# BOTANICAL RENDERINGS: THE UNIQUE REPRESENTATIONS OF NATIVE PLANTS IN ST JOHN'S CHURCH, LAUNCESTON

by Eric Ratcliff

(with eight plates)

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In St John's Church in Launceston, Tasmania, there are remarkably accomplished representations of Tasmanian native plants, formed in masonry, all but one decorating capitals consisting of coloured concrete. They were designed by the architect Alexander North, and, with the exception of one carved in sandstone, were executed by Gordon Cumming in 1938–1939. Possible influences on these designs, and the choices of subject, are considered. This paper examines a late and unusual manifestation of these, executed by hand in the difficult medium of coloured Portland cement render, and to a remarkable extent, overcoming the problems of expressing fine detail and colour contrast in such a material. The plants represented are native to Australia, half of them endemic to Tasmania, so their representations are mostly without any close precedent, and in this form, unique.

**Key Words: Tasmanian native plants, carving, modelling, Portland cement render, Federation style, Neo-Gothic, Art Nouveau, Celtic patterns.**

The ubiquity of leafy vegetation and flowering plants both explains and questions the innumerable representations of them in the visual arts: in meticulous detail in botanical drawings and prints, in the more superficial and aesthetic preservation of the ephemeral in painted flower-pieces, and in abstracted and stylised form in every medium from wallpaper to architectural sculpture. In that last category, there is a long history of the decoration of religious buildings with plant forms, probably pre-dating the *anthemion* (a putative honeysuckle) of Ancient Greece, the *acanthus* of the Corinthian capital and its innumerable corruptions in the Middle Ages, the apotropaic 'green man', the stiff-leaf, the ball-flower and the crocket of Gothic architecture, the *rinceau* of Renaissance decoration, and the return of stylised or attempted realism in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

St John's Church in Launceston was built for one of the earliest Church of England parishes in the Australian colonies. The first entries in the Parish Register date from 1811, and the parish was formally established in 1819. Construction began in 1824, and the building opened for worship at the end of the following year, although the tower was not completed until 1829. The building was of brick, stuccoed without and plastered within, the congregational space approximately square in plan but with a shallow bow at the eastward end behind the altar, and a pair of vestries and a pair of stairs to the gallery flanking the tower at the westward end. Externally, the style was *Gothick* in the eighteenth-century sense, and essentially Georgian within. Changing liturgical requirements led to the addition of a chancel with Gothic Revival features in 1866.

Before the end of the nineteenth century, a larger building was needed. The parishioners sought a design for the replacement of the old church as early as 1892, but building did not commence until 1901. To the east of the old building, a massive polygonal chancel, a pair of transepts, a side chapel and an organ loft above a choir vestry began to rise after an ambitious design by Alexander North (1858–1945). They were built of red brick and yellow sandstone, and stand on dolerite basements resting on concrete, the last an innovation that was just beginning to emerge from the industrial realm. Because of financial constraints, building proceeded gradually, and with successive modifications to the design, until 1927. The crossing between the transepts was roofed with a dome, the chancel and transepts with vaulting, all built with reinforced concrete. North's partner, A. Harold Masters (1874–1951) had a pioneering interest in the domestic use of 'camerated concrete' and several important Launceston buildings resulted from their collaboration. The whole of the new work was achieved without disturbing the older buildings; the dome hovered above the much lower 1866 chancel until the entire east end of the church was demolished to open into the new spaces. The rest of the old building continued as the nave, totally different in style and scale, and North was asked to provide an economical design that would enable the building of a replacement to harmonise with his eastward achievements.

North decided to retain much of the old side walls, but to breach them to allow for arcades giving on to narrow side aisles, locally referred to as *ambulatories,* and to encase the remnants with new masonry and surmount them with a tall clerestory to more than double the height of the space. This last was designed in a Neo-Gothic style, with the use of concrete coloured to look like sandstone to match the natural stone of the earlier work. The building was essentially completed in 1938 (plate 1).

