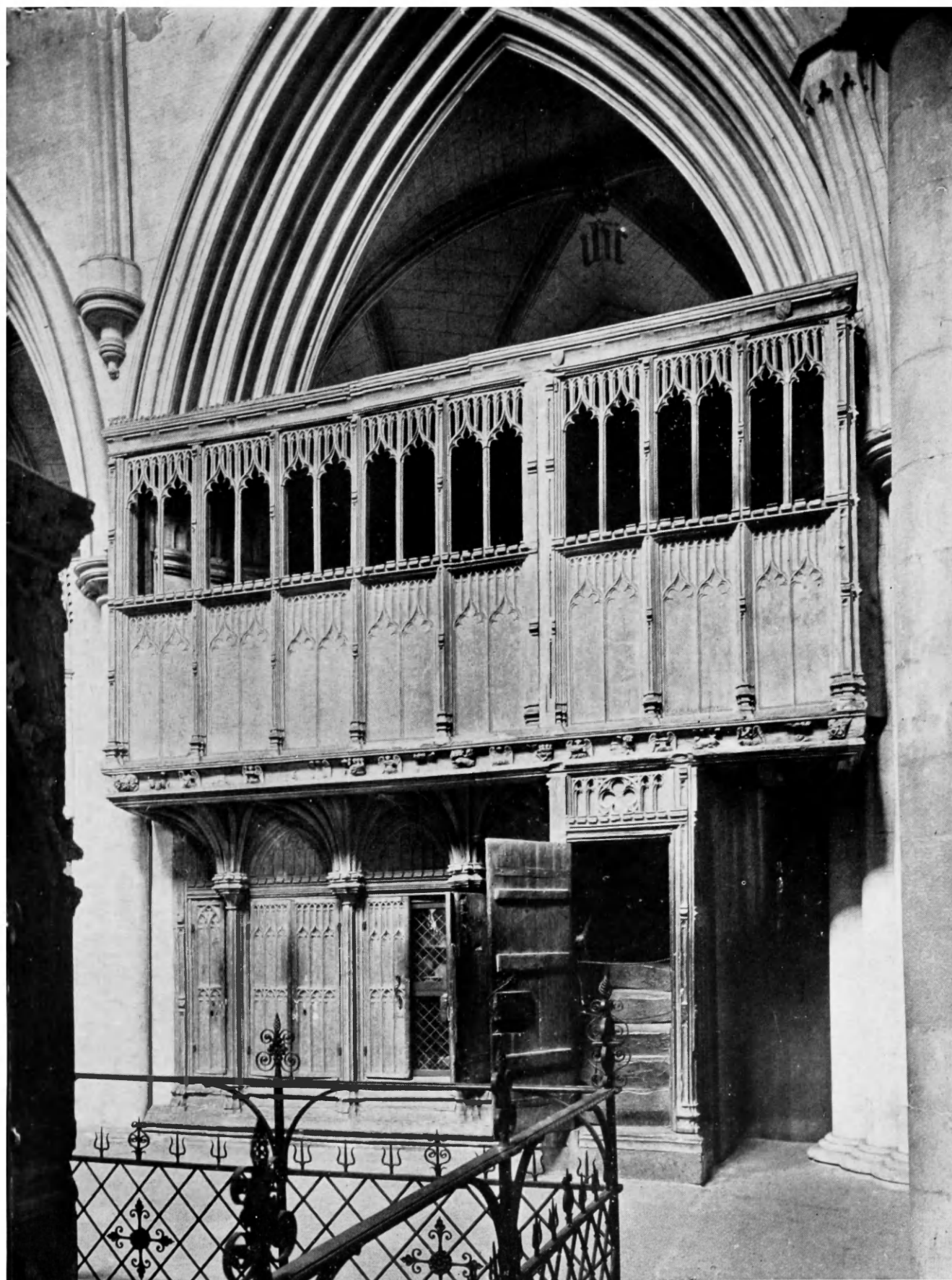
At the top above the hand, as in the illustration (Plate V., Fig. 1) there is the branch of a tree with the head tied to it by the hair, but it is so sadly defaced that the features are obliterated.

A small cross lies on the ground, with the top ending in a circular disc, which had in some cases depicted on it the scene of the Crucifixion.

