

# The Blackadder Aisle at Glasgow Cathedral: a reconsideration of the architectural evidence for its date

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## ABSTRACT

*It is argued from analysis of the mouldings and other features that the Blackadder Aisle was built in two stages, separated by at least two centuries. The shell of the lower storey may be the work of the same mason who built the choir in the mid 13th century, while Archbishop Blackadder (1483–1508) merely covered the incomplete shell with its vault, albeit sympathetically blended in.*

## INTRODUCTION

It now appears to be generally accepted that the unfinished Aisle which projects from the south transept of Glasgow Cathedral is attributable to the archbishop whose name it has come to bear, Robert Blackadder (1483–1508). In view of the liberal application of his arms to both the internal vault and the external buttresses of the building, along with the general appearance of structural homogeneity it presents, there is no immediately apparent reason to question this attribution. Additionally, one recent authority has advanced supporting evidence for the accepted date by linking the construction of the Aisle with late medieval attempts to revive flagging interest in the cult of St Kentigern (McRoberts 1968, 10). However, analysis of the cathedral, in the course of preparing a new guidebook, has led the writer to conclude that the Aisle is probably not of homogeneous construction, but is rather the product of two building campaigns separated by a break of at least two centuries. Examination of the moulded details has suggested that the shell of the lower storey, which was the only part of the projected two-storey structure to be completed, may be by the same mason who built the choir for Bishop William de Bondington (1233–58) in the central decades of the 13th century; if this be so little more was left to Archbishop Blackadder than to cover the incomplete shell with its vault.

This is not a new idea. John Honeyman, whose architectural description in *The Book of Glasgow Cathedral* is a notably perceptive summary of his views after many years of studying the fabric, came to a broadly similar conclusion (Honeyman 1898, 234, 238, 256). In this he was followed by his former pupil, Peter Macgregor Chalmers, who published the useful volume in the Bell's Cathedral series (Chalmers 1914, 29, 68). But, in general, later commentators have preferred to see the aisle as late, although possibly perpetuating an earlier occupant of the site. MacGibbon and Ross have given their own great authority to acceptance of a later date, suggesting that 'although the work in the interior has considerable resemblance to that in the

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lower church, it is decidedly later, and has been copied from it' (MacGibbon & Ross 1896-7, II, 201).

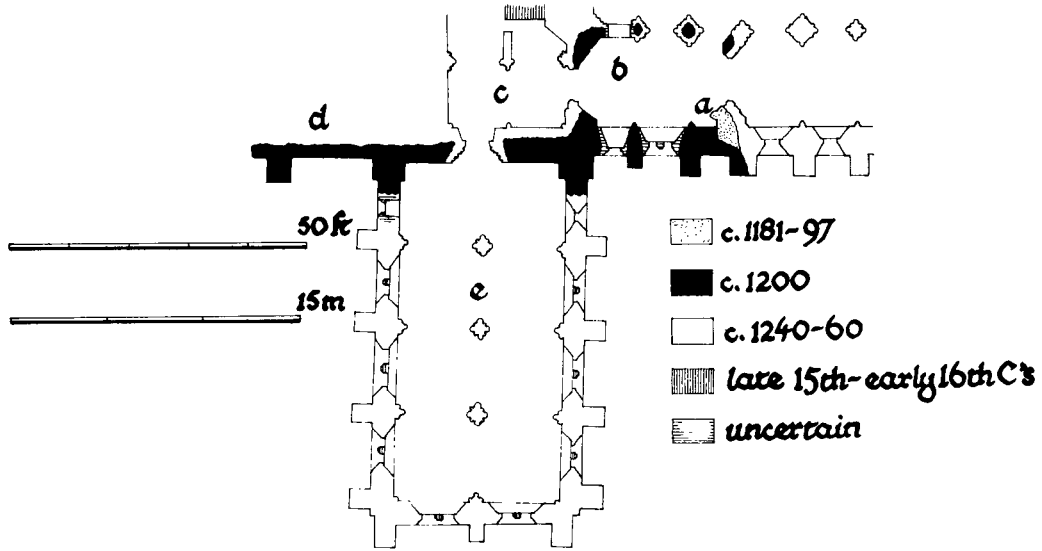
Conscious archaism, as suggested here by MacGibbon and Ross, is a factor which must certainly be taken into account in studying Scottish late Gothic architecture, and indeed the ability of medieval masons in general to make their building sit sympathetically with existing work ought never to be under-estimated. At Elgin Cathedral, for example, there can be little doubt that the mason who repaired the choir aisles after the fire of 1390 made great efforts to attune his work to that of his predecessor who had extended the choir and presbytery after 1270. Nevertheless, these efforts are confined to the major elements, such as the windows, and do not extend to the minutiae of mouldings, details which have always been so completely outside the interest and comprehension of the lay beholder that the idea of adapting them for historical considerations would almost certainly have seemed unnecessary to a medieval mason. Something of this can be seen in Glasgow itself where, along part of the south side of the upper chapter house, the springings of the mid 13th-century vault ribs were retained when the vault was rebuilt in the 15th century; but no attempt to effect a transition between the old and new sections of rib mouldings was made by Bishop Cameron's mason.

