

## Dunblane cathedral: evidence for a change in design of the nave

Richard Fawcett\*

Thirteenth-century Scotland saw the continuation or instigation of a considerable number of major church building campaigns, the designs of which were largely inspired by prototypes in

\* Scottish Development Department (Ancient Monuments), 3-11 Melville Street, Edinburgh

northern England. Except at the royal abbey of Holyrood (and perhaps also at the cathedral of St Andrews) none of these churches appears to have been intended to support a high vault above their central vessel, although, as was usual, the aisles and ancillary spaces were vaulted in all but the poorer foundations. A rather surprising exception to this general rule of vaulted aisles is the ambitious nave of Dunblane cathedral which, despite the impoverished resources of the diocese when Bishop Clement took office in 1233, is one of the most consummately elegant structures of the central decades of the century. Although vaulting was placed above the lower stage of the Chapter House range along the N side of the choir, which was almost certainly the first structure to rise above the completed plinth course of the cathedral, the nave clearly never had vaults to its aisles in the form to which it was built. MacGibbon and Ross have therefore stated that 'the edifice has not been intended to be vaulted' (MacGibbon & Ross 1896, 100), and because of the patent impossibility of constructing vaults in aisles which have a combination of very tall arcades with rather lower outer walls, this conclusion has never been questioned. However, close examination of the masonry at the E end of the S aisle, within what used to be the chapel of St Nicholas (McRoberts 1971, 45), has suggested that there may have been an intention to vault the aisles when work on the nave was started at its E end, and that the design we now see represents a considerable modification on what had been first proposed.

The primary clues to this change are to be noted in the masonry around the head of the E window of the aisle (pl 41a). Running around the rear arch is a narrow arched band of stones, which might at first glance be interpreted as a cloured-off hood mould, although since the arcs described by the bands are considerably more steeply pitched than the rear arch they are most unlikely to have served that purpose. At the base of this band, on each side of the window, are a number of ashlar blocks which have clearly been cut back since they now extend at right angles into the flanking wall, like inverse quoins. This feature is more easily seen on the S side of the window, where there are two deep stones, one above the other, immediately below the band, with a third wider but shallower stone beneath them. In addition, the rubble masonry around the arched band is set radially, rather like the false voussoirs of a relieving arch, a feature which is not repeated in the other windows of the church. Considered together these clues provide strong evidence of an intention to vault this aisle when its E wall was built. (Unfortunately Rowand Anderson's reconstruction of the corresponding wall in the N aisle in the course of the restoration of 1888-93 has destroyed any complementary evidence which may have survived at that point). The arched band may be best interpreted as the relic of a wall rib, which develops out of the *tas-de-charge* at the springing of the vault, now represented by the two 'inverse quoin' stones below the band, whilst the wider stone beneath those would have been the corbel. If this interpretation is correct, the radially-set rubble around the wall rib must have been either the stump of the vault webbing which was built into the wall, and later cut flush with its surface, or more simply packing subsequently set into the seating provided for the abandoned vault webbing.