North's association with the Arts and Crafts Society of Northern Tasmania was notable (Miley 1987, pp. 33, 55), and some of his work suggests influences from the parent

Plate 1 – St John's Church Launceston 1954. (image AB713-1-4335 Libraries Tasmania, Open Access)

Plate 2 – 1939 ca - View into north ambulatory alongside the then new nave. The old colonial walls were incorporated into the walls through which the archways pass. Note that the decorative work on the pillar capitals is completed in this photograph. (copyright All Saints Anglican Network)

guilds in England. However, the principal subject of this paper is separated by both date and artifice from precepts most characteristic of the Arts and Crafts Movement. There was a fashion for applying motifs from native flora that reached its height among designers in Australia in the decades surrounding the turn of the nineteenth century; the works under consideration here appeared much later.

Alexander North's large interventions at St John's are in many ways unique, with features from the Gothic Revival, from Byzantium by way of Tuscany, and John Francis Bentley's Roman Catholic Cathedral at Westminster, from the Antipodean Edwardian styles now labelled 'Federation', and the Neo-Gothic of the years between the world wars. The westward end including the tower remains colonial and Gothick, venerable by Australasian standards, a familiar anachronism, part of the uniqueness of a most peculiar and historic building.

It is the archways between the remnants of the old walls that are the focus of this paper (plate 2). The pointed brick arches spring from sandstone-coloured concrete capitals that spread from half-columns formed by rendering around the cut away ends of the 1825 brickwork. The capitals are rectangular in plan, the shafts of the columns plain half-cylinders; it is North's treatments of the transitions from round to square that are of particular interest.

Alexander North was born in Yorkshire and educated in the north of England and in London, where in 1883 he was awarded the gold medal in a national competition for students at schools of art (Maidment 2012). The set subject for the competition was a design for a cathedral suitable for a British colony (*Launceston Examiner*, 16 June 1886, p. 2), and North's winning entry has many resemblances to the design he eventually produced for St John's. North emigrated for health reasons in 1884 and was employed in Hobart in the Public Works Department. There, he designed the Post Office for Launceston in a style described at the time as 'Queen Anne', and in 1885 he moved to Launceston to supervise its construction and remained to engage in private practice. The carved sandstone decorations on the Post Office include representations of birds and foliage considered emblematic of Britain and Australia. North was a major exponent of the Arts and Crafts Movement in Australia and developed an interest in botany as well as a professional interest in native timber. He presented and published papers on the ferns of Tasmania (North 1891), and on the economic uses of Tasmanian forest timbers (North 1904).

One of the churchwardens during the 1901–1911 building campaign, and the principal donor of the rose window in the north transept, was the draper, Walter Perrin. Perrin died in 1915 and is commemorated in a mural monument in the south transept (Gill 1988). The marble tablet is surrounded by carved stonework including naturalistic representation of an Australian native plant, *Kennedia prostrata,* the 'running postman' (plate 3). The crisp carving, interpreting North's design, was probably executed by the sculptor and woodcarver Hugh Cunningham (1858–1942) but could also have been by the Devonian-born monumental mason, Sylvanus Wilmot (1857–1926), who had trained in England and Italy (Cyclopedia of Tasmania 1900). The choice of *Kennedia* is intriguing. The prostrate plant with its red flowers with yellow centres spreads profusely on the floor of open sclerophyll forest in the hills to the west of Launceston that are divided by the gorge of the South Esk River, so at the time may have been a familiar favourite of the man commemorated.

The 'running postman' was to appear again on one of the capitals of the nave arcade, but this time it was modelled or carved in cement render, one of a remarkable set of decorations designed by Alexander North and executed by Gordon Cumming (1894–1972). The arcades of the nave are each of three arches, so there are twelve half-columns with decorated capitals, all of them different in design, although one species appears twice.