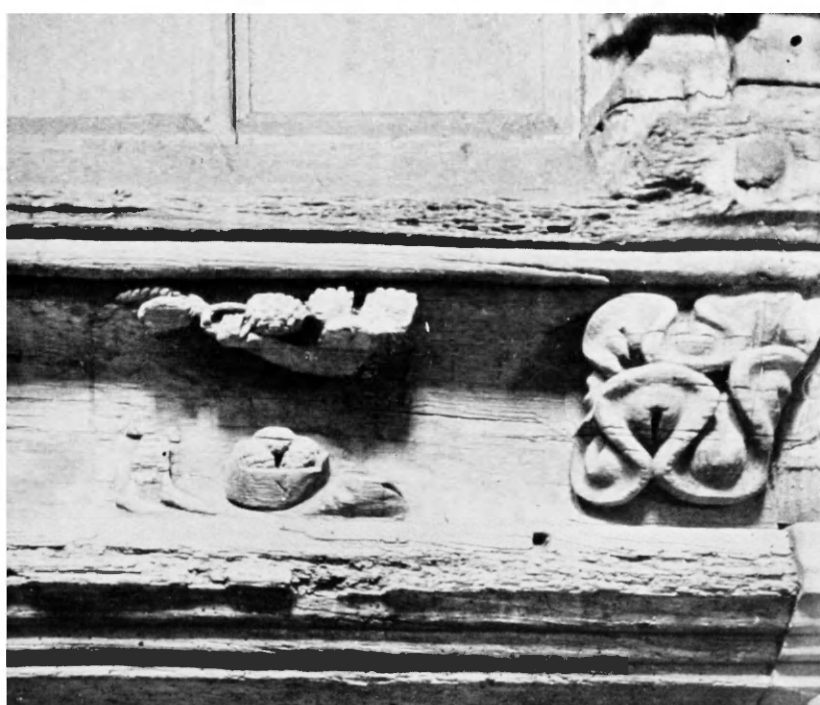
There was in the possession of the Abbey in William of Trumpington's Abbacy, 1214-1235, a silver cross of that description.

The next figure has been cut away leaving just sufficient traces to identify the executioner and his sword