Of all the elements of a medieval building it is thus the mouldings which point especially clearly to the individual authorship of the designing masons, because they were so completely beyond the interference of extraneous influences – except insofar as the degree of elaboration and concomitant cost might be a factor in the patron's mind. In the Blackadder Aisle it is the mouldings which display a particularly close affinity with those of the choir and its supporting crypt, and which, in the writer's view, appear to make it necessary to give further consideration to the idea that the Aisle is essentially of the 13th century.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE AISLE TO THE ADJACENT PARTS OF THE CATHEDRAL

A major difficulty in determining the chronological relationship of the Blackadder Aisle with the rest of the cathedral is that it is structurally distinct from the immediately adjacent parts of the building, which are themselves the products of a rather confusing variety of constructional phases (illus 1). The clearest evidence for this structural separation is that the base course which underlies the transept makes no provision for any southward projection where the Blackadder Aisle now stands. This base course is a continuation of that which runs across the south-west compartment of the choir (b on plan), where it cuts off what appears to have been started as a lateral projection in the course of Bishop Jocelin's campaign of the 1180s and 1190s (a on plan), and which then extends westwards through the transept to underlie the south and north walls of the nave. In view of its chronologically intermediate relationship between Jocelin's work consecrated in 1197 (*Chron Melrose* f 25) and Bondington's choir reconstruction in the 1240s (*Glas Reg* xxvii), this base course may be dated to the earlier 13th century, and it is evident that much of the south-west compartment of the crypt, along with the lower walls of the transept and nave must be dated to the same campaign.

It appears to be certain, therefore, that the Aisle cannot have been planned in the earlier years of the 13th century. Nevertheless, it is worth remarking that, whenever it may have been that work on the Aisle was started, its builders made efforts to ensure structural stability by keying their work into the existing masonry of the transept buttresses. Above the base course the Aisle's west and east walls take the line of the flanking faces of the outer sections of the transept buttresses, and are carefully tusked into these sections, although the only endeavour to continue



ILLUS 1 Plan of the Blackadder Aisle in relation to the adjacent parts of the cathedral; for clarity flights of steps have been omitted: a, truncated wall of projection built by Bishop Jocelin; b, south-west compartment of crypt; c, south transept; d, nave; e, Blackadder Aisle



ILLUS 2 The junction of the Blackadder Aisle (on the left) and the choir crypt

the horizontal lines of the buttress coursing into the Aisle walls starts well above the Aisle windows (illus 2 & 3). Even where the upper courses of the Aisle walls do continue the buttress coursing, however, it appears unlikely that the two parts could be of contemporary construction because of the different forms of the string courses. It should also be noted that from the Aisle roof it is evident that the string below the transept windows runs unbroken through the point at which the buttresses are abutted by the Aisle walls, and must therefore predate the Aisle.