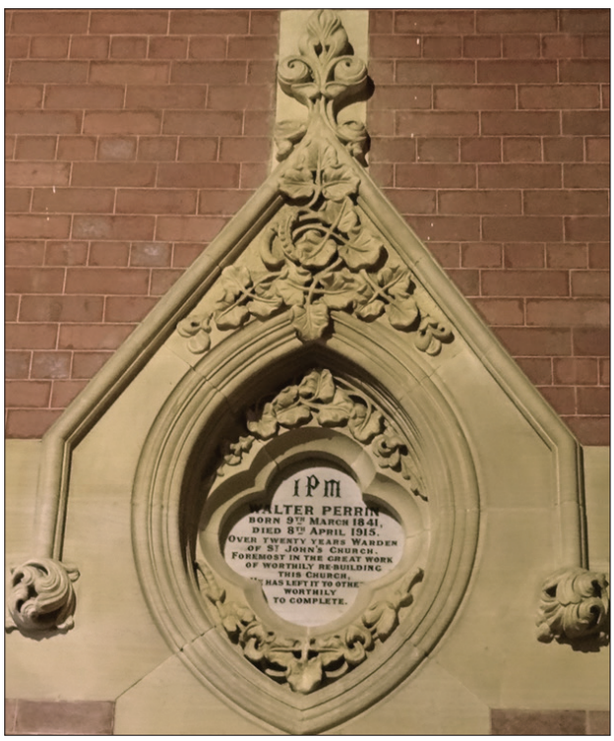


Plate 3 – The Walter Perrin monument in the south transept chapel, decorated with *Kennedia prostrata* carved in sandstone, probably by Hugh Cunningham in about 1916. (Author's photograph 2020)



Plate 4 – (4a) Gordon Cumming at work on a capital in the north arcade of St John's Church in 1939, displaying Tasmanian laurel *Anopterus glandulosa,* and (4b), closeup showing Cumming's craft in fine detail. (copyright All Saints Anglican Network)

On the south side, from the west, there are representations of native laurel *Anopterus glandulosus,* Tasmanian waratah *Telopea truncata,* Macquarie vine *Muhlenbeckia gunnii,* blackwood *Acacia melanoxylon, Kennedia prostrata,* and silver banksia *Banksia marginata.* Two of the six species are endemic to Tasmania. On the north side, there are Tasmanian blue gum *Eucalyptus globulus,* native laurel in what is probably its earlier presentation, black peppermint *Eucalyptus amygdalina,* native fuchsia *Correa reflexa,* Christmas bells *Blandfordia punicea* and celery-top pine *Phyllocladus aspleniifolius*; four of the six species are endemic to Tasmania. Gordon Cumming was photographed at work on the *Anopterus* in the north arcade (plate 4a). He was in motion, so slightly blurred, and it is tempting to suspect that this may have been the earliest of the capitals he worked on.

William Gordon Cumming was a skilled woodcarver and cabinetmaker who also developed a facility in working with concrete. His mentor had been the sculptor and woodcarver, Hugh Cunningham, who taught at the Launceston Technical College and was responsible for the stone carving in the 1901–1927 work at St John's. Other examples of Cumming's work in concrete are the Tasmanian Coats of Arms on the Supreme Court in Cameron Street, Launceston. His woodworking skill is seen at its height in the city Coat of Arms in the Launceston Town Hall, and the Gothic canopy over the baptismal font at Holy Trinity Church in Launceston. He taught woodwork to generations of schoolchildren, including the present author, and innumerable others who wanted to learn to carve. The lessons were held in his workshop at Trotsford Crescent, East Launceston, decorated internally with design drawings and pieces of his carving that had failed to meet his exacting standards.

Cumming's own designs have been described as 'frequently reflecting his love of nature' (Miley 1987, p. 53), but it is clear the St John's capitals were designed by Alexander North. Although the drawings for them have not been located, related drawings that were not used, some from a private collection and some held by the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, dated 1934, 1938 and 1939, were exhibited there in 1987 (Miley 1987, p. 62). Cumming was well-suited to the

task of interpreting actual plants, and it may be that he had specimens or photographs to refer to as well as the architect's drawings. The freedom and elegance of the work suggests that Cumming was given a largely free hand, and the results must be regarded as a joint achievement by both architect and carver (plate 4b).

Fine modelling in cement render is not a simple matter. The material must be in an early stage of setting, but not set. It had to be coloured to match as closely as possible the render of the columns and the abaci, and the closeness of the match would not be apparent until the work was dry. The material must be wet enough when applied to adhere to the supporting structure, but not so wet as to drop or dribble away. Any competent renderer could meet those requirements, but detailed sculpture in wet render is another matter. If trowelled repeatedly to make a small form, the material is likely to soften and deform and even to liquefy, so most of the work entailed actual carving of the firm but still soft material, and pieces that broke away or were damaged could not readily be made good.

The mass of material applied had to approximate the amount that could be finished in a working session, and any unfinished render had to be scraped away before it set. Cumming's task had resemblances to that of painters of fresco, when the colour was applied to fresh plaster, and any of that left unpainted at the end of the day had to be removed.

