

I.

CARVED OAK FROM ST NICHOLAS CHURCH, ABERDEEN.

By WILLIAM KELLY, LL.D.

Some years ago certain pieces of late-mediaeval carved oak were acquired by the National Museum of Antiquities. They comprise: (1) Four

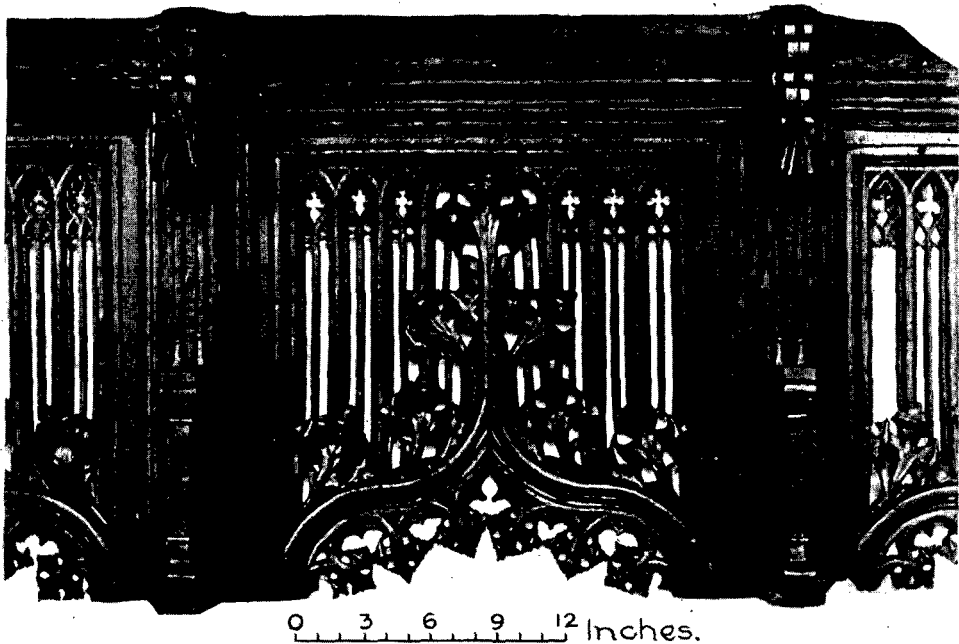


Fig. 1. Oak Canopy-front from St Nicholas, Aberdeen.

bays and part of other two bays of a canopy-front such as usually surmounts choir-stalls (fig. 1); (2) five stiles, in the form of spired pinnacles with gablets and crockets, varying in length from about 4 feet 3 inches to 4 feet 4 inches long (fig. 2); (3) a length of foliated and cusped cresting, about 4 feet 4 inches long (fig. 3); and (4) two lengths, about 8 feet in all, of a $6\frac{1}{4}$ -inch band, or rail, bearing an inscription in raised Gothic lettering as follows:—