If it is thus clear that the Aisle was not planned when the transept was first laid out to its present plan soon after 1200, it is equally clear that its upper storey was not under contemplation when the innovative windows at its principal floor level were being built. Work on the transepts and nave had been abandoned when Bishop Bondington determined to build the eastern limb to



ILLUS 3 The junction of the Blackadder Aisle (on the right) and the nave

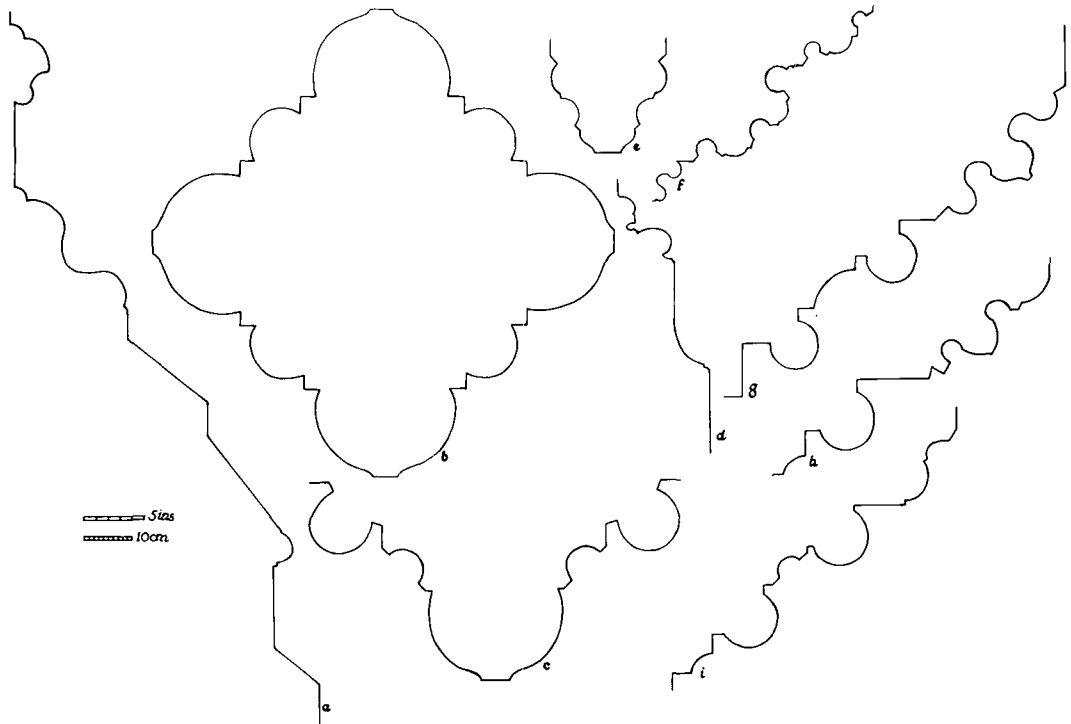
its present form, and the resumption of work on the former may be approximately dated through records of the acquisition of timber for the bell tower in 1277 (*Glas Reg* no 229). Although the value of this dating evidence for the transept is by itself open to question, it finds support from the similarity of the transept windows to other Scottish first generation bar-traceried windows of around the 1270s at Elgin Cathedral and Sweetheart Abbey (Fawcett 1984, 162–4).

So far, then, it may be accepted that the Aisle was not started in the earlier 13th century, when the transept was first laid out, and nor was any upper storey being considered when the main levels of the transept were again under construction in the later decades of that century. In this there is nothing which is inconsistent with the generally accepted date for the Aisle at the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries. But it must be stressed that by the same token there is nothing in this which precludes its having been started after the first campaign of the earlier 13th century; although if this were the case, any idea of building an upper storey must have been abandoned within a few decades. Nevertheless, apart from some of the mouldings, which will be considered next, the only external pointer to the possibility of any part of the Aisle being earlier than the episcopate of Blackadder lies in the way in which his arms are imposed on the fabric. On the west side of the aisle they are carved on a tabernacle corbel in the upper part of the most northerly buttress; yet it is evident that this part of the buttress, and the adjoining wall running back to the transept, are not coursed in with the adjacent fragment of window reveal and therefore appear to be secondary. His arms are also displayed on the south side of the Aisle, where they are cut into – rather than raised from – the general face of the central buttress, possibly also pointing to secondary modification. These clues, however, certainly could not be advanced as arguments for an early date for the main body of the Aisle without other, and much stronger, evidence, and for this we have to look at the mouldings.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE AISLE MOULDINGS TO THOSE OF THE EASTERN LIMB

