Bath Abbey

Bishop Montagu

James Montagu was Bishop of Bath and Wells from 1608–16. His generosity helped save the Abbey for future generations.

There is a story that, in 1608, James tried and failed to shelter from a storm in the Abbey. This was because it had no roof over the nave (the west half of the church) at the time. The Abbey had not been in a good condition since Henry VIII closed the monasteries in 1539. Only a small part of it could be used for services, but some noblemen had started to restore it.

It may have been his experience in the rain that inspired James to donate a large amount of money to help the Abbey's restoration. He started by giving £1000 to help build a new wood and plaster roof over the nave. That's equivalent to about £134,000 at today's rates, so he was very generous. He also weatherproofed the roof with lead from some mines he owned, and donated a stone pulpit.

In his will, James asked to be buried in the Abbey and his impressive tomb is made of carved marble and alabaster, surrounded by decoration including griffins. These are mythical creatures with the body of a lion and the head and wings of an eagle. In the medieval times, griffins symbolised the power of God.

Questions and Activity ideas

- By the time he died, James was Bishop of Winchester, so he could have chosen to be buried in the Cathedral there. Why do you think he chose Bath Abbey?
- If you could pick an animal to represent something important to you, which one would you have and why? You could draw a picture of it and explain why you like it. You can find more information on heraldic animals here: www.englishheritage.org.uk/guide-to-heraldry
- The Abbey was a special place to the Bishop. Is there a place which is important to you? Why not write about what makes it special?

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West Door of Bath Abbey

The door is over 400 years old. It was a gift in 1617 from Sir Henry Montagu, Lord Chief Justice. It is in memory of his brother Bishop James Montagu and another brother called Sir Walter. It is made of solid oak and it was restored in 1833 and 2002.

This is the coat of arms of Bishop James Montagu. The keys and sword represent Bath Abbey. The small ring in the middle shows he was the fifth son.

The inscription is from Psalm 133 and says in Latin, 'Behold how good and pleasant it is'. There was no room to complete it with the rest of the line: 'when brothers dwell in unity'.

This design is called a cartouche.

This is called drapery. The wood has been carved to look like material.

This is the coat of arms of Sir Walter Montagu. The small crescent in the middle show he was a second son.

The Montagu family arms. The diamond shapes are meant to look like mountains as a pun on the 'Mont' part of their name. They are also pointed or 'acute' as a pun on the 'agu' part.

Activity ideas

- Bath Abbey's West Door was designed to look strong and impressive, and it is also a celebration of the fact that the three Montagu brothers 'dwelt in unity', which means they were good friends with each other.
- Using the outline on the next page, design your own family celebration door for Bath Abbey. Try drawing a coat of arms that you feel suits your family. What is your inscription going to be? Will you include drapery and cartouches?

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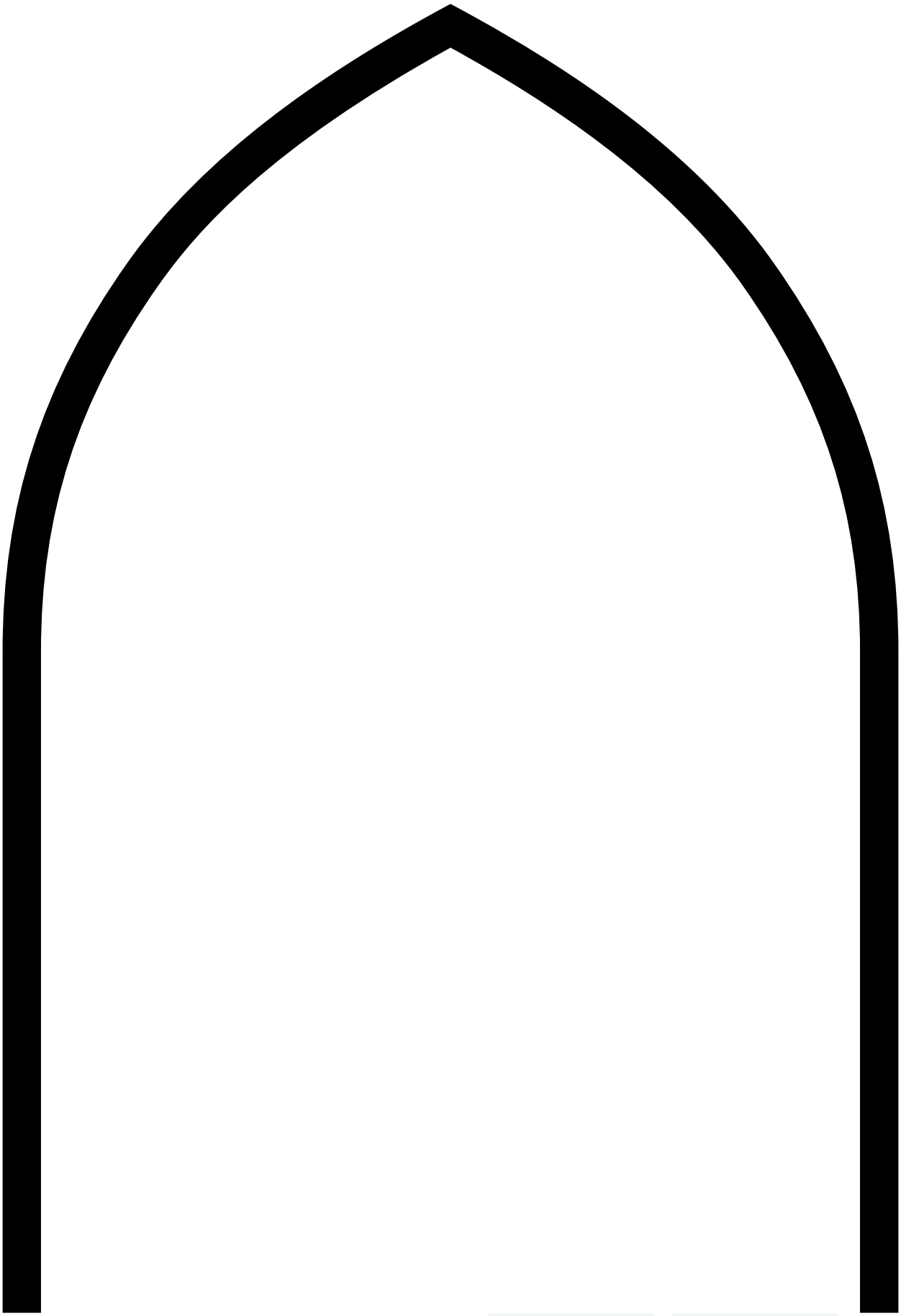

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