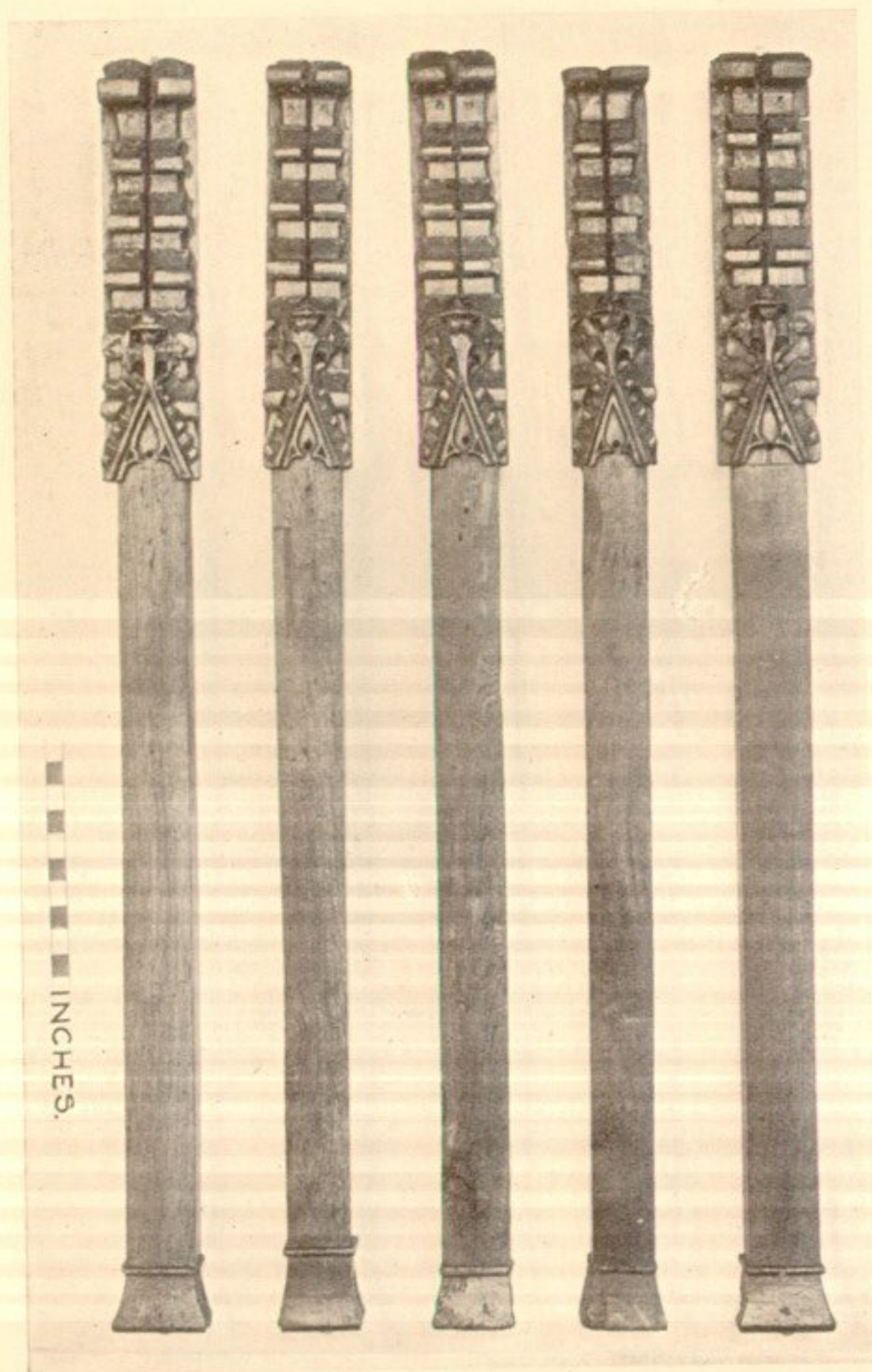


Fig. 2. Oak Stiles from St Nicholas, Aberdeen.