The first point of similarity to be noted between the choir and Blackadder Aisle is the design of the external base courses (illus 4a & 5a). Although generally disregarded, the character of this feature can go far towards giving a medieval building the appearance of being well-founded, and in both the choir and Blackadder Aisle – unlike in the nave and transepts – a great deal of effort was expended on its design. In each case the top member is a strikingly similar water-throwing string of beaked section; also in each case the main formation is terminated by a roll before a short vertical face and a basal chamfer. In these elements the inter-relationship of the base courses of the two parts is clear. Yet between them the formations show significant differences: in the choir a half roll caps a succession of three chamfered courses, whereas in the Blackadder Aisle a fluid wave moulding runs along the top of just two chamfers. There are no precise 13th-century analogies for the use of a wave above a series of chamfers in Scottish base courses elsewhere. However, at Brechin Cathedral the north tower has a very deep wave moulding as its chief element, and since the fine stiff-leaf capitals inside its lower storey indicate the tower was started around the central decades of the 13th century, a similar date is clearly possible for the related detail at Glasgow Cathedral.

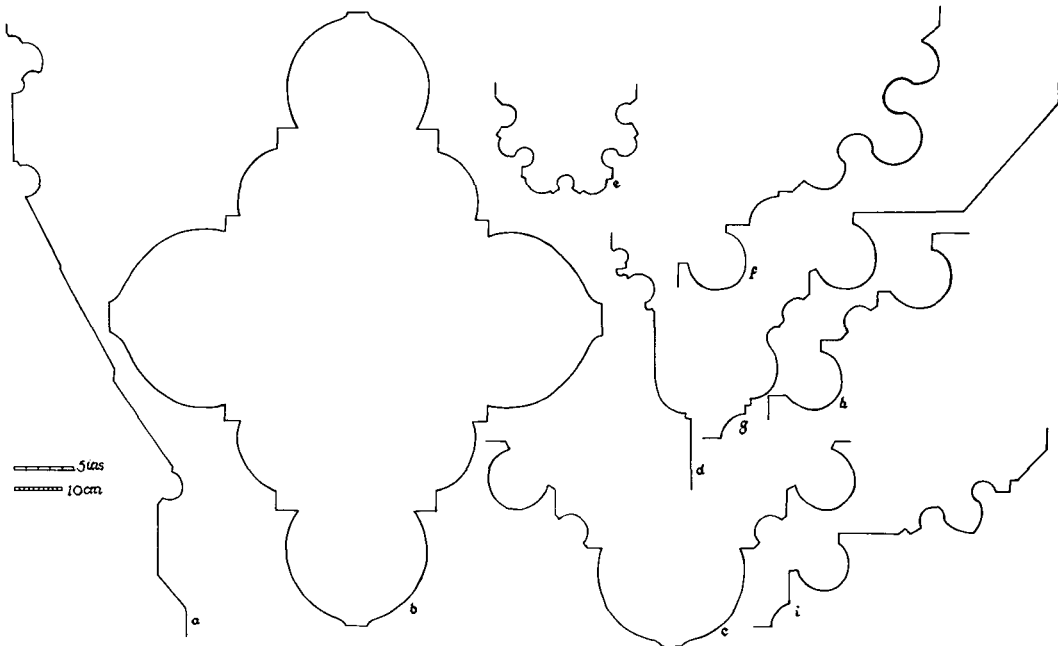
The present form of the window tracery must be seen as a secondary modification if the case for the Blackadder Aisle being early is to be maintained, since Y-tracery like that in the majority of windows is most unlikely to have been employed in Scotland as early as the central decades of the 13th century (see Fawcett 1984, 168–70). But here the remarkably close similarity of the reveals on the eastern side of the Aisle with those of the majority of windows in the crypt