with which he has severed the Martyr's body from his head, a scene repeated, and not so much damaged, at the back. (Plate XI., Fig. 1.)

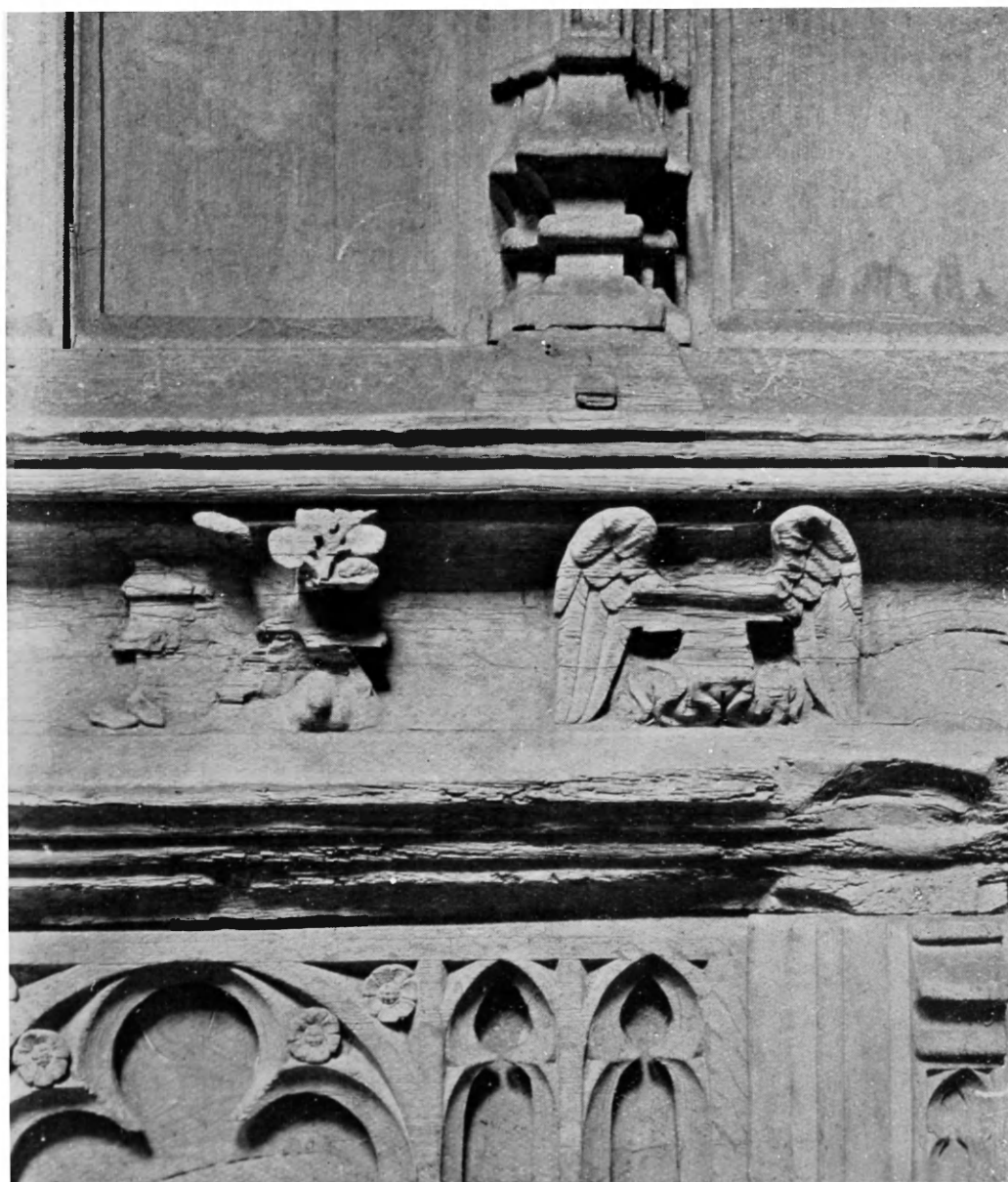
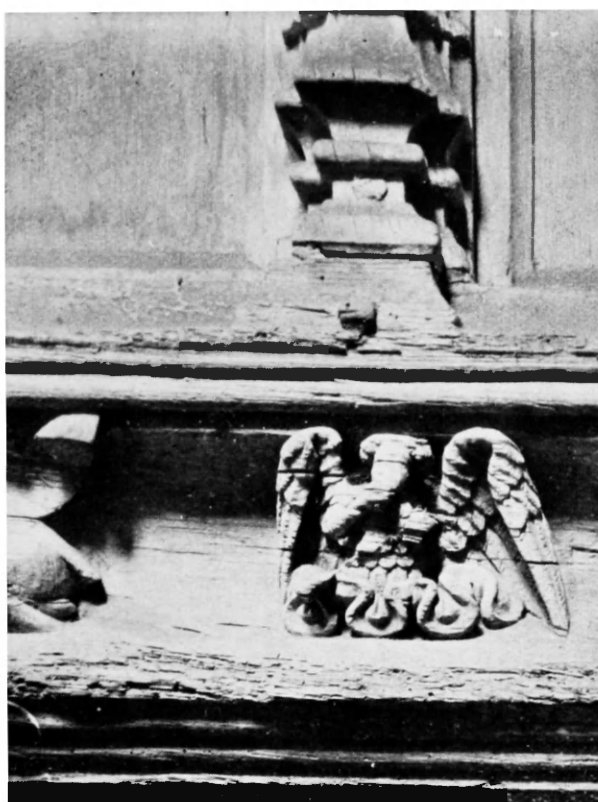
The MS. is now in the Library of Trinity College,