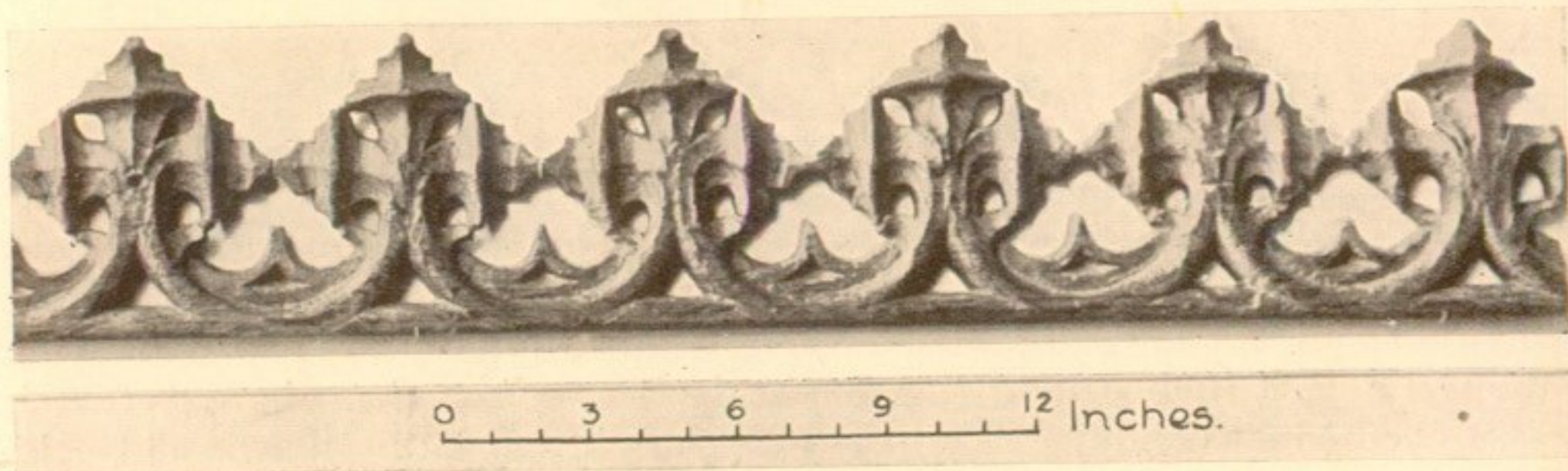


Fig. 3. Oak Cresting from St Nicholas, Aberdeen.

‡ Ad ꝑ laudem ꝑ diui • Nicholaij ꝑ ‡
hoc celamen • factū fuit • tempore • p (fig. 4).

That St Nicholas' Church, Aberdeen, was the source from which this carved work came will be made apparent by reference to the published writings of James Logan, John Ramsay, and James Cooper.

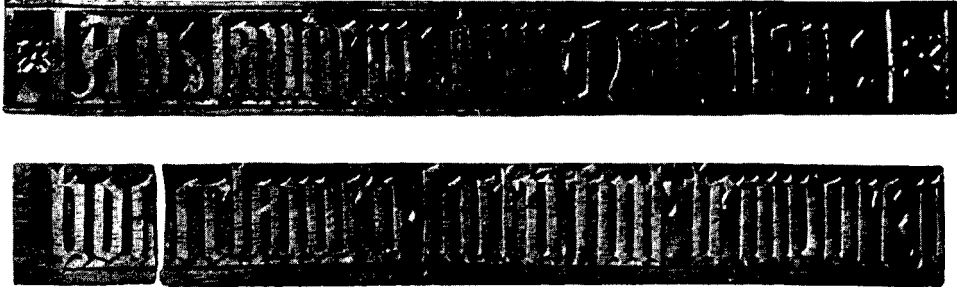


Fig. 4. Inscription in Oak from St Nicholas, Aberdeen.

In his youth, James Logan (1794–1872), author of *The Scottish Gael*, wrote *An accurate and minute description of the East Kirk*, 1818, which was published by the New Spalding Club, in 1892, as an appendix to the *Chartulary of the Church of Saint Nicholas of Aberdeen*, edited by the Rev. Professor James Cooper, D.D. As the East Kirk—the late-mediæval choir of the Church of St Nicholas—was pulled down in 1835 to make way for the present East Church, Logan's careful description is now of great interest. He says: "The roof of the body of the church is ceiled with timber and adorned with raised work, amongst which are the arms of Aberdeen, and another: a bend charged with three buckles, and the letters P. L. Round the edges is a border of flowers painted blue. On the north side is an inscription in black letter, as follows:—

I (^a shield) M
here

Ad * laudem * diui * Nicholai in * anno *
prepositure * hoñabilis * viri Iohis * Mar * hoc *
celamen * factū * fuit * tempore * Patricii *
Leslie * maḡri * fabrice * huius * eēlie *
anno * dōi * millō * CCCCC * XV.

Above may be discerned the date 1510."

It is thus clear that the lettered boards in the Museum formed part of an inscription that ran along above the high eaves on the north side of the choir of St Nicholas.

Shortly after the demolition of the old choir, John Ramsay, M.A. (1799-1870), an Aberdeen journalist, wrote a series of newspaper articles on the church of St Nicholas. Having given the black-letter inscription practically as above, Ramsay goes on to say: "The above inscription ran continuously in one line along the margin of the ceiling, on the north inner wall above the windows of the clerestory, immediately above the spring of the arch of the ceiling. . . . This inscription was removed to the west end of the modern church."¹ The removal of the inscription from one part of the church to another must have taken place after Logan's notes were made. Ramsay could not have meant, by "the modern church," the church rebuilt in 1837, for all its woodwork was destroyed by fire in 1874. If the pieces of oak under discussion had been in the modern church of 1837, they would have perished in 1874. It can hardly be doubted that they were taken away at the demolition of the old church in 1835.