ILLUS 4 Mouldings of the Blackadder Aisle: a, base course; b, pier; c, wall respond; d, arcade base; e, vault rib; f, wall rib and hood mould; g, door from south transept; h, east windows reveal; i, fragmentary reveal of upper window on west

flanks strongly points to the windows in the eastern wall of the Aisle having been originally cut by the mason who designed the crypt (illus 4h & 5i). It should be added that the windows in the other faces of the Aisle are shorter and less elaborated than those on the east because of the stepping up of the base course on those sides. Close investigation indicates that the reveals of the majority of windows along the south flank of the crypt have had their glazing rebate cut back to allow the incision of a later chase; allowing for this, and taking the one unaltered window of the southern flank and those of the northern flank as the basis for comparison, it will be seen that the Aisle and crypt windows are strikingly alike. In both, the containing arch is carried by a three-quarter shaft set back from the outer face by a quadrant hollow, whilst the inner reveal is a keeled roll separated from canted and quirked fillets by deep hollows; leading into the glazing plane is either a chamfered or rounded member.

If the window mouldings of the Blackadder Aisle are indeed of the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries, their mason has followed the mouldings of the mid 13th-century crypt almost slavishly. Such direct copying as this would be is all the more singular when it is considered that it might have been thought more appropriate to copy the details of the contiguous transept or immediately adjacent nave rather than the bays of the crypt which are four half bays to the east at their nearest. It is perhaps more convincing to see the Aisle windows as being the work of the mason responsible for the crypt, with subsequent alterations to modify the likely original state of paired lights within a containing arch – as in some of the eastern chapels of the crypt – to the existing



ILLUS 5 Mouldings of choir crypt: a, base course; b, lesser arcade pier; c, wall respond; d, arcade base; e, rib from western compartment of main vessel; f, north door; g, reveal of windows of outer eastern chapels; h, part reveal of central eastern chapels; i, reveal of windows along crypt flanks

Y-traceried state. The link between the Aisle and crypt is further supported by the form of the one fragment of a window reveal surviving from the projected upper level of the Aisle, which it has already been said is not coursed in with the adjacent section of buttress bearing Blackadder's arms (illus 4i). In keeping with the presumably greater importance of this upper level, the internal mouldings were enriched by a band of dogtooth of pronouncedly 13th-century character, as in the eastern chapels of both crypt and choir. Its outer reveal is essentially an amalgamation of those in the eastern crypt chapels in the use of shafts separated by a hollow between angled fillets, and preceded by a quadrant hollow (figs 5g & h).

Internally, where despite centuries of penetration by dampness the mouldings are better preserved, the similarity between the details of the Blackadder Aisle and the eastern limb of the cathedral may be more precisely observed (illus 6). It should, however, be noted that the design and structure of the doorway into the Aisle indicate that it does not immediately belong with either the first transept campaign or with the Aisle itself (illus 7). In the first place, it may be seen that to accommodate it a rather awkwardly managed cutting into the existing transept base course had to be contrived. In the second place, it is apparent from the way it now faces into the Aisle that it was originally intended to be an external door. Elsewhere in the cathedral, as was customary, doors opening into important subsidiary spaces have their principal mouldings facing outwards from that space, as for example in the two levels of the chapter house and the northern entrance to the crypt. One incidental consequence of having the door facing into the Aisle, which supports the idea that the door and Aisle were not planned at the same time, is that considerable difficulty was experienced when it came to placing a vault over the Aisle because of the inconvenient height of the apex of the mouldings; a separate vaulting cell had to be formed over