WATCHING LOFT, ST. ALBANS ABBEY CHURCH



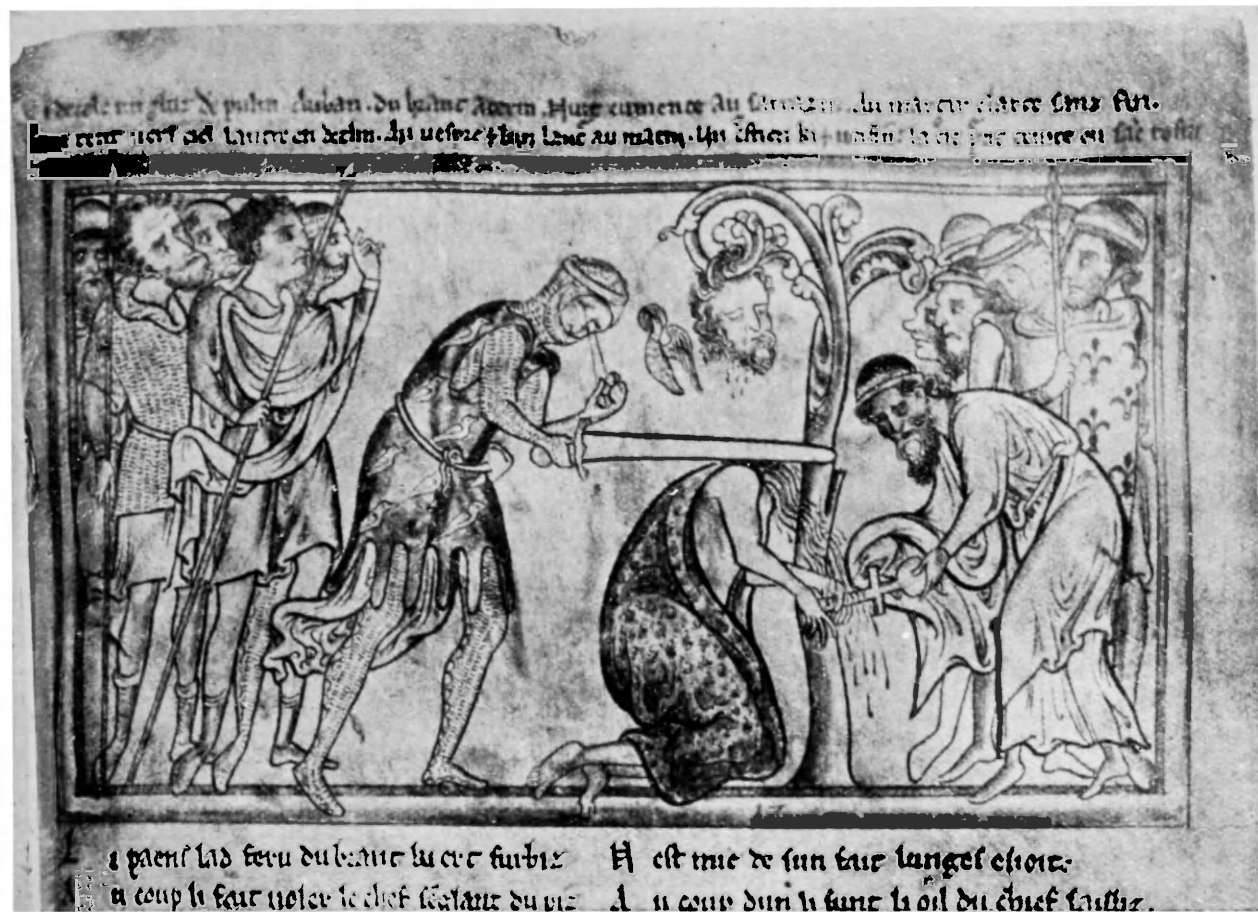
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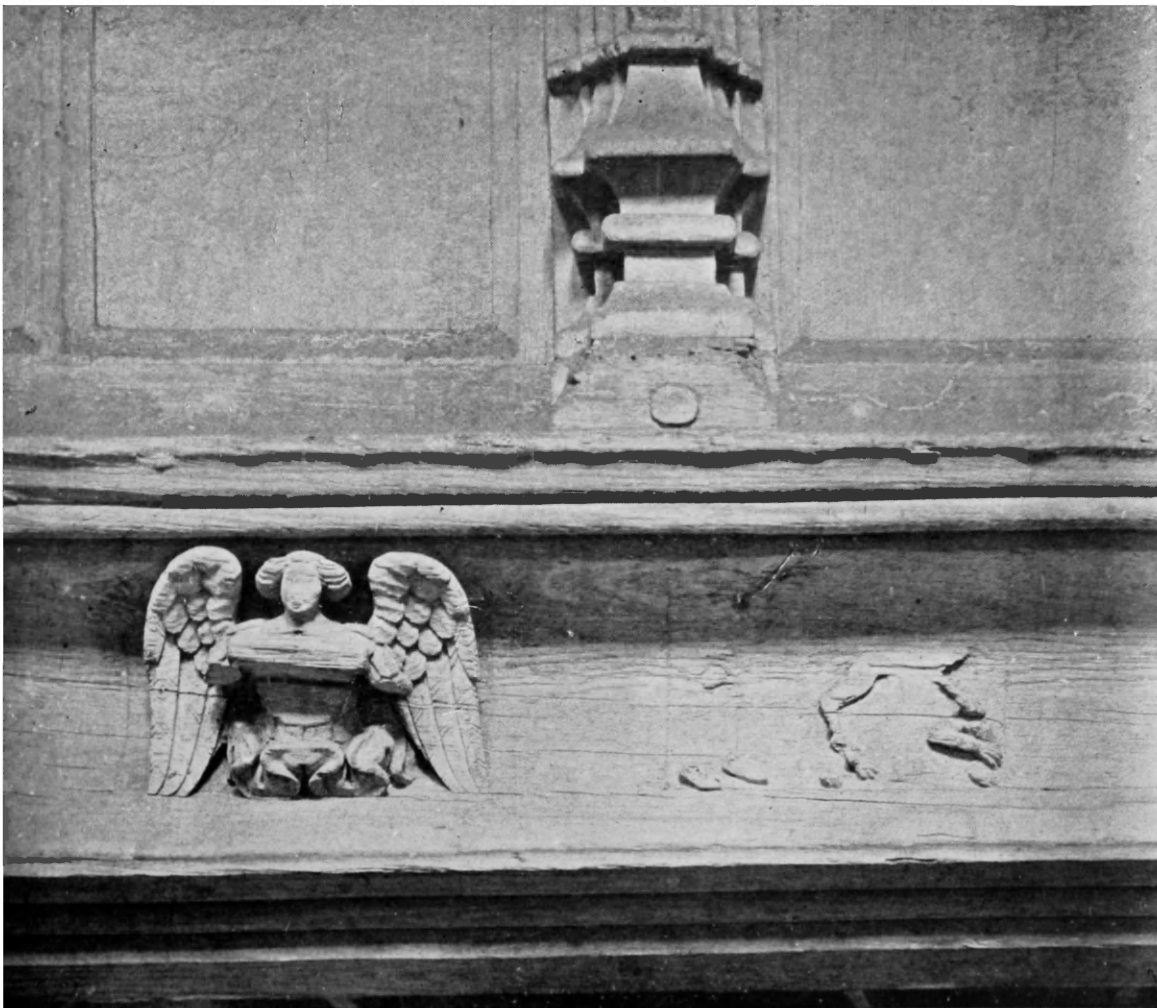
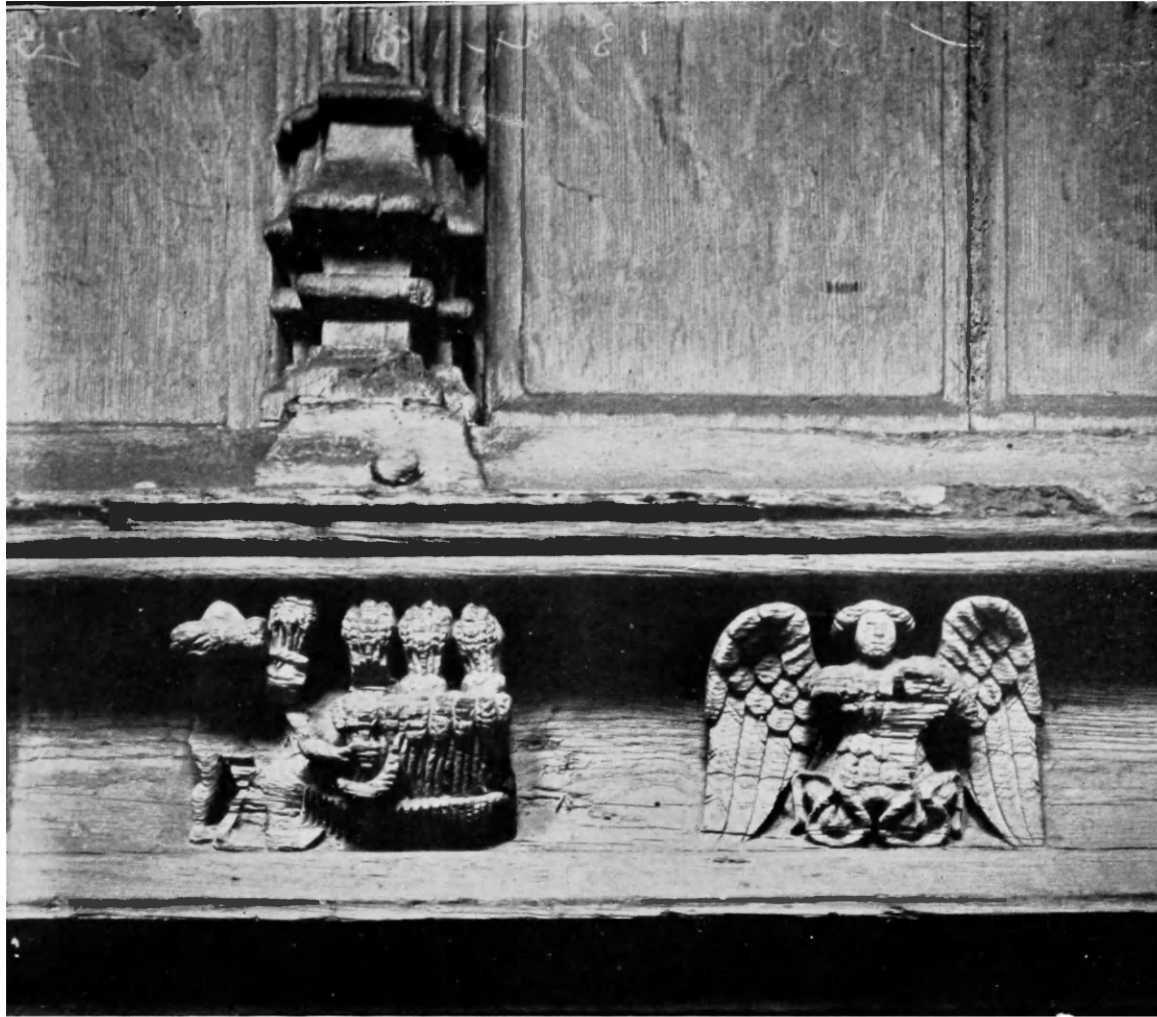
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Dublin (E.1.40), and an account of it written by Dr. M. R. James, F.S.A., Provost of Eton College, with the illustrations, was edited by Mr. W. R. L. Lowe and Mr. E. F. Jacob, and published by the Oxford University Press in 1924.