"When that venerable structure," says Ramsay,² "was doomed to wanton destruction . . . it was resolved that every fragment of carved work should be strictly preserved. Nevertheless, a good deal of it was *sold* and converted into articles of household furniture. The only remnant of the canopy of the choir (a counterpart of that in King's College Chapel, and probably the work of the same artificer, John Findon) was cut up, partly to adorn a set of bookshelves, partly to form a sideboard. . . ."

Dr James Cooper (1846-1922), in his Preface to the *Chartulary*³ of *St Nicholas*, says: "A solitary fragment of the perforated canopies" (of the stalls) "belonged to the late eminent antiquary, Dr John Stuart, and is now in possession of his son-in-law, the Rev. Dr Woodward, Montrose, who assures me that it is at least as fine as anything at King's College."

That the "remnant of the canopy of the choir," referred to by Ramsay, is the "solitary fragment of the perforated canopies" that belonged in 1892 to Dr Woodward cannot be affirmed with certainty; but that the carved work now in the Museum had been in Dr Woodward's possession can hardly be doubted. It is known that the oak-work in question was bought at Montrose by a Glasgow dealer.

Ramsay attributed the stall-canopies of St Nicholas to "John Findon." John Fendour, for that was his name, first appears in the Council Register of the Burgh of Aberdeen⁴ under date of 10th April 1495. "The saide day, certane personis vnder writin, of thar avne fre will has lent

¹ *The Selected Writings of John Ramsay*, 1871, pp. 227-8.

² *Ibid.*, p. 220.

³ *Chartulary of St Nicholas, Aberdeen*, vol. ii., 1892, New Spalding Club, p. xxxi.

⁴ *Extracts from the Burgh Records of Aberdeen*, The Spalding Club, 1844, p. 56.

and deliuerit this money efter folling, to pay Ionhe Fendour for the making of the ruff and tymmir of the queyr."

Apparently the new choir of St Nicholas, begun about 1477, was roofed by about 1495; but it was not until 1510-15, as we learn from Logan's notes and from the oak inscription in the Museum, that the decorative work of the ceiling was finished. In the interim we find John Fendour contracting with the Burgh to make the stall-work of the choir.¹

"26th December 1507.

"The same day, it was appontit betiux the prouest, bailzeis, and consale on that ane part, and Johne Fendour, wricht, one that vthir part, in maner, forme, and effect efter following: that is to say, the said Johne sale, God willing, big, oupmak, and finally end and complet the xxxiiij stallis in thar queir, with the spiris and the chanslar dur, and ale vthir thingis according tharto, one his avin expensis, also substanciusly and honorable as he may, as thai ar begunnyne, and bettir gif he cane, betuix this and the fest of Sanct Petyr, callit Lammes, immediat heirefter following, or at the fest of Sanct Michael nixt, and immediat tharefter following at the ferrast; quilk being completit, and finally endit at the said day, as said is, the prouest, bailzeis, and consale sale content and pay to the saide Johnne tua hundretht pundis vsuale money of Scotland, with ane bontay according to thair honor; and gif he completis nocht the said wark be the said day, thane they sall content and pay to him the some contentit in the first kontrak, and this condicioun making nay dirogacioun to the first kontrak. To the keping of the quhilkis the said Johnne oblist him be the faitht of his bodie to Gilbert Menzies, prouest, in the toonis nam; and ale somes of money that he ressaus sal be allouit in the said some, etc."

It is evident that the making of the stalls had been begun before 26th December 1507; if they were finished by Michaelmas 1508 John Fendour must have had a busy workshop and a competent staff. Assuming that the value of Scots money then was to stg. as 1:4, the contract price would have been £50 stg., which, taken at twenty-five times its present purchasing value, would be £1250. Be this as it may, I think it is clear that these canopy-fronts in the Museum are John Fendour's work, as is also the ceiling inscription.

The five stiles (fig. 2) probably formed part of the screen and "chanslar dur" made by John Fendour; but they have been altered and adapted to adorn, perhaps, the set of bookshelves that Ramsay pilloried. The corresponding door of the screen at King's College Chapel is in two leaves, the upper part of each half being open-work, divided by stiles, of which each leaf has two whole and two half stiles, the carved parts of which are very much like those in the Museum.