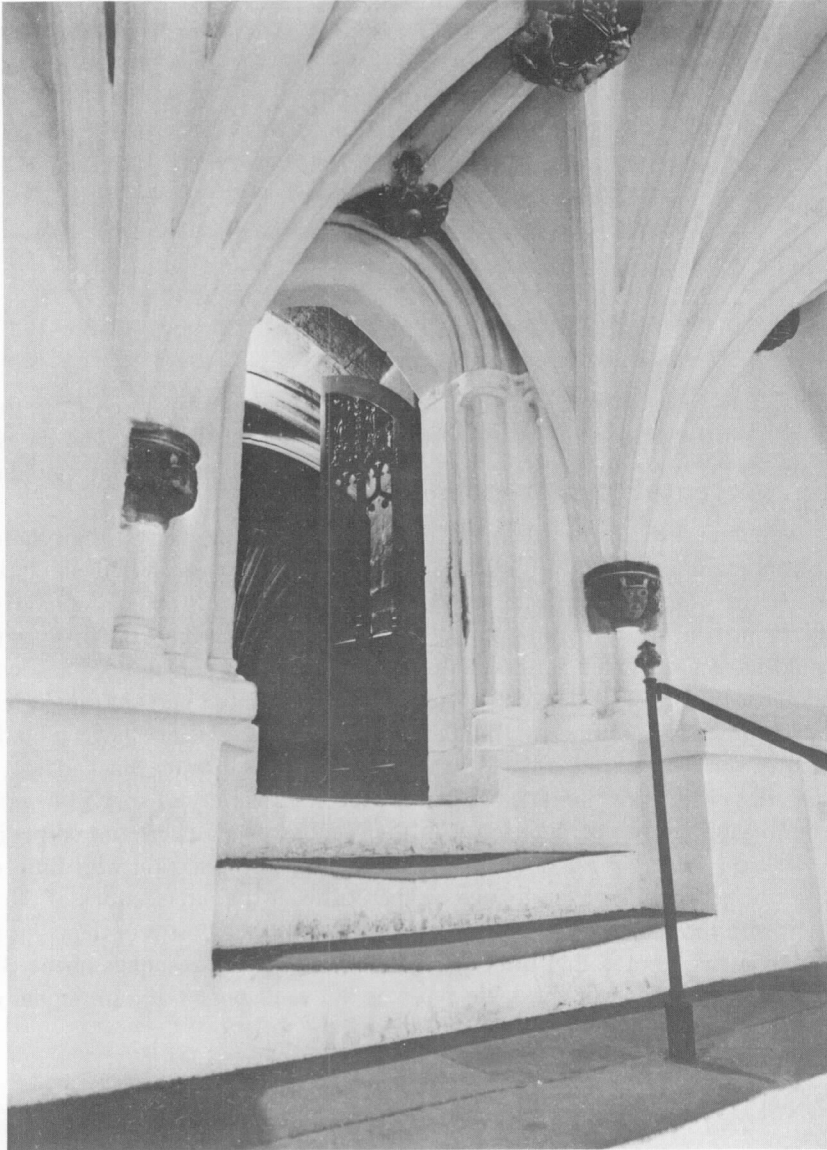


ILLUS 6 The interior of the Blackadder Aisle

the door, whilst the outer shafts of the jambs were cut down and transformed into vaulting shafts. It thus appears clear that, as with the laying of the transept base course, no thought had been given to the construction of the Aisle when the door was formed, and it may be concluded the door had been intended to serve as a transeptal entrance to the cathedral at an intermediate level between crypt and nave floor levels, like its much plainer counterpart in the north transept. Significantly, the mouldings of this door relate to those of the two doors opening in the flanks of the crypt, and may be seen as a slightly more elaborate version of that on the north side of the crypt, which must have been intended to perform a similar function (illus 4g & 5f). In each case the inner order is a triplet formed by a pair of rolls flanking a shaft, which in the Aisle is filleted; following this is a wide quadrant hollow flanked on one or both sides by shafts.