This analogy was noted in France after 1926, when Carlo Sarrabezolles (1888–1971) was credited with the invention of the technique that was to be described as *sculpture à la fresque* (Bréon *et al*. 2013). It would be of interest to know whether North or Cumming were aware of this, or whether they developed the method independently.

The stems of the plants emerge from abstract devices on the smooth shafts, mostly producing combinations of the real and the unreal of a kind once familiar in Art Nouveau designs made four decades earlier. Most of the devices are reminiscent of Celtic knot-work, some sinuous and some more geometrical, and some of imitative ribbon-work. Leaf-forms are artistically arranged in such a way as to suggest their natural habit although not necessarily imitating it. Flowers are directed towards the corners wherever possible.

All of North's selections are botanically recognisable, but they vary in the degree of realism applied. Obviously fluffy flowers like those on banksias, eucalypts or blackwood do not lend themselves to illustration in stone or concrete, but in three cases, the attempt was made, without conspicuous success. In the case of the *Kennedia*, the pea-flowers are enlarged, strongly abstracted and unrealistically arranged, the vivid colour contrast suggested in reverse by deep dark hollows at the centres.

The continuous combination of realistic depiction, stylisation and abstraction is one of the characteristics of Art Nouveau style, but in the capitals, realism prevails, although the influence of the style is discernible in the curving of what in nature would usually be straighter. Many of the abstract parts of the designs owe much to Celtic patterns, particularly from illuminated manuscripts such as the *Book of Kells* which had been widely published by the time North made his drawings (Sullivan 1920). Less comprehensive and detailed sources had been readily available in the nineteenth century in Owen Jones' *Grammar of Ornament* and Richard Glazier's *Manual of Historic Ornament* (Jones 1859, Glazier 1899), but the detail suggests the later source.

All the designs, with one exception, are constrained by the coving under the plain abaci of the capitals, but the motifs are continued above these in the terminals of the hood-mouldings surrounding the brick arches. The one exception is the marvellous representation of the *Correa reflexa,* in which some of the flowers are made to dangle over the edge of the abacus like the tassel of an academic's headgear, so convincingly that one almost expects them to move in a draught. In nearly every case, the emergence of the stems from an abstract device a short way down the shaft of the half-column, overcomes the design problem of their growth from a plain half-cylinder with no other decoration. The rendered columns are left plain, a 'truthful' expression of the material, with no attempt made to pretend that it is stone, such as by engraving false mortar-joints. North had published twice on *The Truthful Treatment of Brickwork* (North 1882, 1892), the second time at the height of the fashion for tuck-pointing, but with the bricks affordable in 1936 he resorted to this untruthful technique, and undoubtedly had reservations about being forced to use yellow concrete in place of sandstone. His 1885 Launceston Post Office has tuck-pointed brickwork, and sandstone dressings, but North sought to avoid application of the former when he could.

## BOTANICAL CAPITALS

The twelve capitals described here were all carved in 1938 and 1939, when the new nave was already in use. They are considered in the order in which they are placed, starting from the westward end of the arcade. The visitor will find the first six on the north side, and the second six on the south.

*Anopterus glandulosus* Tasmanian laurel is endemic to Tasmania, a tall understorey shrub growing in rainforests. It has stiff leaves and fleshy white flowers that lend themselves to sculptural treatment. The stems emerge from angular ribbon-work that is characteristically Art Nouveau in derivation (plate 5).

*Telopea truncata* Tasmanian waratah is also endemic to Tasmania and grows in high rainfall and mountain forests as an understorey shrub. The stiff foliage is rendered naturalistically, but the wide flower heads, usually scarlet but uncommonly yellow, and from 5–8 cm across with multiple florets with long upcurving stiles, have had to be represented in bas-relief, as if pressed flat, as a reference specimen may have been.

*Muehlenbeckia gunnii* is prevalent in high rainfall forests throughout southeastern Australia, but it derives its generic name from the botanist, Ronald Campbell Gunn (1808–1881), an early Secretary of the Royal Society of Tasmania, and its popular name, Macquarie vine, not directly from the Governor, but from Macquarie Harbour in western Tasmania, from the time of the penal settlement

Plate 5 – St John's capital featuring Tasmanian laurel *Anopterus glandulosa.* (Author's photograph 2020)

Plate 6 – St John's capital featuring Christmas bells *Blandfordia punicea.* (Author's photograph 2020)

there. North's design expresses its habit as a vine by the flowing lines of the stems, emphasises the hastate form of the petiolate leaves, and enlarges the flowers.

