

Deadly Sins and Acts of Mercy

What?

This is a visual depiction of the **seven deadly sins** and the **seven acts of mercy**, carved in blocks on two sides of a long beam of stone called an **architrave**.

The seven deadly sins are seven human behaviours that in the Christian tradition are believed to be the most serious and damaging in leading a person away from God. At the end of the row of sins, there is a huge monster's head with its jaws wide open, baring its teeth. In between the jaws is the **devil**, wielding a hook to grab sinners. This represents the mouth of **Hell**, and the message in the stone carving is that if we give our lives over to the seven deadly sins we will end by being swallowed up in Hell.

The sins are:

- pride
- greed
- anger
- envy
- lust
- gluttony
- sloth

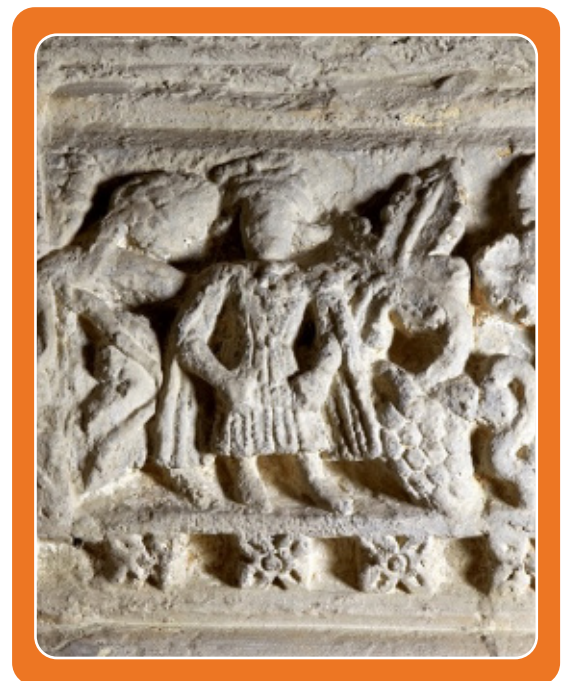
By contrast, the seven acts of mercy (or kindness) are seven human actions that are believed to bring a person closer to God. At the end of the row stands **St Peter** at the gates of **Heaven**, showing us that this is where we will end up if we turn away from sin and are kind towards others, especially the poor.

The acts of mercy are:

- feeding the hungry
- giving water to the thirsty
- clothing the naked
- sheltering the homeless
- visiting the sick
- visiting those in prison
- burying the dead



The jaws of Hell



Pride, depicted by a man proudly showing off his fancy tunic, cloak and hat

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What?

The stone carvers depicted the sins and acts of mercy by portraying people acting them out. The sins are on one side of the architrave, and the acts of mercy on the other. Strangely, however, there is one act of mercy (giving water to the thirsty) mixed up in all the sins, and one sin (greed) mixed up in all the acts of mercy. Was it done deliberately, or was it a mistake on the part of the original stone carvers, who maybe hoped it would not be noticed? If it was deliberate then it means there is a message being given to us through the stone carvings, but what is it? There is some evidence in an early artist's sketch of the Chapel interior (see page 4), that before the Victorian era the sins may have been all on one side, and all the acts of mercy on the other. This would mean that when the Victorians carried out some restoration work on the Chapel they took the blocks down, repaired them, and put them up again in the wrong order. But the evidence for this is inconclusive and we may never find out the answer to this riddle.

How?

The carvings were made by chipping tiny pieces away at blocks of sandstone with a chisel and mallet. Gradually the pictures would have emerged from the rough stone. It must have taken a lot of time, labour and expertise. Once the individual blocks were completed, they were cemented together to make one long block with pictures on either side.



Giving water to the thirsty



The seven deadly sins – can you spot giving water to the thirsty amongst them?

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Where?

The architrave is above the south aisle of the Chapel. 'Architrave' is the word for a beam resting on two pillars (see photo). As you walk under it towards the east end of the Chapel you can see the sins, and as you walk under it in the other direction you can see the acts of mercy.

When?

The stone was carved some time between the founding of the Chapel in 1446 and 1484, when building work stopped. Some remedial work may have been done to it in the 19th century when the Chapel was partially restored.

