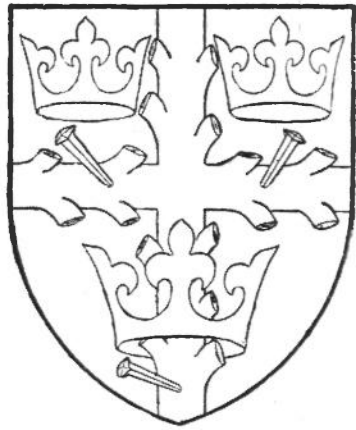


A NOTE ON THE ARMS OF COLCHESTER AND  
NOTTINGHAM.

By W. H. ST. JOHN HOPE, M.A.<sup>1</sup>

In November, 1894, I had the honour of submitting to the Royal Archaeological Institute a paper on English Municipal Heraldry which is printed at length in the *Archaeological Journal*.<sup>2</sup> I have therein described the arms borne by the towns of Colchester and Nottingham in the following terms :

“The splendid seal of Colchester, made probably to commemorate the granting of a new charter by Edward IV. in 1461, bears on the obverse, in base, the arms of the town, *gules, a cross raguly argent, between two crowns in chief and passing through a third in base or*. As the principal subject of the seal is a figure of St. Helen, who is asserted to have been born at Colchester, clasping the Cross and three nails, the principal charge in the arms is easily explained, especially since on the seal it is shown pierced with three nails. The crowns of course refer to the patron saint of East Anglia, St. Edmund the King, whose martyrdom may be indicated by the red field.



The arms themselves are of earlier date than the seal, since they also occur (but without the nails in the cross) in the initial letter of the charter granted to the town by Henry V. This also contains a seated figure of St. Helen, with the Cross held up before her by a kneeling king.

ARMS OF THE BOROUGH OF COLCHESTER.

<sup>1</sup> Read at Nottingham, July 25th, 1901.

<sup>2</sup> Vol. lii. 173-197.

A precisely similar shield, but with the cross *vert*, is claimed as the arms of Nottingham, and so entered in the Visitation of 1569. I cannot, however, find any other or earlier authority for them, nor can I see how they are to be interpreted, or what possible connection they can have with Nottingham."<sup>1</sup>

Since these words were written I have become convinced that my former conclusions are untenable. I should therefore like to submit for consideration a new explanation of the interesting arms under notice, which will, I trust, not only make clear the meaning of those of Colchester, but also show how the ancient town in which we are to-day assembled may with equal propriety lay claim to similar arms.

First let me clear the ground by withdrawing my too positive assumption that the crowns refer to St. Edmund. Mr. J. H. Round has pointed out to me that Essex was not included in East Anglia, so such a reference to the martyred king can hardly be looked for in Colchester, and assuredly not in Nottingham.

The next question that arises is, To whom do the crowns refer? A paper on "Ancient Legends connected with the Arms of Colchester" has lately been put forth by Mr. W. Gurney Benham, in which he discusses the various theories as to the crowns:

- (i) that they are derived from the traditional arms of a mythical British King, Beli Mawr;
- (ii) that they represent the three crowns in the arms assigned by the Heralds' College to old King Coel;
- (iii) that the crowns refer to the arms of the kingdom of the East Angles;
- (iv) that they commemorate a tradition that Colchester gave birth to King Lucius, the Empress Helen, and the Emperor Constantine;
- (v) that the King of England possessed considerable demesnes in Colchester, and so the crowns are introduced to show the royal importance of the borough;

<sup>1</sup> *Archaeological Journal*, lii. 180, 181.

- (vi) that the crowns refer to St. Edmund (as suggested by myself);
- (vii) that the three crowns have reference to the Holy Trinity.

Mr. Benham gives various reasons, all good in themselves, but which I need not repeat here, against these several theories, and suggests in their stead yet one other,

- (viii) "that the three crowns are symbolical of the three Kings of Cologne, whose translation to Constantinople by St. Helena, is recorded as a scarcely less wonderful performance than her Discovery of the Cross ;"

and in conclusion he remarks :

"On the whole, therefore, I think that we may assume that the arms of Colchester, as of Nottingham, were meant to tell the story of Saint Helena; that the cross alludes to her discovery of the Holy Rood; that the three crowns symbolize the Magi; and that their position was, in all probability, intended to remind men of the third specially important discovery attributed to her, the discovery of the three Holy Nails."

I am sorry that after reading Mr. Benham's paper I am unable to accept his theory, but it has suggested to me yet one other, which I now venture to put forth, namely, that the three crowns have reference to, and must be regarded as being associated with, the three nails. This reduces the arms to perfectly simple elements: the Cross of our Lord, pierced by three crowned nails. We may thus at once see (i) why the lowest crown encircles the cross, because it then hovers over the third nail, and (ii) that the honour due to the hallowed nails, which are otherwise liable to be overlooked, is clearly and emphatically set forth by the crowns, in a manner quite in accord with mediaeval usage.

In my former paper I have stated, but I cannot recall upon what authority, that in the initial letter of the charter of Henry V. the Colchester arms are depicted "without the nails in the cross." This is a mistake, for the nails are shown quite clearly, each surmounted by a crown, and they so appear on the splendid town seal.

It will be seen that this new interpretation of the arms, so far as Colchester is concerned, identifies them more closely than before with St. Helen, who is represented on the town seals holding the cross and the nails.

With regard to Nottingham we can see our way a little more clearly, since we need no longer try to associate with St. Helen, in whom Nottingham had no interest, arms that may equally well refer to our Lord alone. These arms may, in fact, be regarded as the well-known emblems of the Passion reduced to their simplest elements.

I must confess to being still without earlier authority than the Visitation of 1569 for the assumption of these arms by the town of Nottingham, and in default of any evidence of the former existence here of any relics of the True Cross or of the three nails I can only suggest for the present that it is by mere coincidence that the arms of Nottingham are identical with those of Colchester, for the illuminated initial already referred to shows that in both cases the cross raguly should be green, or what the heralds now call *proper*.