*Acacia melanoxylon* blackwood is a tree of economic importance that grows throughout southeastern Australia and can reach a height of about thirty metres. The timber has been highly valued, especially for furniture and panelling. The wattle-like juvenile leaves are transient, and the adult foliage consists of flat phyllodes (expanded petioles) so that they are parallel-veined. North's design curves the phyllodes more than is common in nature. The flowers are fluffy globes, not readily rendered in sculpture, so here they look more like raspberries.

*Kennedia prostrata* runs on dry forest floors throughout Australia, with orbicular leaves and crimson pea-like flowers with yellow centres. The common name, running postman, is attributed to the rapid spread of the plant, particularly after burning, and the red jackets formerly worn by colonial postmen. Hugh Cunningham's sandstone carving around the Perrin monument (plate 4) shows the plant in natural form, but in the capital, the flowers have been greatly enlarged and stylised, and the colour contrast is suggested in the negative by deep shadow. The straggling stems emerge from braided Celtic ribbon-work.

*Banksia marginata* silver banksia occurs as a shrub or small tree throughout southeastern Australia, with narrow leaves and 'brush' flowers that resisted realistic expression in carving and appear rather like cones. North and Cumming have attempted to portray the flowers as well as the cones, but only the latter are successful in carving. The stems emerge from Celtic ribbon-work.

*Phyllocladus aspleniifolius* celery-top pine is an endemic Tasmanian conifer that grows in wet forests and highland slopes. In place of needles, there are lobed cladodes, and instead of female cones, the tree produces fleshy flower-like fruiting bodies. As a result of these peculiarities, the conifer superficially resembles a flowering plant. Although less celebrated than the other endemic pines, it is undoubtedly the best suited to sculptural representation.

*Blandfordia punicea* Christmas bells is a lily endemic to high rainfall areas in Tasmania that in summer produces pendulous red flowers with yellow tips on stems up to a metre tall. The sculptured design is very true to the plant, although compacted for the purpose of composition. The ribbon-work on the shaft resolves into leaves that may be mistaken for a stem. This capital has suffered damage unsatisfactorily replaced by plain work, probably due to failure of adhesion of the render, suggesting that it may have been an early attempt at the work (plate 6).

*Correa reflexa* common correa has already been noted as one of the most strikingly successful designs. Its stems emerge from elaborate rectilinear knot-work that appears to combine Celtic and Oriental influences; unusually, it is continued up to the branches. The massing of the plant forms is sparser than in most of the other capitals, and the arrangement of the stems less naturalistic and more related to Art Nouveau stylisation. In design and execution, this is the masterpiece of both North and Cumming.

*Eucalyptus amygdalina* black peppermint, is an endemic tree growing throughout the drier parts of Tasmania. It produces timber formerly highly valued for its splitting qualities, used as shingles, weatherboards, palings and rails

for post-and-rail fences. The narrow almond-like leaves that led to its generic name are not usually as curved as they appear in the carving.

*Anopterus glandulosus* appears twice in the series, and the photograph of Cumming at work was taken when what is probably the earlier of the two was being made. The foliage is particularly dense, and the stems emerge from knotwork of clearly Celtic inspiration.

*Eucalyptus globulus* blue gum, is a tree that can grow to fifty metres in height and is highly valued for hardwood timber. Its locally-sourced timber is traded as Tasmanian Oak; its flowers are the floral emblem of Tasmania, but the rough-surfaced gumnuts are more suitable to the carved design, which is a particularly 'Art Nouveau' representation of the species. The stems emerge from knot-work that has foliations in a Mediæval manner. Most of the furniture in St John's is made of wood from this, or closely related eucalypt species (plate 7).

Alexander North's botanical sympathies were clearly with southeastern Australia and not solely with Tasmania, as his masterpiece is the chapel of Trinity College in the University of Melbourne in Victoria, begun in 1914 and completed in 1917 with his Hobart-born junior partner, Louis Williams (1890–1980). There, the decoration includes plant forms, and the ends of choir stalls are decorated with carvings of native animals, and some of these appear also in woodwork at St John's.