The only other record² referring to John Fendour is a contract, dated 18th April 1511, and registered in the Sheriff Court books, between

¹ *Extracts from the Burgh Records of Aberdeen*, The Spalding Club, 1844, pp. 77-8.

² *Sheriff Court Records, Aberdeen*, vol. i., New Spalding Club, p. 102.

Andrew Elphinstone of the Selmys, on behalf of Bishop Elphinstone, and "Johne Findour wrycht," for making "the tymmer werk of the grat stepile of the Cathederall Kirk of Aberdoun." This work—the lead-covered spire over the Crossing—was uncovered about 1560, and "not many years afterwards was overthroune by the violence of a great storme of wind."¹

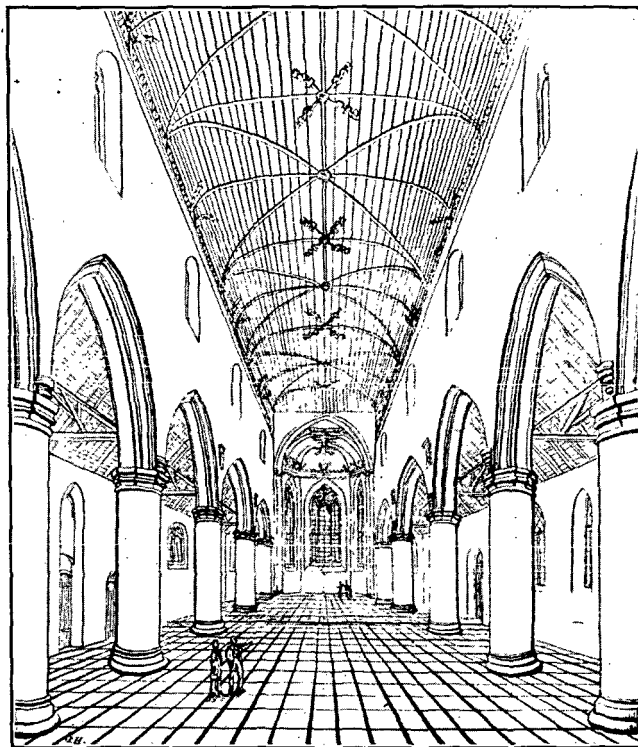


Fig. 5. Interior of Old East Church of St Nicholas, Aberdeen.

The latest example of mediæval wright-work in Aberdeen is the heraldic ceiling of St Machar's Cathedral, put up about 1520. Referring to it, William Orem, Town Clerk of Old Aberdeen, writing early in the eighteenth century, says: "James Winter an Angus man was architect of the timber work and ceiling of said Church." Although Winter is a surname not unknown in Angus, it is possible that we should read Fendour for Winter. The name, which appears in the records as Findour, Fyndour, Fendour, may be of French origin (?Fendeur), and

¹ Gordon's *Description of bothe towns of Aberdeene*, The Spalding Club, 1842, p. 22.

might have been easily changed into Winter; *James Winter* may have been a son of John Fendour.

We have seen that Ramsay was disposed to credit John Fendour with the stalls of King's College Chapel; and he remarked that the two ceilings (of the College Chapel and of St Nicholas choir) "exactly resembled" each other, or were "exactly the same."

The building of the oak roof of the College Chapel was probably well advanced when, on 21st October 1506, a contract was entered into for the lead covering. The chapel roof therefore was later than the roof of St Nicholas choir by about ten years; but it is likely that the oak ceilings of both may be contemporaneous. A poor little engraving (c. 1830) of the interior of the old East Church is all we have, showing what the ceiling was like (fig. 5); of the same type as that of King's College Chapel, it had fewer ribs and was not so richly decorated. The engraving shows both a cresting and a valance at the eaves of the apse; possibly the length of foliated cresting (or valance, if it was pendent) in the Museum came from there. Three different patterns of foliated and traceried valance occur at the eaves of King's College Chapel (figs. 6, 7, 8); they are from 9 inches to 10 inches in depth, whereas the St Nicholas example is but 6 inches (fig. 3). But the size and the design of the vine leaves in every one of the four cases under consideration are the same. A seventeenth-century cast-lead eaves-valance, outside the north transept of St Nicholas, is finished at the bottom with a fringe, cast from a piece of mediæval cresting of the same pattern as that in the Museum. Although there is now no cresting at the eaves of the College Chapel (there is only the valance), Billings's interior view shows that eighty years ago there were both. While it seems probable that Fendour wrought the ceilings of both churches, it is almost certain that he had little or nothing to do with the thirty stalls and twenty-two sub-sellia of King's College Chapel.