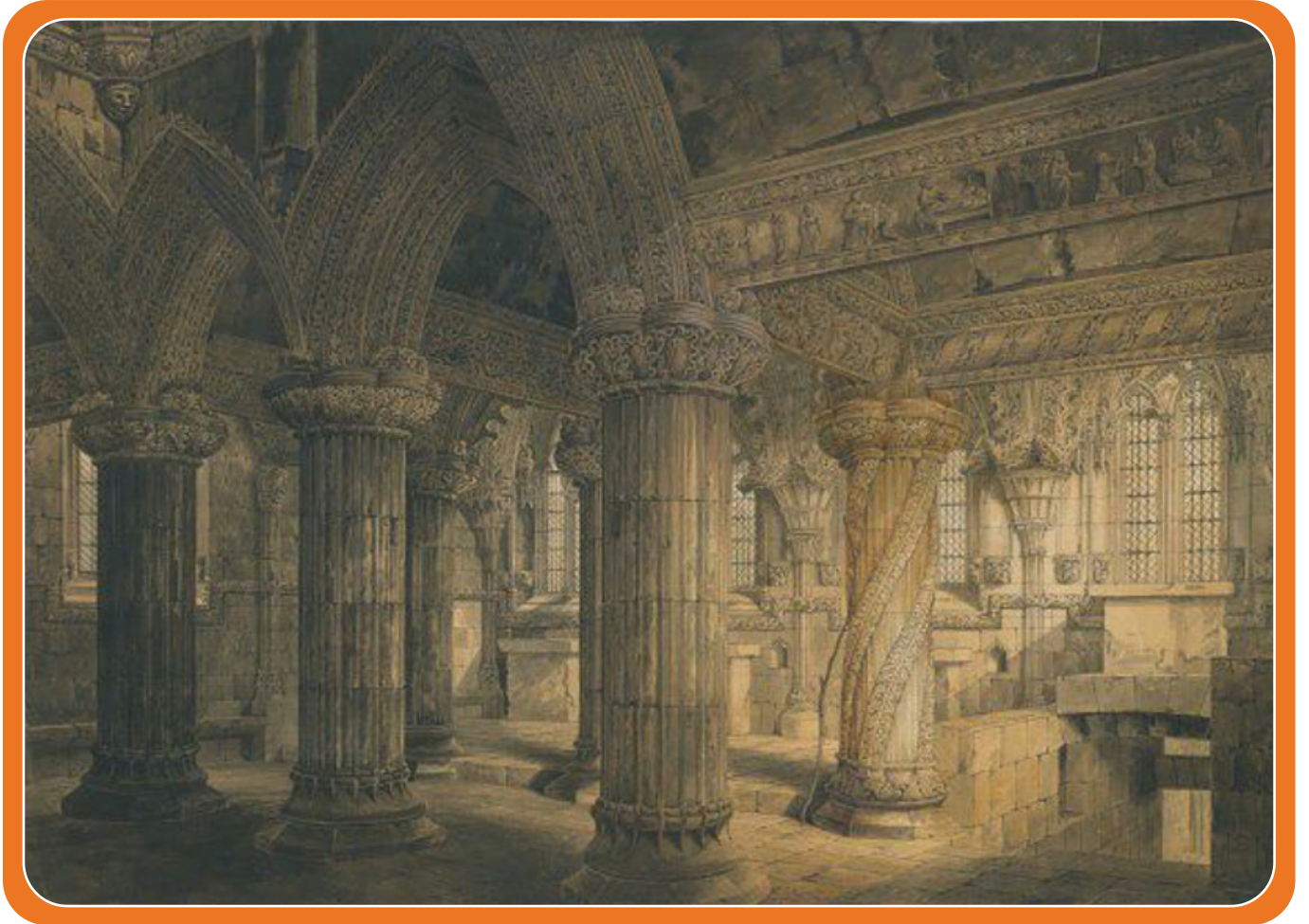
Why?

The Chapel has been called a 'Bible in stone' because its carvings show so many of the Bible's stories and Christian teachings.

Even though the seven deadly sins and the seven acts of mercy are not listed in the Bible itself, they were so important in medieval Christian teaching that they were included in the Rosslyn carvings.

Although now Rosslyn Chapel is open to the public and it has a local congregation, in medieval times it was a private Chapel for the St Clair family, where the members of the family were buried in the vaults. There were several altars placed around the building where priests and living family members would have said prayers and masses for the souls of the deceased in the afterlife. It makes sense to have carvings of the sins and acts of mercy in this setting, as they show what were believed to be the consequences after death of how people behaved in this life – whether they would spend eternity in Heaven or in Hell.

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Painting of the interior of Rosslyn Chapel by George Shepherd, 1809. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

In the top right of the picture you can see the acts of mercy across the architrave over the aisle. This picture shows them complete and on the opposite side of the architrave to how they are now. But how much can we rely on this source?

It is not a photograph. The artist may have been working partly from memory, or may have used 'artistic licence', making the Chapel look how he felt it should be. Or he may have shown it exactly as it was. We will never know for sure.