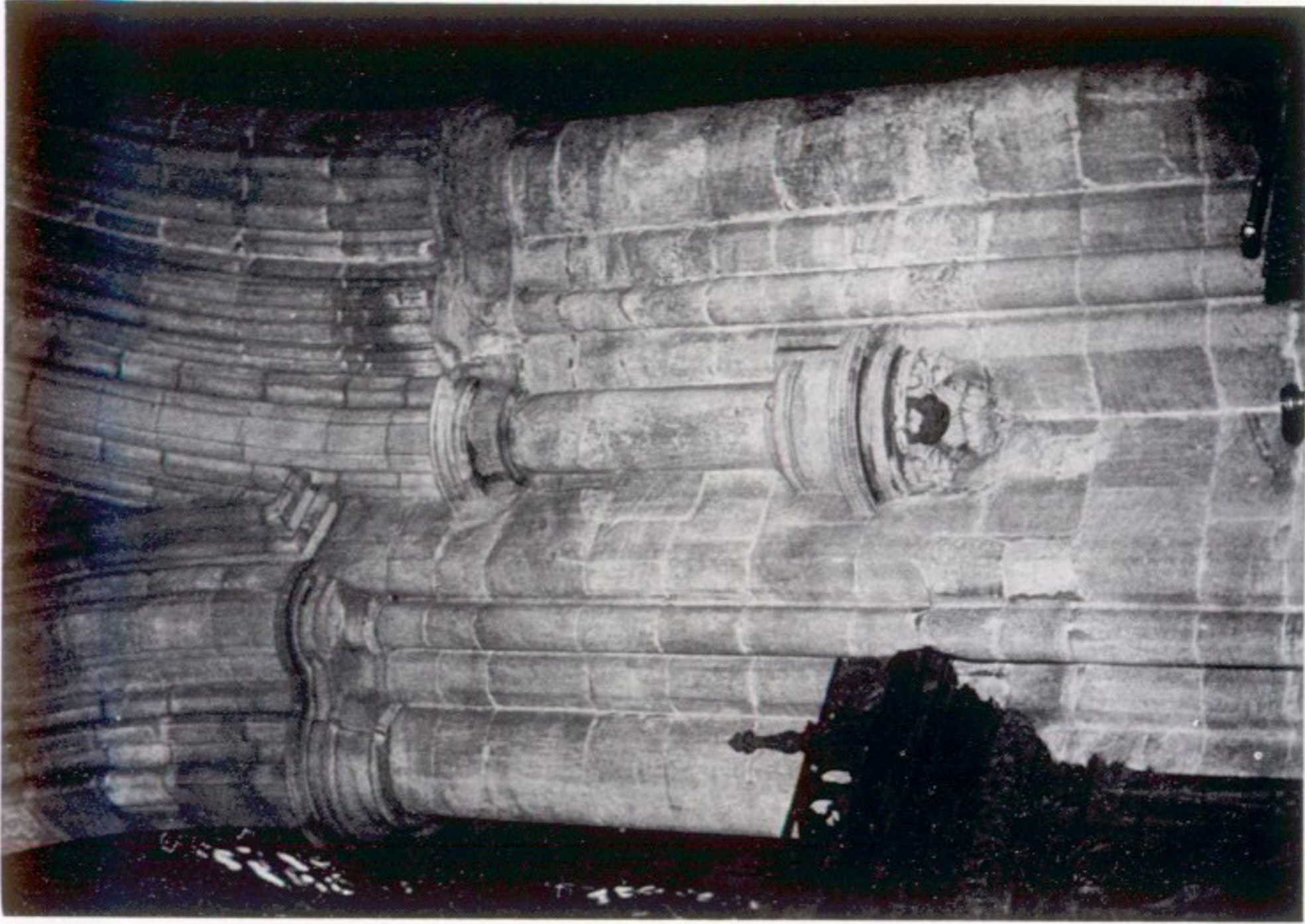
A vault at this level would of necessity have involved a very different nave design from that which we now see. The chapels at the aisle ends would not have had the tall lateral gables which we now have (albeit in restored state). More importantly, the magnificent nave arcades would have had to be six courses lower than they were eventually built, and would have sprung from the height of the upper abacus of the foliate corbel which carries the outermost order of the nave arcade at the northern corner of its E respond (pl 41b). (The short section of shaft which now rises from this corbel to the arcade cap would thus have been obviated). In this short notice it is impossible to give detailed consideration to the implications for the design which would have been involved in this decision to abandon vaults. However, it will be appreciated that the ratio of the arcade height to the total internal height of the internal elevation would have been much less

than that which was built, and in addition a change in the intercolumniation of the arcade piers suggests that an arcade of nine rather than eight bays may have been first proposed. It should also be borne in mind that the provision of aisle vaults carries with it the need for an intermediate stage, which would very probably have taken the form of a triforium gallery. In view of this there is reason to suspect that the original design for the nave would have been much closer to the approximately contemporary design of Glasgow cathedral choir and its northern English sources, although on a lesser scale.

#### REFERENCES

- MacGibbon, D & Ross, T 1896 *The Ecclesiastical Architecture of Scotland*, 2. Edinburgh.  
McRoberts, D 1971 'Dunblane Cathedral under the Chisholms', *Soc Friends Dunblane Cathedral*, 11 (2), (1971).





b Dunblane cathedral. E respond of S nave arcade



a Dunblane cathedral. Detail of masonry on S side of window at E end of S aisle