PLATE V. FIG. 1.

Depicts, from that MS., the Martyrdom, the Martyr's head remaining tied to a branch of the tree by his hair, while his body falls to the ground and the executioner's eyes fall out. The Martyr's soul flies to heaven in the shape of a dove, and the small cross and cloak are handed to the secret Christian who accompanied the Martyr.

PLATE V. FIG. 2.

From the same MS. four of the Monks of the Abbey, two of them with choirmaster staffs crossed at the top, worshipping at the shrine of St. Alban.

It is quite possible, indeed it is most probable, that this picture, No. 50, may be a copy of the shrine, i.e., the casket, not the pedestal, as it was in the thirteenth century.

The occasion was that of the first "elevation" of the Relics of St. Alban.

Above is written in Latin, the shrine of St. Alban, the first Martyr borne into Holy Sion.

The rubric says that there was a small church outside Verulam, built by the converted pagans, which was called Holy Sion, and there St. Alban's shrine was placed until they had finished building the great church. (Dr. M. R. James's introduction to the MS.)

PLATE VI. FIG. 1.

The Angel's instrument is destroyed.

One man reaping wheat with a sickle while another on the left carries a sheaf for stooking, with others made ready on the top.

PLATE VI. FIG. 2.

The two feet of a man on the left, a hind leg of an animal, and small piece of another hind foot, and on the right limbs which have insufficient bodies to identify them, render the scene tantalisingly uninterpretable, as also is the Angel's instrument.

PLATE VII. FIG. 1.

The attendant Angel is, in this instance, fortunately identifiable. The instrument visible is the tabor with the head of a drumstick resting on it, the stick itself gone but leaving enough evidence to supply the pipe which undoubtedly occupied the left hand of the Angel. The pipe and tabor were a usual accompaniment to the dancing bear.

A man and woman sitting, and between them a basket, the contents of which would seem to be loaves of bread which would appropriately round off the preceding subjects.

PLATE VII. FIG. 2.

At the West end: the right corner is filled by a conventional form of "cloud," something like that on which the Angels along the front are resting.

An Angel tucked away in the left corner completes the series.

The scroll is broken but the charming pose of the head, and expression on the face, and the treatment of the wing are mercifully left to us.

The North side: back and ends: in North Aisle.**PLATE VIII. FIG. 1.**

East end: A hunter with bow, baldrick, and hound sitting behind him. He is blowing his horn, but that has been a good deal damaged, and his right arm amputated.

PLATE VIII. FIG. 2.

Obliterated except for two animals' feet which may probably tell of a capture.

PLATE VIII. FIG. 3.

A stag in lair, lithe, and a very beautiful piece of sculpture.

PLATE IX. FIG. 1.

North side: Eastern end. A very charming and lively squirrel busy with a nut.

PLATE IX. FIG. 2.

Commonly called boar hunting, but I much prefer to call it swine herding.

It reminds me of Lincoln Sheep Fair with many thousands of sheep, and the sheep dogs sorting their own sheep out of apparently inextricable confusion when the fair broke up.

So it was with the swineherd; whenever the time came his "trusty hound" could be relied upon to collect the herd.

Out of this fact arose the pithy saying of the old countryman if he wished to convey his opinion that you were not strictly accurate: "You've got the wrong pig by the ear."

Indeed I imagine that the subject would be differently treated if it were a case of life and death.

A man and woman are seated, while a woman kneeling blows up the fire with a pair of bellows. This possibly may be a representation of the month of February, the cold month.

PLATE IX. FIG. 3.

A lady, very smartly dressed, in a garden, seated by a tree, with a be-buttoned beau approaching and the lady smiling, her hands folded on her lap. The subject I should say suggests "Courting."

Clearly either cat and kitten, or cat and mouse, in spite of the bovine character of the larger animal's head.

PLATE X. FIG. 1.

Shepherd with double recorder, and sheep, one of them on three legs and scratching its ear with the fourth foot, a very familiar scene.

Two men wrestling. A truly artistic, living, and strenuous piece of sculpture.

Here it may be mentioned that on the Roomland, outside the great gateway still standing, were held the large and profitable fairs in which such scenes would be enacted, but that form of competition was one of the most popular at all times.