The general design of the thirty bays of canopy-front at King's is different from that of the St Nicholas canopy. The dividing stiles at King's have applied "buttresses," rising up into gablets and crocketed pinnacles; those of St Nicholas have pedestals designed to carry statuettes, with gableted and crocketed canopies over the niches. All the thirty traceried panels at King's are different, showing extraordinary fertility in design, whereas those from St Nicholas follow one pattern, which is much less elaborate and shows less invention than the similar work at King's. Mature consideration of the masterly design and execution of the Old Aberdeen stalls leads one to conclude that they were made in Flanders; but Fendour may have fitted them up, and he may have added some parts that do not reach the high standard of the

canopies. The remains, however, of the ancient rood-loft at King's, with its canopies, and the screen, with its two-leaved door, may safely be attributed to Fendour.

Certain details of this part of the woodwork at King's are similar to those of a long oak desk now in St Mary's Chapel, the fifteenth-century crypt under the east end of St Nicholas; and that desk, without doubt, was part of Fendour's stall-work. Although the bottom rails of the front and ends appear to be later than the framing, and some other small alterations have been made, yet the desk, on the whole, seems to be much in its original form. It has seven carved panels in front, and one at each end, all to the same design; the top is $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches thick and is slightly sloped; and a hollowed moulding, carved with a series of four-leaved flowers, serves as a bedmould.

These nine carved panels are exactly the same, both in size and design, as those nearest the floor, right and left of the screen-door at King's; and the same four-leaved flowers are also found there, in profusion.

The desk and the screen must have come from the same hands. And the desk must, I think, be the only remnant of those belonging to the choir-stalls. If so, there were no sub-sellia in St Nicholas. A good reason for this, it may be, was that the choir was only 22 feet wide between the pillars; and allowing $5\frac{1}{2}$ feet on each side for the stalls and desks, there would have remained only a width of 11 feet between the opposite desk-fronts. At King's College Chapel, which is about 29 feet wide, the distance between the opposite desks is $17\frac{1}{2}$ feet and about 15 feet between the opposite sub-sellia.

In St Mary's Chapel there are other two ancient carved panels, exactly the same as those of the great desk, and now forming part of a small modern desk.

The Art Gallery, Aberdeen, owns a curious piece of carved oak from St Nicholas. The photograph (fig. 9) is more explanatory of its form than much description would be. It is possible to fix the original position and function of this fragment by an examination of the plan of the choir, together with the engraving (fig. 5) of the interior of the old East Church. The crown of the wooden vault of the apse is shown at a considerably lower level than the apex of the pointed arch between the choir and the apse. A kind of suspended "box," decorated with a valance towards the choir, closed the open gusset; this "box" came to a salient corner at its east end, following the lines of the diagonal ribs; our fragment, attached to the "box," was the boss, 3 inches thick, which gathered up the five ribs and two diagonals of the apse-vault. It will be noted that the carving of the foliage follows exactly the forms used in the crestings, but adapted to the space to be filled; the flower, cut

swiftly and simply, is fresh, although (or because) the carver had done such a flower hundreds of times before. Evidently, the decorative detail turned out by John Fendour and his men was standardised, and repeated over and over again, with a good deal of freedom on occasion, and in very varied settings. The "patterns" changed very slowly; they matured, and grew simpler and stronger, at least for a time; and the



Fig. 9. Oak Boss from St Nicholas, Aberdeen.

handling was so sure and vigorous that the work could hardly fail to be effective and pleasing.

An example of heraldic carving by Fendour, shown on fig. 10, is placed in front of the eaves-valance at the east end of King's College Chapel.