Of the plants chosen for the St John's capitals, six are Tasmanian endemics, and North may at the time have believed others to be so. His interest in timber trees is reflected in four of the choices, the two eucalypts, the blackwood and the celery-top pine. This last may have been chosen to represent its compatriot endemic conifers, the King William pine (King Billy) *Arthrotaxis selaginoides,* the Huon pine *Lagarostrobos franklinii*, and the South Esk pine *Callitris oblonga* as these were not likely to be recognisable in sculptured representation. The Tasmanian blue gum *Eucalyptus globulus* grows also on Bass Strait islands and on Cape Otway and Wilson's Promontory in Victoria. The botanist, Thomas Burns, noticed that prominent specimens planted in Launceston flowered at the same time as those in Victoria, and not with most of their Tasmanian cousins, and speculated that the seedlings may have been brought across the Strait (Burns 1974).

The sculptured iconography of St John's Church is quite limited in content, and it is yet to be finished. Other than the botanical capitals, the only completed scheme is that of the six pendentives of the dome, roundels surrounded by clover or shamrock leaves, traditional symbols of the Trinity, but probably alluding to the Irish connections of the two longest serving rectors of the parish: the Reverend Dr Browne, the second, and Canon Brownrigg, the longest serving incumbent. Two of the roundels contain Greek crosses, the other four the traditional 'evangelical symbols'

Plate 7 – St John's capital featuring blue gum *Eucalyptus globulus.* (copyright All Saints Anglican Network)

representing the alleged writers of the four canonical Gospels: the man, lion, calf and eagle. The uncarved blocks of stone in the corners of the crossing were reportedly intended to carry the heraldic arms of the successive dioceses to which the parish had allegiance. Otherwise, the carvings are almost entirely of plant forms, the most elaborate of those finished being on the tympanum of the north door, oak branches that appear in constant motion as if lashed by a high wind. This is a Church of England, its architect an exiled Englishman. The foliage surrounds a mandorla containing an inconspicuous cross, a very 'Low Church' emblem: no crucifix, no enthroned Christ. The Evangelical tradition of the parish probably explains the absence of strongly symbolic motifs, and the vegetable representations, whether naturalistic or stylised in either a Mediæval or an Art Nouveau fashion, must be regarded as purely decorative, acceptable as part of the architecture or as representations of works of the Creator. In the nave, the capitals demonstrate the botanical naturalisation of the exiled Englishman.

For purposes of comparison, it is instructive to consider some much earlier examples of the use of plant motifs by Alexander North and Harold Masters. The spandrels of the arch over the main entrance to the Launceston Post Office are decorated with escutcheons emblazoned with the Union Flag, one with the lion badge of Tasmania superimposed, and entangled with plants emblematic of Britain and the Colony (plate 8). The Tasmanian side has the blue gum entangled with the English oak, the 'Home' side more variously vegetated, probably in recognition of the other parts of the United Kingdom. All are arranged to occupy the space, but otherwise represented naturalistically, and carved in sandstone, probably by Sylvanus Wilmot (plate 8). Other spandrels on the same building have birds perched on the vegetation. Over a quarter of a century later, North's partner and collaborator, Harold Masters, decorated the *Launceston Examiner* office with stylised Art Nouveau rose bushes, applied to an Edwardian Free Style building of brick and concrete. The plants are wholly stylised in a fashion most often displayed on fireplace tiles and wallpapers of the preceding decades; a British commercial domestication of a Continental style suspected of being *decadent.* Naturalistic architectural decoration and Art Nouveau did not long survive the First World War, but they remained in the eclectic mind of Alexander North and issued in the anachronistic capitals he designed for St John's.

Belated for their style, unusual for their subject, uncommon in their material, remarkable in their accomplishment, a feature of a building that is no beauty, but has its beauties, and is unique in all the world, the botanical capitals of St John's are in my opinion a hidden treasure of national importance.

Plate 8 – Spandrel over the entrance archway of the Launceston Post Office, designed by Alexander North in 1885, and probably carved by Sylvanus Wilmot, combines English oak with Tasmanian blue gum. (Author's photograph 2020)

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