PLATE X. FIG. 2.

King Lion, from the tale of "Reynard the Fox"; another item from the same tale appearing further on. (Plate XII., Fig. 2.)

Two men meeting a third with a tree between. I think it is the tale of Valentine and Orson.

A courtier of King Pepin had two sons. While quite small Orson wandered off into the woods and was brought up by the bears.

Valentine grew up to be a courtier. One day out hunting with an attendant he followed up a mysterious

animal who proved to be his long-lost brother Orson, who had become a "wild man of the woods" and is so represented.

PLATE XI. FIG. 1.

The Martyrdom (see also front centre).

On the left hand the executioner with his sword and his eye fallen out on to his cheek so that he should not see the Virtues of the Martyrdom.

In the scene of the Martyrdom the suspended head has been cut away, but the small cross lies below the Martyr's body, an excellent specimen of that form of cross.

PLATE XI. FIG. 2.

Cow and calf and a woman seated on an animal-footed bench spinning. The top of a distaff upon the cornice giving the clue.

PLATE XII. FIG. 1.

A charming domestic scene, Sow and litter, and

The Hart, which is the badge of Richard II., 1377-1399, and probably indicated the approximate date of the construction of the Watching Loft.

PLATE XII. FIG. 2.

The mediæval tale of Reynard the Fox. King Lion, tired of the constant litigation in his court between Isegrim the Wolf and Reynard, decreed that they should settle their disputes by the favourite mediæval method of "trial by battail."

This episode shows Reynard, his brush up his back, being oiled, after he was clipped close by "Aunt Rukenaw" the Ape, his faithful ally, before his fight with the Wolf, so that he should give no easy hold to his enemy. The oil can was evidently in her right hand. The story ends in the defeat of the Wolf and the last chapter treats of "how the King forgave Fox all things and made him the greatest in his land."

(The most delectable history of Reynard the Fox—J. Jacobs and W. F. Calderon. Macmillan & Co., 1895.)

Milking a cow. The artist has had a difficulty in arranging his subject in so small a space, but he provides all the necessary appliances, though the milkmaid is in a very uncomfortable position for the job.



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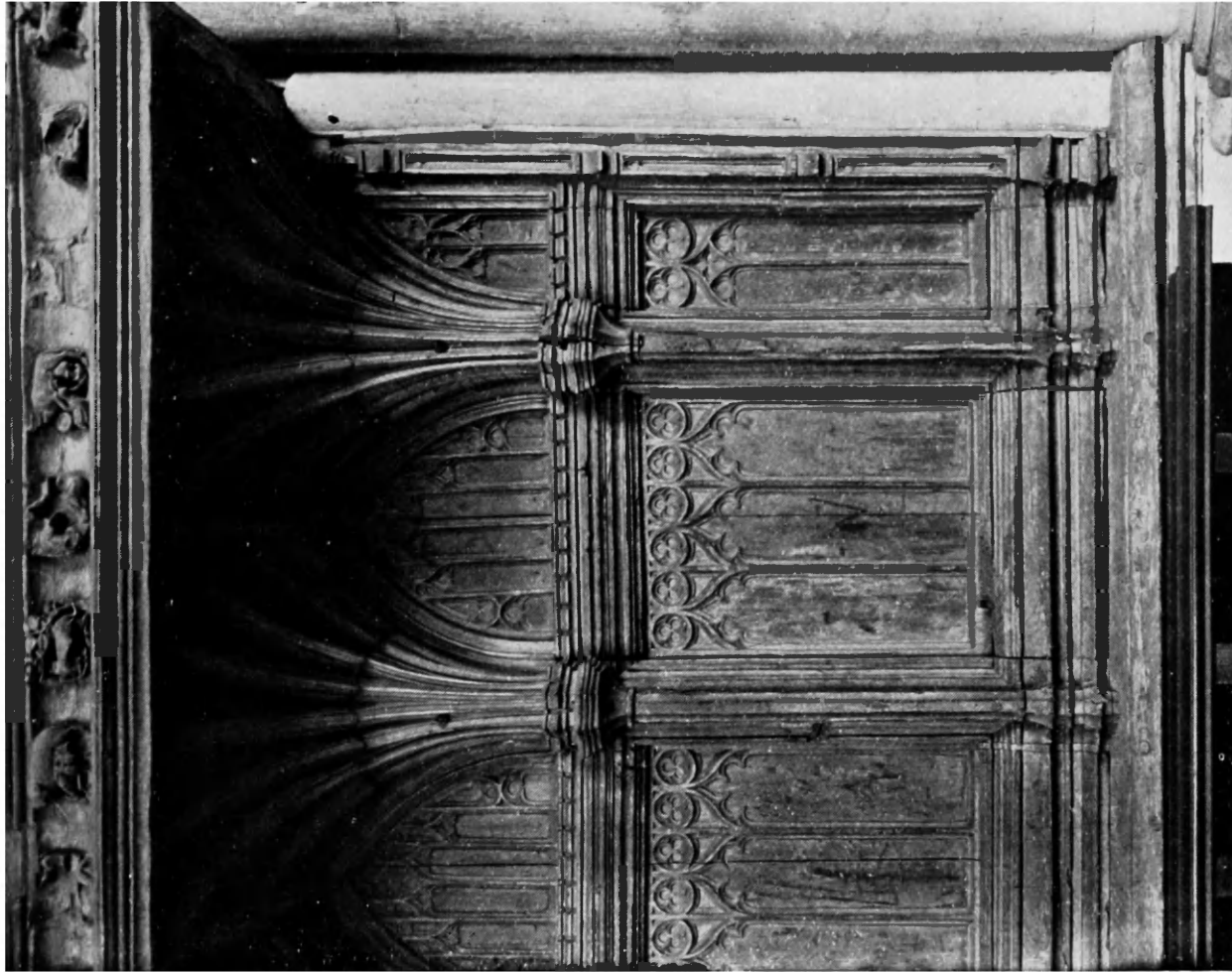
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PLATE XIII. FIG. 1.