Despite the evidence this provides that the Aisle had still not been planned when the mid-13th century eastern limb was started, examination of the internal details suggests that the decision to build the Aisle must have been reached before work on the eastern limb was far advanced. The responds which articulate the walls into bays, for example, are virtually identical with those in the crypt aisles and in the eastern chapels of the choir itself (illus 4c, 5c & 8a). In each case a massive filleted shaft is separated from smaller flanking rolls by diagonally-set hollows between angled fillets. The similarity of the wall ribs and internal window hood moulds to some

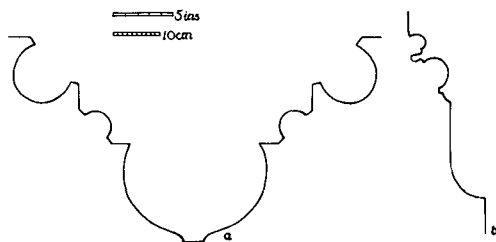




ILLUS 7 The door into the Blackadder Aisle from the south transept

of the rib mouldings in the crypt also suggests the presence of the same designing mason (illus 4f & 5e): of particular significance in these is the use of double-filleted rolls separated by three-quarter hollows, a characteristically 13th-century combination.

In the design of the central line of piers which support the vault, the hand of the choir mason appears to be equally strongly in evidence. Although the piers of both crypt and choir had to be larger to carry the great burdens of those parts, comparison of the Blackadder Aisle piers with the lesser piers of the crypt arcades reveals marked similarities (illus 4b & 5b). In each case



ILLUS 8 Mouldings of choir: a, wall respond; b, base

the cardinal axes have filleted three-quarter shafts, which are separated from the much slighter simple shafts on the diagonal axes by portions of rectangular section. The bases of these piers, and of those of the wall responds, are also closely linked both in their water-holding sections, and in the concave outward flaring of the sub-base (illus 4d, 5d & 8b).

As was remarked in regard to the external window mouldings, the relationship between these internal mouldings of the Blackadder Aisle and of the eastern limb similarly appears to be too close to be coincidental, and, if this were to be dismissed as copying on the part of Blackadder's mason, it is hard to understand why the eastern limb rather than the transepts or nave should have been taken as the model. Beyond this, plagiarism becomes less plausible as a justification for the forms of the Aisle when it is seen that those parts of the Aisle which are most firmly attributable to the time of Blackadder on heraldic evidence have mouldings or carving which accord well with so late a date. Thus, the vault, which bears Blackadder's arms at several points, has ribs which are unrelated to any of the wide variety of mid 13th-century ribs in the eastern limb (illus 4e). By comparison with the sections of the choir and crypt ribs tabulated by Watson (Watson 1901, fig 5), they are of decidedly massive section with little cutting into the body of the stone. Similarly, the foliage on the bosses at the intersections of the ribs bears little comparison with the rich varieties of stiff-leaf which adorn the bosses of the crypt and of the choir aisles. It may also be noted that the caps of the piers and wall responds of the Blackadder Aisle are embellished by foliage of the same types as the vault bosses and are equally clearly of late date.

## CONCLUSION

Considered together, all of this evidence would appear to be consistent with the interpretation that the Blackadder Aisle was under construction after the eastern limb had been started in the 1240s, but whilst work was still in progress on it. The absence of bond with the transept base course and buttresses certainly demonstrates that it had not been conceived of at the time of the abortive early 13th-century start on the transepts and nave and, equally, the design of the south transept door indicates that it had still not been planned when work was first started on Bondington's eastern limb, at which time this door was cut into the existing transept base course. However, strikingly precise analogies between the mouldings of the Aisle and eastern limb point to the likelihood that the two parts were the work of the same mason; although only the shell of the Aisle's crypt and a tiny fragment of its upper storey can have been completed before the decision to abandon work on the Aisle was taken, since the lower transept windows appear to be an integral part of the transept design of around the 1270s.

If this interpretation is correct, Blackadder's contribution was the partial completion of an existing shell, involving little more than modifications to the windows and the addition of a vault to a form dictated by existing piers responds and wall ribs. In doing this his masons displayed great tact in contriving to make their additions and adaptations develop harmoniously from the then existing fabric, but it appears likely that the charge against them of plagiarising the details of their predecessors of two centuries earlier should not be pressed.

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