Fendour's style was derived from Flemish or, it may be, French work. John Fendour himself came to Aberdeen early in the last decade of the fifteenth century and found much to do there for many years. I incline to believe that he was either of Flemish or of French extraction; if the family came "from Angus," his father may have worked at Arbroath Abbey. One is led to such speculations by the case of the Franche family of master-masons: John, working at Linlithgow until his death there

in 1489; Thomas, his son, at work in Aberdeen for at least ten years, until about 1530; and Thomas, the son of Thomas, dying at Aberdeen in 1530, others of the family remaining in Aberdeen, while Thomas the

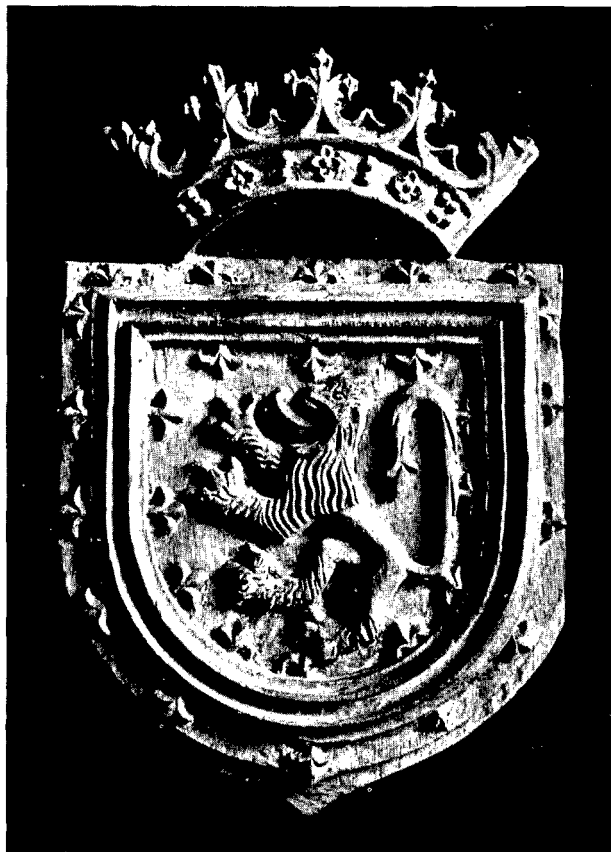


Fig. 10. Royal Arms of Scotland in Oak.

elder, as King's master-mason, returned to Linlithgow in 1535, and later went to Falkland.

In conclusion, I return to where we began—to the inscription (fig. 4). In passing, note that the little *fleurons* are exactly like those Fendour always used. A small point that has hitherto escaped printed comment is the peculiar genitive, "Nicholaij." The two final i's are plainly to be seen, and the second has a tail, the two suggesting the letter Y. Did the carver make a mistake, or was the nominative supposed to be Nicholaius? Or does the mistake, if it is a mistake, point to any foreign usage?

A CORRECTION.

With reference to my short paper, "Four Scottish Ecclesiastical Carved Oak Panels, c. 1500-25," communicated to the Society in Session 1929-30, I wish to correct some errors. Shortly after the publication of the paper Mr Thomas Innes of Learney, Carrick Pursuivant, pointed out that, on account of the omission of the tressure along the top of the Royal Arms, the carving should be dated somewhere in the 1470's—after 1471. Some-time afterwards, in course of reading *The Bishops of Scotland*, by Bishop Dowden, I learned that the arms of Thomas Spens, Bishop of Aberdeen from 1459 to 1480, were: 1st and 4th [? two covered cups], 2nd and 3rd, three martlets. These arms, surmounted by a mitre, which occur on one of the four carved panels, I had wrongly attributed to Abbot Robert Shaw of Paisley, afterwards Bishop of Moray. Bishop Thomas Spens died 15th April 1480, and was buried next day in Holy Trinity Church, Edinburgh.

Boece, in his *Lives of the Bishops of Aberdeen*, says that Spens "removed the ancient seats (stalls as they are called) in the choir. . . . He put in their places new ones of rare art and beauty, along with a throne of equal artistic beauty for the use of the bishop."¹

It is clear that the four panels belonged to Aberdeen Cathedral and that they were made at some date between 1471 and 1480 for Bishop Spens.

¹ Dr James Moir's translation.