An episode common enough on Misericord Seats—evidently a woman beating her husband.

The South side corner terminates in a grotesque, human-faced bear being chained up, its keeper forcing it back by means of his stick applied through its collar like a tourniquet, and hauling on a chain with his left hand. This connects with the following bear-baiting scenes round the corner.

PLATE XIII. FIGS. 2 and 3.

On the West end is the muzzled bear chained to a peg in the ground awaiting the oncoming attack of three of the baiting dogs, the keeper with two dogs in reserve straining at their leash to be let loose for the fray.

So ends this truly remarkable set of carvings. Some of them have been interpreted in terms of months and seasons. In part they are, indeed all our lives also may be so treated, but my belief is that they interpret the country life of the age, and for that reason they were introduced into the church, and I believe most appropriately too on that account.

PLATE XIV. FIG. 1.

Specimen, on the North side, of the lovely oak of which the Loft is made.

PLATE XIV. FIG. 2.

The last, being panels near the bottom of the western portion. The ornamental carving and the diaper very attractive.

NOTE.

In *Archæologia*, Vol. XLIV., November 23rd, 1871, pp. 165 and 166, Mr. James Fowler F.S.A., has an article in which he says: "Along the lower frieze of the wooden Watching Loft on the North side of the feretory at St. Albans Abbey, for two separate independent series of notes on these interesting carvings I am indebted to Mr. Boutell and to Mr. J. T. Micklethwaite, F.S.A."

He then gives the following ascriptions to the months:

January: A man and woman seated on a bench feasting. (My Plate 7, Fig. 1.)

February: A man and woman seated warming themselves by a fire. (My Plate 9, Fig. 2.)

March : A Shepherd seated blowing a double pipe, four sheep attending. (My Plate 10, Fig. 1.)

April : A sheep and a lamb, the latter sucking. (My Plate 11, Fig. 2, Cow and calf.)

May : A woman milking a cow into a bowl. (My Plate 12, Fig. 2.)

June : A man mowing grass with a scythe. (My Plate 4, Fig. 1. Mowing rye.)

July : A man weeding behind a tree, his coat lying on the ground beneath. (I am wholly unable to identify this unless it should be meant for what is the scene of the Martyrdom. My Plate 4, Fig. 2, and Plate 11, Fig. 1.)

August : A man reaping with a sickle ; behind another carrying and piling up sheaves. (My Plate 6, Fig. 1.)

September : A Huntsman with a bow, horn and dogs. A squirrel in the midst of oak leaves and acorns. A dog holding a boar by the ear. (My Plate 8, Fig. 1 and Plate 9, Figs. 1 and 2).

On p. 190 *et seq.* of his article Mr. Fowler gives a most interesting set of tables, with references to authorities, describing alternative attributions to the individual months.

In Table 1 he has September, Boar Hunting, Cottⁿ. MS. Tiberius B.V., and Driving Swine to the Woods, Cottⁿ. MS. Julius A.VI. (My Plate 9, Fig. 2, Swineherding.)

October : A vine with grapes near to which is a basket of grapes and the feet of a man mutilated. (My Plate 2, Fig. 2.)

November : A sow with litter. (My Plate 12, Fig. 1.)
(December is not mentioned.)